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## Colonial Flashpoints

Joanna Brooks

***The Colonizing Trick: National Culture and Imperial Citizenship in Early America.* By David Kazanjian. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003. 311 pages. \$77.95 (cloth); \$25.95 (paper).**

In July 1793, thousands of French planters and their families fled slave revolts in the French West Indian colony of Santo Domingo. Two thousand refugees came to Philadelphia, then the capital of the United States. White Philadelphians responded with an outpouring of sympathy, quickly raising \$12,000 for refugee assistance. Some even canceled their pledges toward the building of the city's African Church and redirected the monies toward French refugee relief. Certainly the irony of this situation was not lost on African Church founders Richard Allen and Absalom Jones: white Philadelphians were more loyal to white French West Indian settler colonists, many of them slaveholders, than they were to their black fellow citizens. The true frailty of national and civic fellowship was fully revealed a few months later when the city of Philadelphia impressed its black population into serving as nurses and grave diggers during the deadly yellow fever epidemic of 1793.

*The Colonizing Trick: National Culture and Imperial Citizenship in Early America*, by David Kazanjian, develops a trenchant new critical apparatus for understanding historical moments like this as “flashpoints” in the “articulation” of a transatlantic white solidarity among settler colonists, which was fundamental to the formation of modern nation-states and neocolonial capital networks. Through readings of literary, historical, and political archives from the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, Kazanjian teaches us that when we talk about American culture as a product of transatlanticism—a gesture that is gaining currency in early American studies—we must consider not only intellectual and cultural exchange among European and Euro-American elites, but also relations of domination between European colonists and indigenous and black peoples. Transatlantic circuits, he argues, do not necessarily free individuals from constraints of national and racial identity; rather, through a “colonizing trick,” transatlantic imperialism leads to the economic and cultural capitalization of new, racially hierarchical nation-states,

which in turn become organizational nodes for transnational capital and the international division of labor. The constitutive contradiction of the early United States, according to Kazanjian, is the conjoining or “articulation” of Enlightenment ideals of universal equality with racial hierarchy. He explores this articulation at four distinct “flashpoints”: black mariners and early national mercantilism, black intellectuals and the African colonization movement, early national culture and the campaign to assimilate or eradicate Native peoples, and the Yucatan Caste War of 1847.

The fact that I am using terms such as *transnationalism*, *imperialism*, and *capital* to summarize the argument and implications of *The Colonizing Trick* may raise a red flag for some readers. It is true: Kazanjian does apply the big medicine of Marxism to his subject matter. As Michael Denning, John Carlos Rowe, and others have observed, American studies practitioners—early Americanists especially—have sometimes been reticent about theoretical approaches such as Marxism, postmodernism, and postcolonialism.<sup>1</sup> But early American studies is steadily converging toward current critical methodologies and concerns, especially as new emphases on comparative colonial studies and transatlanticism demand a deeper familiarity with theories of colonialism and postcoloniality. Kazanjian uses Marxist theory in *The Colonizing Trick* to address a paramount problem in this new early American studies: how do we understand the political and cultural dimensions of transitioning from American settler colonialism to nationhood to neocolonial power?

In pursuing this question, Kazanjian contributes to a decades-old discussion of the relationship between American racial politics and imperialism. From the 1960s, American Indian, Chicano, and African American intellectuals such as Vine Deloria, Rudolfo Acuna, and Harold Cruse described the situation of people of color in the United States as internal colonialism.<sup>2</sup> The publication of Edward Said’s landmark *Orientalism* (1978) promoted empire as a framework for cultural analysis and produced a new impulse to precisely identify the colonial or postcolonial position of the United States. Because the United States began as British settler colonies, the authors of *The Empire Writes Back* classified American literature as postcolonial, as did American literature scholar Lawrence Buell (1993).<sup>3</sup> This assessment was contested, complicated, and rejected by Gayatri Spivak, who claimed that people of color in the post-Civil Rights era constituted the postcolonial United States, as well as by Ruth Frankenberg and Lata Mani and Anne McClintock.<sup>4</sup> More recently, Jenny Sharpe has argued that the postcolonial in America be understood as the “neocolonial relations into which the United States entered with decolonized nations.”<sup>5</sup> It is important to note that Native American scholars continue to

question the relevance of postcolonial theory to the United States in its continuing colonial relationship to Native peoples, especially given the egregious oversight of American Indian peoples and texts in standard works of postcolonial theory by Edward Said and Homi Bhabha.

In the field of American studies, the arrival of postcolonial theory was marked by the publication of the landmark collection *Cultures of United States Imperialism*. Amy Kaplan's memorable introduction to the volume, "Left Alone with America," exposed the imperial history of American studies, which was, she wrote, "conceived on the banks of the Congo" by the legendary Perry Miller as he was employed "unloading drums of case oil flowing out of the inexhaustible wilderness of America," a scene he himself recalled in his preface to the classic *Errand into the Wilderness* (1956).<sup>6</sup> It took a few years more for this realization to impact Miller's home field of early (also known as *colonial*) American studies. Among the first early Americanists to apply or consider the applicability of postcolonial theory were Edward Watts, Malini Johar Schueller, and Michael Warner.<sup>7</sup> Still, early studies tended to focus too narrowly on white Anglophone settlers, neglecting the colonial experiences of black and indigenous peoples. Watts and Schueller attempted to rectify this narrowness with their essay collection *Messy Beginnings: Postcoloniality and Early American Studies*, explaining that postcolonial studies could helpfully "mess up" the story of national origins by revealing the intercultural, interracial, uneven, locally nuanced, unstable, ambivalent processes of colonization and decolonization.<sup>8</sup>

*The Colonizing Trick* aims to do more than expose messiness. It strives to connect the dots between colonization, national formation, and neocolonialism and the creation and maintenance of racial hierarchy in the United States. In so doing, David Kazanjian remedies a blind spot in previous "postcolonial" treatments of American literature that have positioned white creoles as normative and definitive, neglecting the perspectives of peoples of color. He thus contributes to an important body of early American critical race studies, including works by Philip Deloria, Russ Castronovo, Priscilla Wald, and Dana Nelson.<sup>9</sup>

In chapter 1, Kazanjian examines the interaction of mercantilism, race, and national formation. Comparing writings by black merchant mariners—Briton Hammon, Olaudah Equiano, John Jea, Venture Smith, Boston King, George Henry—to those by white sailors, he reveals the emergence of a "transatlantic white colonial identity" and the simultaneous constriction of freedoms and opportunities for black sailors in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Policies established by the new United States government to support American economic activity contributed to this constriction, he argues: "We

need to understand mercantilism not simply as an economic policy, but rather as a set of discursive practices that articulated formal and abstract equality with the codification of race, nation, and gender in the North Atlantic" (39). Kazanjian goes on to show how black mariners like Venture Smith did not simply buy into the free market notion of exchange as a means to economic advancement and personal emancipation, but rather manipulated market economics that put a monetary value on black lives to "reclaim the very terms of [their] own subjugation," purchasing friends and family members in order to win "a much more substantial freedom" (62). Importantly, Kazanjian also explains how this constriction affected gender relations between black men and black women in the gendering and redistribution of shipboard, shore, and domestic labor. In summary, this chapter extends important lines of inquiry initiated by Marcus Rediker and Peter Linebaugh in *The Many Headed Hydra* to produce a compelling theorization of the tightening vise of racial formation at the end of the eighteenth century.<sup>10</sup>

Chapter 2 shows that in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries African colonization was imagined to be "the completion of the American Revolution's emancipatory promise of universal equality" (91). As an early architect of colonization, Thomas Jefferson sought "a systematic reformation of citizenship" (92) through a "racial purification of a domestic space and imperial power over foreign spaces" (95). Kazanjian discovers in Jefferson's letters an attempt to apply rational, mathematical, statistical, or "population thinking" to manage through Foucauldian "governmentality" the contradictions between the racialized realities of national founding and the universalist ideals of Enlightenment philosophy. In turn, black intellectuals from Phillis Wheatley to David Walker and Maria Stewart debunked the logic of colonization by refusing either to align themselves with white U.S. interests or to speak for African peoples. In so doing, they challenged colonizationist assumptions about the isomorphism of race and national belonging and thus asserted their own irreducible, incalculable difference as black citizens of the United States. Black anticolonizationism, Kazanjian observes, thus enacts "a hermeneutic of seizing and reforming the Enlightenment" (132).

Chapter 3 builds on a scene from Charles Brockden Brown's *Memoirs of Carwin, the Biloquist* in which Carwin masters the "shrill tones of a Mohock savage" as a first step in his mastery of ventriloquism. This scene, according to Kazanjian, can be read as an allegory for national-cultural formation: in his novels, Brown "labors to produce a narrative of the 'natural' emergence of American literature, a narrative that replaces the violent history of white settler colonialism with an aesthetic call to incorporate scenes of 'wild' America

into tales of white colonial life,” mirroring federal policies directing the “assimilation and conversion” of Native peoples (140). He challenges us to move beyond mere observation of Brown’s hallmark modernist ambiguities and contradictions to recognize the constitutive relationship between American modernization, settler colonialism, and its continuation in racist federal policy. This is a very useful reading of Brown, to be sure, and a significant contribution to Brown scholarship. Still, this chapter lacks the grounding in materialist history and the welcome reference to perspectives of people of color that distinguished chapters 1 and 2.

The Yucatan Caste War (1847), an armed conflict between the ruling creole minority and indigenous Mayan majority in the Mexican province, is the focal flashpoint of chapter 4. Kazanjian demonstrates how “ambivalent alliances” advocated and forged by U.S. leaders with Yucatan creoles on the basis of a perceived white solidarity against indigenous peoples and potential capitalist interests in Yucatan economic development marked an important point of transition: “It transformed U.S. imperialism from white settler colonialism to neocolonialism, and it produced white, Indian, Mexican, and, eventually, Chicano racial formations that blended the assimilative mode of civilization policy with the eradication mode of removal policy” (176). These processes he observes in his readings of governmental archives as well as in the racial characterizations and marriage plots of dime novels published during the U.S.–Mexico War. Here, Kazanjian contribute to several vital strands of scholarship. First, in showing how Yucatan Creole leaders effectively appealed to white solidarity, Kazanjian develops a little-recognized dimension of the historical formation of whiteness: his work suggests that whiteness was produced not only on the domestic model proposed by Noel Ignatiev, David Roediger, and others, as an attempt by working-class Euro-Americans (especially Irish immigrants) to accrue new social and political power by identifying as whites against their devaluation as wage laborers, but also articulated internationally through political appeals to white solidarity among European colonial-settler populations against indigenous peoples.<sup>11</sup> Second, in demonstrating how these white political networks created new circuitry for the establishment of international capital interests, Kazanjian provides compelling historical evidence that America arrived into postcoloniality and emerged into neocolonial power much earlier than is now commonly assumed. If, as Jenny Sharpe suggests, the “the postcolonial” in the United States is to “be theorized as the point at which internal social relations intersect with global capitalism and the international division of labor . . . the neocolonial relations into which the United States entered with decolonized nations” (106), then Kazanjian displaces 1898 as a

defining year for American postcoloniality, proposing instead 1847, or even multiple earlier “flashpoints” identified throughout the book.

*The Colonizing Trick* is a valuable, challenging contribution to early American studies. Some readers will dislike Kazanjian’s theoretical flourishes and his sometimes superfluous references to a range of contemporary critical theorists, and some will find the prose of his Marxist exposition to be a bit mechanistic. As might be expected of a project constructed around “flashpoints,” *The Colonizing Trick* will leave many readers wanting a more evenly developed narrative of the momentous cultural and political developments Kazanjian attempts to chart. Despite its shortcomings, this book quite successfully enjoins us to remember that any putatively transatlantic analysis of early American culture should also account for the material underpinnings of transatlanticism in the slave trade, the appropriation of indigenous lands, and the expropriation of indigenous peoples, and it teaches us to recognize the hierarchical codification of race in the United States as a legacy of its settler colonial history as well as a scaffolding for its neocolonial ambitions.

#### Notes

1. Michael Denning, “‘The Special American Conditions’: Marxism and American Studies,” *American Quarterly* 38.3 (1986): 356–80; John Carlos Rowe, *The New American Studies* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 2002), 17–79.
2. See Harold Cruse, “Revolutionary Nationalism and the Afro-American,” *Studies on the Left* 2.3 (1962); Vine Deloria, *Custer Died for Your Sins: An Indian Manifesto* (New York: Macmillan, 1969); Rudolfo Acuña, *Occupied America: The Chicano’s Struggle Towards Liberation* (San Francisco: Canfield Press, 1972).
3. Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin, *The Empire Writes Back: Theory and Practice in Post-Colonial Literatures* (New York: Routledge, 1990); Lawrence Buell, “American Literary Emergence as a Postcolonial Phenomenon,” *American Literary History* 4.3 (autumn 1992): 411–42.
4. Gayatri Spivak, “Teaching for the Times,” *Journal of the Midwest Modern Language Association* 25.1 (1992): 3–22; Ruth Frankenberg and Lata Mani, “Crosscurrents, Crosstalk: Race, ‘Postcoloniality,’ and the Politics of Location,” *Cultural Studies* 7.2 (1993): 292–310; Anne McClintock, “The Angel of Progress: Pitfalls of the Term ‘Post-Colonialism,’” *Social Text* 31–32 (1992): 84–98.
5. Jenny Sharpe, “Is the United States Postcolonial? Transnationalism, Immigration, and Race,” in *Postcolonial America*, ed. Richard C. King (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2000), 103–21, quote p. 6.
6. Amy Kaplan, “‘Left Alone with America’: The Absence of Empire in the Study of American Culture,” in *Cultures of United States Imperialism*, ed. Amy Kaplan and Donald Pease (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1994), 3–21.
7. Edward Watts, *Writing and Postcolonialism in the Early Republic* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1998); Malini Schueller, *U.S. Orientalisms: Race, Nation, and Gender in Literature, 1790–1890* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1998); Michael Warner, “What’s Colonial About Colonial America?” in *Possible Pasts: Becoming Colonial in Early America*, ed. Robert Blair St. George (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2000), 49–72.

8. Malini Johar Schueller and Edward Watts, eds., *Messy Beginnings: Postcoloniality and Early American Studies* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 2003).
9. Dana Nelson, *National Manhood: Capitalist Citizenship and the Imagined Fraternity of White Men* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1998); Philip Deloria, *Playing Indian* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999); Priscilla Wald, *Constituting Americans: Cultural Anxiety and Narrative Form* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1995); Russ Castronovo, *Necro Citizenship: Death, Eroticism, and the Public Sphere in the Nineteenth-Century United States* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2001).
10. Peter Linebaugh and Marcus Rediker, *The Many-Headed Hydra: Sailors, Slaves, Commoners, and the Hidden History of the Revolutionary Atlantic* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2001).
11. David Roediger, *The Wages of Whiteness: Race and the Making of the American Working Class* (London: Verso, 1999); Noel Ignatiev, *How the Irish Became White* (New York: Routledge, 1996).