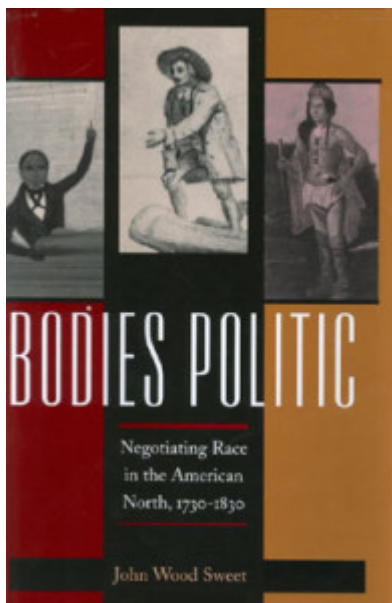
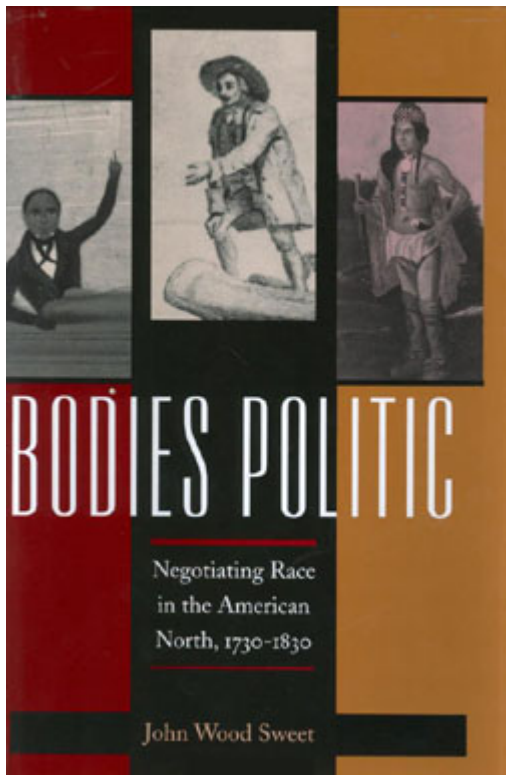


Race and Citizenship in Early New England



Bodies Politic: Negotiating Race in the American North, 1730-1830

John Wood Sweet's *Bodies Politic: Negotiating Race in the American North, 1730-1830* taps a range of new manuscript and printed sources to paint a fascinating picture of the interactions between English settlers, African slaves, and Native Americans in New England during the colonial era and early Republic. While reinforcing the fluidity-to-rigidity model of racial identity

that other scholars have proposed, *Bodies Politic* fleshes out the process of encounter and exchange. Sweet argues that contests over who belonged to the developing American society—who could claim “citizenship”—were crucial to the formation of colonial New England, to meanings of the American Revolution, and to the development of democracy.

Part I, “Coming Together,” discusses the encroachment of English settlers onto Narragansett lands, the development of African slavery, and the negotiation of identity as blacks and Indians converted to Christianity, appropriated English ways of life, and sought to define their roles in colonial New England society. Sweet provides a nuanced understanding of the conflicts through which the Narragansetts were dispossessed of their land, the complicated constructions of slave resistance within the dominant culture, and the emergence of autonomous Christian traditions among native and African peoples toward the end of the colonial period. Part I argues that even as acculturation erased differences, it distanced African slaves and Native Americans as a whole from participation in the developing colonial society and “prompted increasingly vital senses of racial identity”(57).

Part II, “Living Together,” moves from narratives of acculturation that were integral to English ideologies of imperialism to other, more intimate forms of membership in New England society. Whether regulating marriage or illicit sex, grappling over military recruitment policies, or, ultimately, disputing abolition, the public played a significant role in determining the limits to native and black resistance; yet Sweet also highlights the ways in which these peripheral groups sought sexual respectability, exploited the destabilization of political order during the Revolution to gain concessions from white settlers, and sought aid from emerging networks of abolitionists to pursue manumission.” If Part I stresses the agency of blacks and natives in the process of acculturation, Part II focuses on the ways in which living together spawned both the promise of greater equality and a white male fraternity that left free people of color without a clear place.

Part III then turns to the “problem of race” and the “problem of equality” in the early republic, looking at the meanings of the Revolution for African Americans, Native Americans, and whites in terms of their expectations for citizenship. Some Native Americans and free blacks abandoned hopes for equality and moved elsewhere, but many sought to establish themselves as members of the new nation. During the nineteenth century, free blacks used increasingly confrontational strategies to assert their citizenship, and whites responded by constructing rigid categories of racial difference that fueled widespread antiblack violence and brought to an end the “period of potential racial egalitarianism during the early years of the Republic” (355). These struggles over the symbolism of citizenship reflect not only the inheritance of slavery and exploitation, but also the ways in which the desire to construct a new republic created the problem of equality among whites. The founding of American democracy occurred through the rigorous exclusion of people of color from the new body politic; yet even as the book comes to a close, people of color are

articulating alternative narratives of the origins of the new nation that would continue to challenge the myth that America had come into its own as a land of "heroic self-sacrifice, manly vigor, and republican virtue" (399) and to call for Americans to realize the promise inherent in the rhetoric of the Revolution.

To do justice to the subtlety of Sweet's analysis or to the range of his source material would require a review of greater length. But I would like to point to two examples that are representative of the sensitivities that he brings to the encounters between the peoples of early New England. In chap. 1, Sweet shows that Indians and English settlers both forged analogies between English and native models of government, a process that produced ambiguities that each could exploit in their relations with one another. Chaps. 2 and 6, on the other hand, do a wonderful job of decentering the master and stressing the role of the public in determining the contours of the master-slave relationship. Sweet provides rich evidence of slaves running away and thus directing their resistance towards individual masters rather than the slave system itself, but he broadens this view by arguing that the general threat of slave revolt was partly directed at a complicit public that failed to recognize the rights of slaves. In so doing, he points to the ways in which New England colonial identity was increasingly bound up in the settlers' desire to keep slavery private and permanent in the face of an institution that, in practice, constantly undermined this vision.

Bodies Politic considers negotiations of citizenship in a range of different contexts from acculturation to the formation of a post-Revolutionary democracy. The analysis would have benefited from a more dynamic definition of "citizenship" that made explicit what the move from subject to citizen meant for early New Englanders; as it is, Sweet's static definition of citizenship—meaning, broadly, the rights enjoyed by white, property-holding men—reflects the perspective of the historian and loses sensitivity to change and to the fluidity of membership in early American society. At the same time, however, Sweet provides a much more detailed picture of common New Englanders' day-to-day lives. His book comes as part of a long-term effort to balance the complicated histories that we have of white America with an equally nuanced understanding of the perceptions and strategies of people of color. That he does so with the American north is crucial to revising the still-too-common assumption that New England housed a relatively homogenous population less shaped by interactions—especially with African slaves—than by a shared religious errand. The more pluralistic society that Sweet reconstructs brings this region into line with the growing scholarship on the importance of encounter, exchange, and conflict in the development of American identities and reintegrates it into the accepted broad narratives of American history for this period. Perhaps the book's greatest contribution lies in its portrayal of African and Native American identities as quickly coming to share the same cultural ground as whites'; in the persistence with which people of color sought equality in the new republic and even in the English-style Christian settlements that those who chose to leave pursued elsewhere lies the unfinished

business of the American Revolution and a constant reminder of the origins of American democracy.

This article originally appeared in issue 5.1 (October, 2004).

Catherine Molineux is a Ph.D. candidate at Johns Hopkins University and is currently finishing a dissertation entitled, "The Peripheries within: Race, Slavery, and Empire in Early Modern England."