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Michelle R. Warren, *Creole Medievalism: Colonial France and Joseph Bedier's Middle Ages*. Minneapolis.: University of Minnesota Press, 2011. xxxii + 379 pp. Bibliography and index. \$25.00 U.S. (pb). ISBN 978-0-8166-6526-6.

Review by Andrew M. Daily, University of Memphis.

Michelle Warren opens her account on the colonial politics of medievalism with a familiar colonial scene: a young Réunionnais migrant, freshly arrived in the metropole, contrasts the vibrancy and modernity of Paris with the lassitude and backwardness of the home colony. As Warren's young worker laments, "It's like I came from the Middle Ages... we are savages" (p. xi). Movement across space is also movement through time, from the medieval atavism of the colony to the modern vitality of the metropole.[1] The wonder and confusion occasioned by the "voyage in" operates as a familiar trope in immigrant and colonial literature, whether Antilleans on their way to London and New York, or West Africans to Paris and Liverpool. In a reverse of the colonialist "voyage out," the contrast between the poor colony and the rich metropole establishes a fecund moment for colonial critique, ironic self-reflection, and heroic self-fashioning.[2]

The life and work of the medievalist Joseph Bédier (1864-1938) complicates this literary trope. Through Bédier, the principal subject of her study, Warren guides us through the intertwined literary and racial politics of Réunion's white elite (the creoles of her title). Rather than painting Réunion's "medievalism" as a lack or deficit, Bédier and his Réunionnais—they preferred "Bourbonnais," invoking Réunion's pre-revolutionary name—compatriots instead celebrated it, casting their home island as the preserve of the values and virtues of the French Middle Ages, values and virtues which made France France and made France great. "I am not a man of the present," she quotes a proud Bedier, "but of the Middle Ages" (p. xi). Bédier, the scion of a prominent creole family, well-connected in both political and literary circles, was among the most eminent medieval scholars of the Third Republic, composing critical works on *Les faiblaux* as well as virtuoso translations of *Tristan et Iseut* and *Le Chanson de Roland*. Elevated to the Académie Française in 1920, he maintained a significant literary and scholarly presence through the waning days of the Third Republic. As Warren notes, when he died in 1938, Bédier's obituary appeared in over 200 newspapers, and tributes poured in from throughout the nation and the empire.

Warren is a scholar of medieval literature whose previous work has focused on the emergence of proto-national identity in medieval texts, as well as how nineteenth-century nationalisms mobilized medievalism to establish the bounds of nation and national identity. *Creole Medievalism* fits into her previous work and expands upon it, extending her studies of nationalism's use of imagined medieval pasts into the colonial context. As Warren remarks—and to which her extensive notes and bibliography bear witness—Bédier's impact on medieval scholarship and French literature have been subject to extensive comment, but the influence of Bedier's creole and colonial origins on his aesthetic and political interventions has been largely overlooked.

Thus Warren's volume is in part a work of recovery, taking the unique figure of Bédier and his trajectory from the Indian Ocean to the Académie Française as an opportunity to excavate Réunion's unique racial politics, to expose to wider scholarly attention the island's literary contributions to France, to restore to Bédier's career his Réunionnais roots, and to read Third Republican intellectual history through its colonial context.

Vital to understanding Warren's account of Bédier and of creole medievalism is the complex literary politics behind the term 'creole' in the Réunionnais context. Traditional understandings of creole in the historical and social scientific literature describe the processes of racial, cultural, and linguistic mixing that emerged out of the colonial encounter, whether in the slave and settler societies of the New World or the colonial polities of late nineteenth-century "new imperialism." Warren's usage, drawn from her subjects, is closer to the oldest definitions of creole first articulated in the Spanish and Portuguese New World empires: whites born overseas. For Réunion's white elite, creole was not only a term of self-definition, but was explicitly opposed to the cultural and racial mixing the term commonly denotes. Warren painstakingly reconstructs how for Bédier and other white elites, "creole" signified whiteness, and how the defense, elaboration, cultivation, and promotion of creole whiteness formed the cultural and ideological grounds for their demand for a greater role in French imperialism, closer ties to the French metropole, and the inclusion of creole culture into the national canon and national cultural institutions. The ideology of creole elites, including Bédier, was thus rooted in a fundamental cultural defense of whiteness and white privilege.

Warren begins by framing Réunion within the larger empire, both reconstructing its internal politics and situating Réunion within the broader colonial imaginary of Third Republic France, steps necessary to locate Bédier and his work within his dual colonial and metropolitan context. The growth of "medievalism" in the nineteenth century and its union with nationalist politics forms the background to Bédier's career. As Warren details, under the Third Republic, medievalism came to replace antiquity as the basis for national cultural prestige, a shift in emphasis that reflected the late nineteenth-century search for the origins of modern European national identity in the dynastic cleavages of the Middle Ages (p. 11). For France, the extended conflict with Germany shaped the turn to medievalism and imbued French medieval studies with a strongly nationalist bent. French writers, republican and monarchist alike, mined France's medieval history to uncover the origins of France's language, territory, and identity, and in order to understand what separated the French from their Germanic cousins. The fascination with the past, read through the conflict with Germany, constituted a veritable "nationalist medievalism."

Warren notes the important place of the national epic, particularly *Roland*, to nationalist medievalism. Epic poems—from the *Aeneid* to the *Songs of Ossian*—were perceived as foundational moments in national and linguistic identity. *Roland*—actually composed in Anglo-Norman—was claimed in the late nineteenth century as France's national epic. During the Prussian siege of Paris in 1870, Charles Lenient (Sorbonne), Gaston Paris (Collège de France), and Léon Gautier delivered three separate lectures on *Roland*, highlighting the poem's nationalist themes and holding up Roland and his sacrifice as models for modern Frenchmen. Warren argues that the promotion of the *Roland* and epic literature helped shape a French nationalism that, wounded by the German seizure of Alsace and Lorraine, valorized, in Ernst Renan's words, the nation as "a soul, a conscience, a living effect" (p. 18). The epic, Renan continued, embodied the national soul, and transmitted to the present the spirit of the first Frenchmen. Nation as imagination and spirit was contrasted to nation as territory and state, and helped assuage the loss of Alsace and Lorraine. The lost provinces might be territorially German but remained spiritually French. Nationalist medievalism also articulated a national imaginary into which Réunion's creole elite could insert their island—separated by thousands of miles of ocean—as incarnating and preserving what was best about France's ancient values and spirit.

A nationalist medievalism became the means for the creole elite, including many members of Bédier's extended family, to promote Réunion and creole culture as vital to national identity and to imperial expansion. Through history, museography, the Colonial Expositions of 1889, 1900, and 1931, and literary glory, Réunionnais politicians and literary figures strove to put Réunion at the center of the expanding French empire, lauding Réunion as a model for imperial expansion and an example for national rebirth. The island showcased the flourishing implantation of (white) French culture in the tropical soil of the empire, providing a model for future settlement projects. This, however, required that creole ideologues stress that Réunion and the metropole were not fundamentally different. As such, their efforts to promote Réunion were caught in the "double bind" of colonial discourse (p. 29). The colonial imaginary was preoccupied with "primitive" colonial subjects in need of *la mission civilisatrice*, while creole elites repeatedly stressed the refinements of their (white) culture. By arguing that the colony preserved the best aspects of French classicism, chivalry, and culture, the colonial imaginary's guiding exoticism meant that Réunion, alongside Guadeloupe and Martinique, were of little interest to imperial propagandists or the broader French public. To counteract such marginalization, creole writers like Marius and Ary Leblond promoted Réunion's contributions to French letters. Chivalric and romantic poets Evariste de Parry, Leconte de Lisle, and Léon Dierx, were cast as expressing France's purest values and testified to Réunion's place in French national identity and artistic glory. In time, Bédier's scholarship, literary genius, and patriotic service to the French nation, saw him incorporated into this pantheon as well.

From the French colonial imaginary, Warren turns her focus to Bédier's literary and patriotic career. His work, both scholarly and literary, expressed the values and contributed to the construction of "creole medievalism." Bédier's biography, Warren shows, itself became an epic myth, recounted and promoted by the Leblonds and other elite creoles as incarnating the contributions of creoles to French genius. Biographies of Bédier turn around the primal scene of the young Bédier reading *Roland*—given to him as a school prize—beneath the mango tree in the courtyard of his family's home and deciding to become a medievalist, marrying together the national (*Roland*) with the colonial (the mango tree) (p. 92). The portrait of Bédier that emerges beyond the myth is of a serious yet affable scholar who secured friends and prestige across the literary and political spectrum of the Third Republic. Deeply shaped by his creole origins, particularly "creole chivalry," and imbued with a creole exilic consciousness, Warren depicts Bédier's work as one long effort to construct a French identity that transcended time and space, a corpus that posited an almost essentialist French identity that was tied not to territory but to spirit. In this reading Bédier's nationalism has its creole shadings, but does not differ profoundly from the nationalist vision promoted by Ernst Renan and other late nineteenth-century French republican nationalists. Warren argues that "home and sadness"—a desire to find a place in *la France profonde*, tinged with a nostalgic sadness for his home island—shaped Bédier's nationalism (p. 107). Yet it is curious that despite his exilic sadness, Bédier returned to Réunion only once, in 1887 (p. 103).

Warren tries to untangle Bédier's politics, although to this reader they seem hopelessly muddled as Bédier appears without any firm ideological commitments besides patriotism. He was a Dreyfusard, yet was close to many in the anti-Dreyfusard camp, including Barrès and François de Mahy, his cousin and Réunion's deputy. He maintained creole aristocratic values, yet admired the "noble" Jean Jaurès. He was committed to (an albeit conservative) republicanism, yet corresponded with Charles Maurras and socialized within Action Française circles (pp. 79-87). Warren reads Bédier's incoherent political associations as the "contradictory" expression of creole republicanism, though his tangled alliances seem more an exemplar of the open literary politics of the late Third Republic, which saw many friendships that transcended ideological grounds (for example, between Louis Aragon and Pierre Drieu la Rochelle).

Bédier's politics, such as they were, seem driven less by ideological arguments between right and left than by a deeply felt nationalism and an attendant anti-Germanism that subordinated internal French debates to the struggle against German political and cultural expansion. "The only thing that lasts in

our national sentiment,” Warren quotes Bédier, “is our hatred of the Germans” (p. 21). His work on a French edition of *Tristan et Iseut* reclaimed the “French” epic from both Germanic scholarship and Wagner’s popular opera. *Légendes épiques*, the published version of his doctoral dissertation, sought to “de-Germanize” French medieval studies by articulating a distinctly “French” philology. During the war, Bédier worked for the Ministry of War as a propagandist. He contributed to *Les Crimes Allemands* and penned several patriotic tracts as well as patriotic plays. Bédier was proud of his wartime service—“it will make the Germans scream with anger and humiliation”—and Warren argues that his war work helped secure his 1920 election to the Académie (p. 85).

Following the war, Bédier published the work for which he is still remembered, a French edition and modern translation of *La Chanson de Roland*. Warren argues that the epic, already secure within French nationalism, was also read as expressing French imperial values. Roland’s noble sacrifice testified to French notions of chivalry, sacrifice, and national identity, while Charlemagne’s Moorish wars linked the contemporaneous French imperial project to the medieval past. “Colonial medievalism” posited an unbroken tradition of French colonial expansion from the Crusades through the conquest of Madagascar, and Charlemagne’s expansionist struggle against the Moors was read as prefiguring the Third Republic’s colonization of North Africa. Bédier’s edition of *Roland* fit neatly into this tradition, and Warren reads his philological and editorial choices as consonant with the colonialist rereading of the Middle Ages. Bédier downplayed Arabic influences on the poem’s composition, glossing it instead as expressing the values of a fully formed French spirit. His translations stressed the differences between the Moors and Franks, casting the Moors as absolutely other, while stressing the similarities between the poem’s depiction of Charlemagne’s Franks and the modern French.

Nonetheless, Warren argues, *Roland*’s text is riven with ambiguities and continuities between the Franks and Moors, particularly the traffic in material objects such as furs, silks, olifants, and swords. In a later chapter, Warren offers a fascinating reading of *Roland*, focusing on the circulation of objects in the poem as indicative of “creolizing” elements in the narrative. The easy movement of objects back and forth between the Franks and Moors undermines their absolute difference and instead reveals a shared material culture. Here Warren uses “creole” in its more traditional usage, as cultural and racial intermingling, although her argument that *Roland* is a “creole epic” remains unconvincing. A shared material culture is not the same as the hybrid racial and cultural intermingling that creolization usually denotes. Within *Roland* it is not clear that the difference between the Moors and Franks is grounded in any sense of racial difference, despite Bédier’s editorial interventions. In one of the poem’s key moments, the defeated Moorish prince’s widow, Bramimonde, converts to Christianity and is accepted into the Frankish community, signifying that the difference between Franks and Moors is not racial but religious. Certainly *Roland* shows traces of cross-cultural circulation and exchange but it is debatable that such interactions should be interpreted as “creole.”

Warren concludes with a chapter on “postcolonial itineraries,” following creole medievalism, as well as Bédier’s legacy, into the postcolonial moment. Warren shows that Bédier, as one of the island’s famous sons, was mobilized for myriad political and cultural causes. Following Réunion’s departmentalization in 1946 and the subsequent import of standard metropolitan bureaucratic practice to the island, disputes arose between “integrationists” who insisted on France as “one and indivisible” and “creolists” who stressed Réunion’s cultural particularity. In debates over school curricula, broadcast policy, museography, and public memory, “integrationists” like Réunion’s powerful deputy Michel Debré drew on republicanism to argue against cultural difference, while localists drew on Réunion’s rich cultural and literary tradition to argue for the island’s unique history. Both sides mobilized Bédier’s memory to advance their cause. A 1965 monument to the tricentenary of Réunion’s settlement, a monument Warren reads as dedicated to integrationist ideals, featured a Bédier quote stressing Réunion’s “love” for her “mother” France (p. 208). Creolephone activists drew on Bédier’s life as well as his published works to argue that Réunion’s great patriotic academician lauded creole and French as complementary rather

than opposed (p. 196). The tension between local identity and national belonging has persisted into the present day, but Warren argues that this tension has worked to provoke discussion around both Réunion's history and contemporary Réunionnais identity.[4]

Warren's book is ambitious and erudite, linking an extensive scholarship on Bédier to the ever-growing literature on French empire and French imperial culture, advancing unique readings of Bédier's oeuvre, Réunion, and Third Republican literary politics. Among its many contributions, Warren's effort to re-read national intellectual history from a colonial vantage point is a welcome one, tracking with recent developments in intellectual and literary history.[5] While the "colonial turn" has reshaped myriad historical subfields from gender studies to religious history, intellectual history has remained largely impervious to Gary Wilder's call to treat "the imperial nation-state" as an interconnected whole.[6] Showing how medieval studies, which seem so quintessentially metropolitan, were deeply imbued with colonial ideology and imperial traces, the author sketches a path for opening up French intellectual history to a postcolonial perspective.

Additionally, her careful reconstruction of the ideology of Réunion's white minority recovers an important yet neglected chapter in colonial history. White elites on Réunion—and on Martinique and Guadeloupe—exercised an outsized influence on the development of the colonies in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. They profoundly shaped not only island politics and island institutions, but also representations about the colonial past. Her extensive analysis of Marius and Ary Leblond, two forgotten but extraordinarily important colonial ideologues (Ary Leblond was among the first curators at the Musée de la France d'Outre-mer), is an important addition to the history of colonialist discourse and the construction of colonial institutions. Due undoubtedly to the white elite's racist ideology and hierarchical politics—and to their political and cultural eclipse since 1946—their role in the *vieilles colonies* has largely faded from scholarly view, though the 2009 unrest in the Caribbean (which spread to Réunion) has reminded observers of their still-dominant role in the overseas departments. While books and articles on *négritude* continue to proliferate, Warren's account of this extremely important chapter in French colonial history joins what is still a very narrow shelf.[7]

Warren's book is not without its idiosyncrasies and frustrations, though many of my difficulties with her book flow from differences in methodology and evidentiary standards between her critical-literary approach and the standards of historical scholarship. Some of her claims about the extent and depth of "creole medievalism" may prove perfectly tenable for literary scholars but will exasperate historians accustomed to archival sourcing and clear causality. In her chapter on the Colonial Expositions, for example, juxtaposition—the proximity of the Réunionnais pavilion to medieval-styled pavilions—must do extensive analytic work. Despite the thorough documentation, both archival and published, on the colonial expositions, she adduces little evidence that organizers linked Réunion to the Middle Ages in a way that supports her claims of a pervasive "creole medievalism" at the expositions. Patricia Morton has argued that the creole colonies posed a "problem" of representation for exposition planners: the three islands lacked an "indigenous" idiom that could be incorporated into the exposition's exoticist architecture. If the Réunionnais pavilion replicated the Villa du Chaudron, this flowed from both a desire to express Réunion's "aristocratic pedigree," and from the absence of a more suitably exotic style.[8]

This example is representative of the book's one major weakness, Warren's tendency to discover proliferating "medievalisms" everywhere, such that the idea lacks precision and becomes amorphous. That Réunion's creole elite had an ideology that could be described as "creole medievalism" she proves convincingly. That there was an extensive "colonial medievalism" that played a major role in the French colonial project is somewhat less convincing. While she cites major historians of French imperialism—Gary Wilder, Alice Conklin, Martin Thomas, and Raoul Girardet (though William Cohen and Raymond Betts are notably absent)—there is little direct engagement with their arguments. While her reading in the historiography is impressive, to make her case that medievalism was a vital part of nineteenth-

century French imperialism demands a careful appreciation of the already extensive literature on colonial ideology.

Additionally, in Warren's pairing "creole medievalism," she defines creole narrowly and medievalism broadly. For most of the book, creole is defined solely as the ideology of Réunion's white elite, an ideology that rejected racial and cultural mixing and was thus diametrically opposed to the most common scholarly definitions of the term. Towards the end of the book she shifts to the more common sense of creole as cultural, racial, and linguistic *métissage*. Missing from her account are the pitched polemics around the term "creole," as well as the historical development of creole as both an identity and a concept.[9] And, for an island that was once a slave society, hewing to such a narrow definition of creole is inherently problematic.[10]

With medievalism, the reverse is true, with its definition so broad it seems to fade and thin at the edges. "Medievalism," of course, is different from the medieval, referring not to any historical reality but to an imagined and idealized vision of the Middle Ages. Nonetheless, it is not always clear when Warren's invocation of this term is simply descriptive and when it is intended to be critical. Medievalism in her account can refer to phenomena as diverse as the Réunionnais elite, to ancient Gaul, to the pre-republican monarchy, to aristocratic values, to rural France, to militaristic Germany, to the medieval period itself, in essence, to any social order or cultural practice understood as pre-modern or pre-republican. For example, she describes the Réunionnais elite's exclusive and exclusionary familial patterns as reflective of their "medievalism" and "creole chivalry," yet their practices remind one more of Norbert Elias's theses on the construction of the post-medieval European cultural order, or the thoroughly modern practice of colonial racial hygiene, than the dynastic politics of the Middle Ages. Perhaps Warren means that the creole elite understood their behavior as "medieval," but if that is the case, she does not make it clear. Such slippages cause a conceptual drift that sometimes makes it hard to pin down when she is writing descriptively or analytically.

Quibbles aside, *Creole Medievalism* is a welcome contribution to studies of French colonial culture, and a much-needed intervention in metropolitan intellectual history.

NOTES

Thanks to Héloïse Finch-Boyer for her perceptive comments.

[1] Johannes Fabian, *Time and the Other: How Anthropology Makes Its Object* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1983).

[3] C.L.R. James's *Beyond a Boundary* and George Lamming's *The Emigrants* remain among the most well-known examples of this literature. In French, René Maran's understudied *Un homme pareil aux autres* fits into this genre as well.

[4] Her final chapter contains a fascinating discussion of the Musée Leon Dierx and an installation by the artist Sarkis that recast the museum's medieval statuary into a commentary on the metropole-colony relationship.

[5] Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000); Andrew Sartori, *Bengal in Global Concept History: Culturalism in the Age of Capital* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008); Andrew Sartori and Samuel Moyn, eds., *Global Intellectual History* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2013); Christie McDonald and Susan

Rubin Suleiman, eds., *French Global: A New Approach to Literary History* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011).

[6] Gary Wilder, *The French Imperial Nation-State: Négritude and Colonial Humanism between the Two World Wars* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005); Gary Wilder, "From Optic to Topic: The Foreclosure Effect of Historiographic Turns," *American Historical Review* 117 (June 2012): 723-745.

[7] Other notable works include Rebecca Schloss Hartkopf, *Sweet Liberty: The Final Days of Slavery in Martinique* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2009); Howard Johnson and Karl Watson, eds., *The White Minority in the Caribbean* (Princeton, N.J.: Markus Wiener, 1997); Édith Beaudoux-Kovats, *Les Blancs créoles de la Martinique: une minorité dominante* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 2002).

[8] Patricia Morton, *Hybrid Modernities: Representation at the 1931 Colonial Exposition, Paris* (Boston: MIT Press, 2003).

[9] Charles Stewart, ed., *Creolization: History, Ethnography, Theory* (Walnut Creek, Cal.: Left Coast Press, 2007).

[10] It would have been beneficial to see a deeper discussion of slavery and emancipation in this book, particularly since slavery was often cast by its opponents—whether Karl Marx or Victor Schoelcher—as feudal or medieval.

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