

Making Peace, Making Early American Diplomacy: A Conversation with Eliga Gould

By Taylor Christian

Q: Your talk today is about slavery and the peace treaty that ended the American Revolution. But in this story the British are, in many ways, the champions of liberty...

A: Hmm. . . The treaty makers together, in Paris, agreed to treat slaves as property. . . and that's a British act—it's an Anglo-American treaty. But it is the British soldiers in America who come off as liberators.

Q: That's a lesser-told version of America's founding. How did you first stumble across this project and what made you think you needed to share this story?

A: I first talked about this part of it in my most recent book, *Among the Powers of the Earth*, which is about the [American] quest for international recognition. So I've known about this for quite a while. . . . The book that really influenced my thinking about it was Chris Brown's *Moral Capital*, about British abolition. . . . So I knew about it from that. . . but it was one of these things where I then started looking into it myself and I realized there was so much more here than this liberationist story.

Q: I think it's a fascinating story--

A: It's a fascinating story.

Q: But it's certainly not the traditional story?

A: People have written about it—primarily from the liberationist standpoint. . . . There are a number of actually excellent books about the African American side of this. But, less so on the treaty itself. The larger book that this is drawn from is about the treaty. If you think about the United States as having three founding documents: the Declaration of Independence, the Constitution, and, in between, the Treaty of Paris—the Treaty of Paris is hands-down the least studied one. . . . I don't think we think of the story of the black loyalists as a diplomatic story, but it definitely is.

Q: You're really writing about a time period that does not receive much attention in diplomatic history—early American diplomacy. What is your assessment of the field?

A: One of my other projects that I'm involved in, I'm co-editing the first volume of the new Cambridge—they're calling it the *Cambridge History of America and the World*—but it's basically a successor volume to the *Cambridge History of American Foreign Relations*, though they've given it a title that decenters diplomacy, so I've been spending a lot of time with other American diplomatic historians.

I think it's a problem that [early] American diplomatic history doesn't have the standing within the field of the history of American foreign relations that it could, because there's actually a lot of really interesting work being done on it. But I think one of the reasons why it doesn't have the standing that it [could] is that a lot of us who are doing *chuckles* well, in all modesty, the many people who are doing this interesting work. . . don't necessarily think of ourselves as diplomatic historians.

My interest in diplomatic history grows out of a much larger interest in political history. . . if you think of the American union as an international system of states—getting interested in the diplomacy is just sort of a natural extension of a set of interests that wouldn't necessarily be recognized as diplomatic history by modern diplomatic historians. So there's almost kind of a disconnect between what we are doing and what people—particularly in the twentieth century think of as American diplomatic history. The whole idea of an American state is deeply conjectural in my period.

Q: So the problem isn't a lack of scholarly attention to the period, but that traditional scholars of American foreign relations aren't recognizing that work as diplomatic history?

A: Yeah. . . The other thing is. . . the foundational premise of modern diplomatic history is that there's a difference between domestic and foreign. . . Some of the really innovative work sort of, you know, probes that boundary and looks at the way which they are interpenetrating and entangled with each other. You can take, as a given, a fairly stable line between, you know, the domestic United States and the world beyond our shores, whereas that's totally up for grabs in 1776 and '83 and, you know, heck *laughs* the Missouri Crisis. . . In some ways, right down at least to the Mexican War, it's an open question even where the United States' borders are.

Eliga Gould earned his Ph.D. at Johns Hopkins under Jack Greene. He currently teaches at the University of New Hampshire, where he is working on a new project entitled: Crucible of Peace. Gould is also a 2018-2019 Guggenheim fellow.