

# Was New Orleans Caribbean?

*By Andy Cabot*

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**Until recently, the history of French colonial New Orleans was treated as an exception. Writing a total social history of 18<sup>th</sup> Century New Orleans, Cécile Vidal offers to reframe it as a Caribbean outpost of the French Empire rather than as a North American frontier town.**

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Reviewed: Cécile Vidal, *Caribbean New Orleans: Empire, Race, and the Making of a Slave Society*, Chapel Hill, The University of North Carolina Press, 2019.

Until recently, the history of French colonial New Orleans was treated as an exception, or a minor phenomenon in the larger fields of Atlantic history, and the comparative history of slave societies. The city's marginalization within major historiographical trends had several factors, the most crucial one being the tendency to consider eighteenth-century New Orleans in light of its later history as part the United States, something which remains highly problematic for academic historians.<sup>1</sup> This has reinforced the view that the city's colonial experience as an urban locale was inherently different from other American colonial cities. *Caribbean New Orleans* proposes a broad investigation of this claim by affirming that "it is more accurate to

1 The French-speaking historiography also played a role in this marginalization : LANGLOIS Gilles Antoine, « Préface », GIRAUD Marcel, *Histoire de la Louisiane Française. Tome V*, La Compagnie des Indes, 1723-1731, Paris, l'Harmattan, 2012, 9-17. Langlois notes that, although unparalleled in breadth and precision, Giraud's history remains centered on the "metropolitan" dynamics of the colony, while largely ignoring its "regional" (Caribbean) and Atlantic ones, thus also largely putting aside the importance of enslaved people in the colony's history.

view eighteenth-century New Orleans as a Caribbean port city rather than a North American one" (p. 8), a proposition that seeks to recast the entire colonial period as one primarily affected by the relations with the main French colony of Saint-Domingue that "exhorted a profound influence on New Orleans society" (p. 9). More largely, this vantage point on the city aims at "decentering North America" by situating "early North America history on the periphery of Caribbean history", and, more broadly, "all American colonial and slave societies as parts of a continuum" (p. 2).

Constructed as a total social history, *Caribbean New Orleans* ceaselessly alternates between the micro and macro historical to demonstrate how the two responded to each other in myriad ways. The book's subtitle, *Empire, Race, and the Making of a Slave Society*, is a testimony to this arduous yet masterly executed back and forth movement between individuals, groups, and institutions. This, in turn, gives shape to one of the book's core ambitions: to understand New Orleans as a "case study" (p. 510) that develops "a situated Atlantic history and [...] a microhistory of race within the urban center" (p. 35).

The book's larger project is sustained by the chapters' general organization which stands out as a model. At large, these succeed in demonstrating how structural developments in the city's history under French rule were often found at "the intersection between the North American and West Indian worlds" (p.23). They do so by deploying a multitude of analytical scales and complementing each other both chronologically and thematically, each of them being devoted to unveiling the different grains of this complex relationship between race and empire, where the former played an intrinsic role in the making of the latter, and, *in fine*, in the establishment of a slave society.

## **A Total Social History of a Colonial City**

If the book's chapters generally cover a specific theme (the law, families, labor, trade, etc.), and how each was affected by its interaction with race and empire, the first two chapters serve as a large chronological overview of the city's history. Chapter I forms an important contextual base for the rest of the book. While exploring the contours of the city's founding era until the 1731 Crown takeover, it puts great care in

replacing the city's emergence within the specific imperial, Atlantic, and regional conditions, that ultimately led to the "Caribbeanization of New Orleans and Louisiana society" (p. 29). Then, the colony came to a turning point in November 1729 after a deadly Natchez Indians' attack on Fort Rosalie that "could have led to a complete inversion of the colonial order" (p. 106). The revolt, detailed in Chapter II, truly forms a turning point in this relation between race and empire analyzed throughout the book. It prompted a sharp migratory trend from the plantations back to the capital that eventually concentrated both the white *and* slave populations within the same area. For white colonists, this pitted the lower ranks of the urban population against the top urban dwellers formed by administrative officials and clergymen who sought to distinguish themselves by acquiring nearby plantations. For slaves, the general direction adopted was similar but the strategies different. A "rival geography", as Vidal puts it, was developed by slaves many of whom resorted to a *petit marronage* made of short-term escapes from their plantations or households in and around New Orleans, but also by a desire to find temporary employment, sometimes a one-day task, in the city, in order to "enjoy a more autonomous life" (p. 130) and attain a "measure of anonymity" (p. 131). Nevertheless, "disappearing was not easy" (p. 131) in a locale where patrolling militias and networks of control had been patiently built in the aftermath of the Natchez revolt. Despite tensions within the different groups, the chapter identifies with great perspicacity how the apex of the Louisianan colonial project became centered on New Orleans after 1731 after another plot among the Bambara slaves was discovered and suppressed. The administrative capital progressively became the *ville* above all other cities where "a sense of community among white urbanites" (p. 141) developed against the sources of disorder represented by Indians and Africans.

These social and ethnic tensions within the city were a perpetual concern to the city's leading officials who wished to assimilate the various groups of European colonists into a more coherent racial and social stratification. Slavery remained the central element of these conflicts, as it "determined not only labor relationships between whites and blacks but also among whites." (p. 289). Throughout Chapter VI on labor, the different types of activity and employment used in the city are surveyed by Vidal with a particular emphasis on who, among free colored, slaves, or European indentured servants, occupied these positions, and how it changed over time. As in previous developments, the year 1731 is a turning point here. The Crown's takeover

<sup>2</sup> "Petit marronage," was a strategy of resistance in which individual slaves or small groups, for a variety of reasons, escaped their plantations for a short period of time. Contrary to *grand marronage*, it usually concerned only a few slaves, and it ended when slaves eventually returned to their owners.

of the colony and the closing of the slave trade led authorities to encourage white inhabitants to train slaves as apprentices to compensate for the shortage of new laborers (indentured or enslaved), reduce the number of white workers and thus “turning the colony into a genuine slave society” (p. 308). Similarly, this resulted in the exclusion of many whites from slave-ownership which, as a 1747 proposal for increasing the capitation tax on slaves proved, “had become the main fault line dividing Louisiana society” (p. 318). The few large slaveholders<sup>3</sup> lived on the city’s outskirts and thus came to constitute a colonial elite who held slave-ownership as a social marker and embraced “the traditional aristocratic ethos associated with the seignorial system” (p. 318). For these powerful aristocrats, lower whites and slaves were the equivalent of “vassals” and “peasants” whose lives were commanded by loyalty to their immediate superior.

### **Labor, Class, and Race: Urban Slavery in a Colonial Capital**

Trade under its various forms did not escape this racialization process delineated throughout the book. For freemen, engaging in trading activities through wholesaling or retailing provoked tensions, especially with the colonial nobility who rightly considered merchants as direct challengers to their social preeminence. In one case, a certain lieutenant Sabran confronted a Sieur Battar who belonged “to the world of maritime commerce” to force him to apologize on his knees in front of all the city’s military officers for having dared to remove his hat in presence of the officer. In a milieu where daily occurrences of “the extreme violence the slave system allowed masters to use against their enslaved laborers” (p. 349) took place, this white-on-white symbolic violence became common for nobles who were keen on drawing a clear line separating them from their rivals. Of course, nobles also indirectly engaged in trading activities to preserve their much needed credit reputation in the colony. Trusted enslaved servants became useful auxiliaries to these activities by carrying their masters’ retailing business and feeding the growing “informal market economy” (p. 361) of the city. Chevalier de Pradel’s slave Jupiter was one of these “enslaved hucksters” (p. 362). Ordered to sell and buy goods with letters of exchange, he was directed to return a certain amount of money from his dealings. When negotiations in

<sup>3</sup> According to the census figures quoted by Vidal on p.121, by 1763, 9% of slaveholders had more than 10 slaves while only seven households had an exceptional number between 30 and 60.

the marketplace became difficult, petty thefts sometimes became necessary. These actions left him vulnerable if found guilty, but such an outcome was preferable than the violent punishment at the hands of his master.

Drawing on this example, Vidal argues here that urban slaves were “no less brutalized and exploited than other plantation slaves working in the fields” (p. 362). When alluding later to the widespread practice of pawnbroking—selling clothes or personal objects for money and committing oneself to buying it back at a later date to market value—among slaves and poor whites, the author considers it not as a “form of solidarity and cooperation”, but rather as an economic system where poor whites could “maintain their social superiority over free and enslaved people of color, causing the latter to be obliged to them” (p. 364). These examples establish a convincing rebuttal to the common trope of “urban slavery” being more fluid and less violent than plantation slavery.

## The Racialized Identities of French Colonial New Orleans

Against generalizations on the “Creole” character of Louisiana, Chapter IX finally examines how the use of particular labels was contingent to racial and political understandings of what constituted a *pays*, and, then, later on, during the 1768 revolt against the new Spanish governor Ulloa, a *nation*. For the white population, “ethno-labels” (p. 468) were varied and referred to the origins of French speaking migrants whether these were *Canadiens* or *Provençal* or from another *pays* in continental France. Interestingly, these labels did not create much tension during the great waves of company-sponsored migrations in the 1720s. It was only with the *Canadiens* migrants that they first became tools to ostracize and exclude a portion of the population considered inferior to “French” migrants. These attempts at differentiation found echoes later with the larger debates on racial degeneracy initiated by Cornelius De Pauw and Buffon in the metropole. Two among the most prominent authors on the French colony, Antoine La Page Du Pratz and Jean-Bernard Bossu, became vocal proponents for a strict definition of the term “Creole” or *Louisianais* as they considered *métissage* with indigenous people or Africans as impure. For these authors, it was one’s lineage with a European ancestor that made a colonist a proper “Creole”. This tendency to define and exclude through different ethno-labels thus achieved its apex

with “Creole” from the 1740s onward when both authors with a colonial background and enlightened metropolitan critics attached a “Creole” identity with “a person’s purity with blood”, and guarded against “the suspicion of *métissage*” (p. 455).

Slaves were part of this conversation too. Contrary to other slave societies in the mainland or in the Caribbean, slaves were in short supply in Louisiana after 1731. Thus, for owners, “markers of status and race, but not ethnicity” (p. 468) became dominant. The few slaves’ testimonies in court detailed in the chapter do hint at how the defendants sought to “adapt their former African experiences to navigate the different power struggles presented by the colonial situation” (p. 473). Therefore, as the second generation of slaves started emerging, many also attributed themselves a “Creole” identity (“Creole of this colony”, “Creole of the country”, “Creole of the Mississippi”, etc.) during trials in order to highlight their “awareness that a Creole identity had replaced an African ethnicity” (p. 474), and thus evade fierce punishments.

## **The New Frontiers of Atlantic History**

The research aims outlined and examined by Vidal in this book are broad and compelling. More importantly, the nearly 500-page synthesis she offers here completely fulfills the reader’s hopes. We are served with a truly historical research monolith that not only comprehensively synthesizes decades of cutting-edge scholarship on various fields (racial formations, Atlantic slavery, imperial history), but also delivers rigorously thought arguments to advance longstanding debates in those fields. The breadth and precision of Vidal’s footnotes are particularly to be praised. When addressing historiographical issues as varied as the place of free blacks in urban colonial locales, the importance of Caribbean migrations and exchanges on the development of mainland slave societies, or, most preeminent in the book, the development of race and slavery in French colonial Louisiana, Vidal comfortably quotes all the key articles and monographs on each specific topic within references that end up forming a book of its own. Furthermore, this study goes beyond the encyclopedic exercise on secondary literature as it also presents detailed archival references in both « local » (American) and « colonial » (French) archival centers, the

whole constituting the most erudite and synthetic study of a colonial city since Anne Pérotin-Dumon's book on Pointe-à-Pitre and Basse-Terre, published in 2000.<sup>4</sup>

*Caribbean New Orleans* remarkably concludes decades of research conducted by the author, and nurtured by a solid group of scholars whose contributions to the history of colonial New Orleans in collective volumes have reshaped our understanding of its place in the regional and Atlantic world economy of the eighteenth century.<sup>5</sup> As expressed in the Conclusion, this total social history of the city will help scholars to move away from the "creole singularity" paradigm and finally "draw comparisons between New Orleans and other places within the greater Caribbean, the French empire, and the Atlantic world." (Vidal, 499). Indeed, one of the book's main tasks was to operate a *reintegration* of colonial New Orleans within its multiples contexts (imperial, regional, Atlantic). It is fulfilled beyond scholarly expectations. The amount of research compiled and synthesized is impressive and gives a vivid dimension to a city which, under Vidal's minute details, becomes the book's central character.

The book also proposes larger claims to established scholarship fields (Atlantic history, comparative history of Atlantic slavery, imperial history) *through the lens* of the "New Orleans case study" (Vidal, 510). By recasting light on traditional interpretations of the supposedly innate differences between North American and Caribbean slave regimes, and how these explain different contemporary attitudes towards race, the book delivers necessary and concise demands for a more comprehensive treatment of the history of American slave societies beyond past and present borders. Vidal supports a "relational history of slavery" (p. 500), first formulated by Eugene D. Genovese, that would seek to recast the entire set of social relations within urban locales and their hinterlands in plantation environments, beyond a simple white over black axis. As the book shows, slave-ownership and racial hierarchies pervaded all aspects of social life in colonial New Orleans. Similarly, longstanding assumptions about the more "racialized" nature of British American slave systems are also questioned as the book gathers evidence demonstrating similarities between French legal practices and British American colonies towards

4 Anne Perotin-Dumon, *La ville aux îles, la ville dans l'île. Basse-Terre et Pointe-à-Pitre, Guadeloupe, 1650-1820*, Paris, Éditions Karthala, 2000.

5 Vidal has been at the centre of this group whose contribution appear in : Bradley G. Bond (dir.), *French Colonial Louisiana and the Atlantic World*, Baton Rouge, Louisiana State University, 2005. Cécile Vidal (dir.), *Louisiana. Crossroads of the Atlantic World*, Philadelphia, University of Pennsylvania Press, 2014.

manumission and slave mobility, thus calling “for a renewed approach to racial formation in a comprehensive perspective within the greater Caribbean” (p. 510).

Finally, there is also an implicit call to established and young scholars alike here to embrace the most difficult yet probably most engaging task of Atlantic history: the pursuit of an “integrated” yet critical history of the “Atlantic” aimed at tracing connections and relations between the different regions of the American hemisphere. While we remain hopeful “to better fulfill the promises of Atlantic History “ (p. 510), we can cling on to *Caribbean New Orleans* as an unfaltering starting point to engage in such a task.

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