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Janet Allured, Judith F. Gentry, eds. *Louisiana Women: Their Lives and Times.* Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2009. 352 pp. $69.95 (library), ISBN 978-0-8203-2946-8; $24.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8203-2947-5.

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Female Perspectives on Louisiana History

In the introduction to *Louisiana Women: Their Lives and Times*, we learn that when university students in a class on Louisiana women are asked to name famous women from the state, they always name contemporary women, never women from the past. It is this invisibility of women in Louisiana's history that the seventeen essays in this book address. Editors Janet Allured and Judith F. Gentry created *Louisiana Women* to "reconceptualize the history of Louisiana by including women in the story," providecreate an educational resource for Louisiana women's history, and stimulate additional historical research on Louisiana women (p. 1). The theme that ties the women in these essays together is that they all possess an "unusual grit" that enables most of them to stretch or challenge traditional gender roles (p. 7). Their lives are linked with larger trends in Louisiana history and in women's history.

In both its general design and goals, *Louisiana Women* does not break entirely new ground. Other state studies about women have a similar structure and focus.[1] Even so, Louisiana's distinctive social and political history makes *Louisiana Women* an especially important addition to essay collections that focus on southern women's history by state. Moreover, the engaging essays in *Louisiana Women* make an important contribution to ongoing efforts to address gaps in the historical literature about women in Louisiana.

Using the approach of microhistory, all but three of the essays in the volume are about individual women, "each woman an exemplar of the era in which she lived" (p. 1). The other essays focus on groups of women, and one on a family of females. The book is organized chronologically. Eight of the essays concern women born before the Civil War, and nine focus on women born after the war. Among the essays prior to the Civil War, only three concern women born before the Louisiana Purchase in 1803, underrepresenting the female perspective on nearly a century of Louisiana's rich colonial and frontier past. This gap in information supports the editors' argument in favor of the need for expanded research on Louisiana women.

Taken together the essays represent a geographic cross-section of the state, but there is imbalance in the distribution. Nine of the essays focus on New Orleans, again highlighting the need for new directions in research on Louisiana women. Demographically, the women's stories in this volume represent a cross-section of the ethnic diversity in the state's history. In addition to the several Euro-American women profiled, five of the essays are about women of color, including women of African American and Native American descent. As Allured points out, one of these women combined all three of the state's primary heritages. The essays incorporate the experiences of female slaves and free women of color, as well as the experiences of working-class women, like folk artist Clementine Hunter. In the effort to capture a wide spectrum of female experience, the contributors to this volume use a broad range of private and public sources, from personal letters and interviews to court records.

The first three essays fit within the larger trends in interpretation of women's history as they uncover both the obstacles women faced in controlling their own lives in colonial and early Louisiana and the agency they exercised in spite of those obstacles. Marie Thérèse Coincoin, a Creole slave born in 1742, endured the challenges of slavery and racism in the Cane River country, ultimately obtaining her freedom and owning property in both land and slaves. Women's disability under the law in colonial and early Louisiana forms the backdrop for Baroness Micaela Almonester Pontalba's story. Doggedly pursuing justice in the courts, the wealthy Pontalba won a sep-

aration from her costly and dangerous marriage, at the same time thatas she left a legacy of magnificent buildings in New Orleans and in Paris. In the ethnically diverse culture of early nineteenth-century New Orleans, Marie Laveau negotiated the fluid boundaries between her West African spiritual heritage in voudou and Roman Catholicism, famously practicing both. Even though she is placed much later in the book, the life of Clementine Hunter, a self-taught, twentieth-century folk artist, illustrates similar agency. Hunter worked as a plantation laborer and domestic servant but, as author Lee Kogan explains, "through art, she gained a measure of control over her life" (p. 190).

White, educated, middle- and upper-class women who stretched, but never overtly challenged, the boundaries of post-Civil War gender roles are the subject of several essays about the second half of the nineteenth century and early twentieth century. Mary Farmer-Kaiser's intriguing portrait of Kate Stone corroborates interpretations of southern women's conservatism in the post-Civil War era. On the one hand, many white women assumed new, public roles after the Civil War and, on the other hand, these women defended the past with all of its traditions. Stone, like many other southern women of her class, became a vocal advocate of keeping the memory of the Confederacy alive.[2] Eliza Jane Nicholson, the first woman newspaper publisher in the South, author Grace King, and columnist Dorothy Dix fit within this loosely defined category of women who modeled change through their occupations but did not openly challenge traditional gender roles. Each of these women became what historian Patricia Brady calls a "working feminist" (p. 111). Still, life in Louisiana could provide the inspiration for defiance of convention. According to Emily Toth in her essay about author Kate Chopin, "Without Louisiana, Kate Chopin might have been an ordinary wife and mother in St. Louis. With Louisiana in her heritage and in her heart, she became what Edna in *The Awakening* is supposed to be: 'The courageous soul ... that dares and defies"' (p. 134).

Several contributors explore themes connected with women's roles in the building and maintenance of communities and the intersection of those roles with reform in the first half of the twentieth century in Louisiana. The role of gender in maintaining Native American culture among the Coushatta is analyzed through the lives of three generations of women. The theme of cultural persistence among Native Americans is also part of an essay about Caroline Dorman's work on behalf of "identifying and protecting American Indian sites and promoting the arts of Native peoples of Louisiana" (p. 256). Better known for her work in conservation, Dorman drew upon the women's club movement of this period to access the social networks she needed to push reform initiatives for her "Indian Work" (p. 253). The influence of female associations in generating reform is evident in Ellen Blue's analysis of St. Mark's Community Center, a settlement house in New Orleans supported by Methodist women and inspired by the Social Gospel and Progressivism. The last essay in the volume, entitled "Louisiana Women and Hurricane Katrina," provides an interesting update on women's social activism in the wake of the devastating storm that struck New Orleans in 2005. Pamela Tyler finds that "the new element visible in this post-Katrina manifestation of women's activism is diversity.... [W]women reformers after Katrina consciously attempted to avoid errors born of racism and elitism" that often characterized the efforts of earlier generations of women (p. 340).

Twentieth-century women who took on traditionally male-dominated occupations and activities also receive attention in the final section of the book. Cajun musician Cleoma Breaux Falcon challenged recording industry traditions and traditional gender roles for Cajun women in the decades just prior to the Second World War. Falcon performed in male-dominated venues, sang in English, and blended new sounds with traditional Cajun music. In many other ways, however, she echoed tradition and was therefore "representative of the transformation of Cajun society in the twentieth century, a transformation that retained and adopted old values in a new context" (p. 250). Another essay shows how outdoor writer and cookbook author Mary Land benefited from new ways of thinking brought about by the ideal of the "New Woman," an ideal that encouraged women, among other things, to engage in sports and espoused "the notion that women could determine the course of their own lives" (p. 282). Rowena Spenser became the first female surgeon in Louisiana and first pediatric surgeon in the state, despite the fact that she finished her medical training just after the World War II, a time when women were strongly encouraged to pursue domestic careers. In 1960, Oretha Castle Haley helped found the New Orleans chapter of the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE). She later became president of the chapter, challenging the pattern of male leadership in civil rights organizations.

The essays in this collection offer a tantalizing glimpse of Louisiana history from a female perspective. There is much more work to be done. Noticeably absent from the volume are female voices from much of

Louisiana's agrarian past, including farm women and sugar cane workers. This does not detract from the book's overall contribution. *Louisiana Women: Their Lives and Times* is effective in demonstrating that, despite their persistent historical invisibility, Louisiana women played a significant role in the history of state. In this regard, the volume will be useful to both scholars and teachers. Further, comparisons to collections about women from other southern states will help readers to see more precisely what is distinctive in the historical experience of Louisiana women.

Notes

[1]. See, for example, LeeAnn Whites, Mary C. Neth, and Gary R. Kremer, *Women in Missouri History: In Search of Power and Influence* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2004).

[2]. See, for example, Drew Gilpin Faust, *Mothers of Invention: Women of the Slaveholding South in the American Civil War* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996).

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