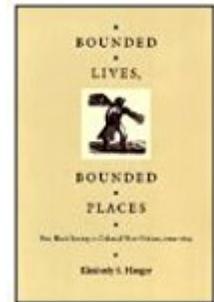


Kimberly S. Hanger. *Bounded Lives, Bounded Places: Free Black Society in Colonial New Orleans, 1769-1803.* Durham N.C., and London: Duke University Press, 1997. xiii + 248 pp. \$79.95, cloth, ISBN 978-0-8223-1906-1.



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When the United States raised its flag in the Place d'Armes of New Orleans in 1803, the city's population numbered some 7,300 of what Daniel Clark called "domiciliated residents." Of that aggregate, white inhabitants totaled approximately 3,200 and slaves 2,775, two extremities of society separated by an additional group of almost 1,400 free persons of color. This last class possessed an economic, social, and legal status appreciably higher than that enjoyed by their kind in other sections of the slave South, which generally lumped all non-whites into an undifferentiated inferior category defined by its color. The uniqueness of this Louisiana pattern, approached to a degree in Charleston and Gulf communities such as Mobile, has led Paula Foner, Thomas Fiehrer, and Paul Lachance, among others, to identify it as a three-tiered society more akin to the typical Caribbean model than to slave communities elsewhere in the United States, which were essentially shaped by Anglo law and culture.

>From the time of the Purchase until the Civil War, this "third caste" of New Orleans society would experience the ambivalent fate of enjoying

a generally expansive prosperity and group consciousness while at the same time suffering an ever-growing erosion of its personal freedoms as new forces ate away at the permissive arrangements they had known under Spanish colonial control. Despite these legal setbacks, however, its members continued to hold a distinctive margin of superiority over those bound in slavery. Its members provided not only an appreciable portion of the unskilled labor of the community but also a significant number of its most accomplished artisans in carpentry, ironwork, cabinet making, masonry, and stone carving. Many flourished as tailors, cigar makers, barbers, shoemakers, and tavern keepers, with the distaff side prominent most notoriously as the storied quadroon mistresses of white New Orleanians but also as hairdressers, milliners, dressmakers, boardinghouse keepers, and owners of the countless stalls proffering goods and edibles of all varieties along the bustling levee fronting the great port. Never given any true integration into the basically racist white community, they nonetheless interrelated with the ruling class on various levels of open and frequently clandestine intimacy, and

maintained a distinctive place in the jurisprudence of the state. Sustaining that demarcation, the state Supreme Court in 1856 held that "in the eye of Louisiana law, there is... all the difference between a free man of color and a slave, that there is between a white man and a slave." True enough, the same court two years later adjudged that "the African race are strangers to our Constitution and are subject of special and exceptional legislation." But the line of distinction between free persons of color and slaves remained always drawn, allowing the development of a segment of New Orleans society which in the antebellum years would produce men and women of considerable wealth and often of great artistic talent.

How this distinctive group came into existence, how it found protection and nurturing under the colonial administrations of France and Spain, and how it related to the other two elements of the population form the central theme of Kimberley Hanger's *Bounded Lives, Bounded Places: Free Black Society in Colonial New Orleans, 1769-1803*. Working within the conceptual framework largely structured in earlier studies by Ira Berlin, David Rankin, Daniel Usner, Foner, Lachance, and Fiehrer, Hanger makes her greatest contribution in providing comprehensive statistical data to give the most definitive assessment of a broad range of topics addressed in more generalized terms by her predecessors. She has combed the archives of the Spanish colonial bureaucracy, the Roman Catholic archdiocese of New Orleans, and the rich collection of the city's notarial records to quantify what previously had remained largely impressionistic conclusions, coming essentially to the conclusion that while France and Spain did indeed provide a cultural climate basically conducive to the growth of a privileged class of free persons of color, the more forceful agent in this phenomenon was the combination of environmental, demographic, strategic, and economic factors which shaped Louisiana's colonial society.

In her opening chapter on "Avenues to Freedom," Hanger argues that the growth of the libre class from 3.1 percent of the total New Orleans population in 1770 to 19 percent in 1805 derived not only from natural increase but even more directly from a liberal manumission process dictated by Spanish colonial policy and the community's need for manual and skilled labor and trustworthy manpower to provide internal and external defense not provided by the mother country. The always sparse number of white settlers required them to look to the libre class for these services, and the even more limited supply of white women inevitably promoted sexual union across racial and status lines. Under Spanish colonial law, slaves could not only own and amass property but through the policy known as "coartacion" might "purchase their freedom for a stipulated sum of money agreed upon by their masters or arbitrated in the courts (p. 25)." The process functioned even if the master opposed his bondsman's bid for freedom. Those so manumitted frequently found ready employment in the varied needs of the community and then used their accumulated wealth to purchase relatives still in bondage, whom they usually then set free to add to the growing numbers of the libre caste. Extensive sexual alliances between white men and both libre and slave women produced a growing mixed racial group made up of lighter skinned individuals called "pardo(a)s" and those of darker hue designated "moreno(a)s," many slaves of both categories moving into the libre class by virtue of emancipation by white fathers. Hanger's data show that of the 1,921 manumissions in New Orleans from 1771 to 1803, 41.5 percent resulted from free grant of the master, 23.5 percent from uncontested self-purchase, 4 percent from a grant conditioned on additional service, 23 percent from purchase by a third party (usually a libre relative), and 8 percent by intervention of a Spanish tribunal.

Hanger gives particular stress to perhaps the single most cohesive force contributing to a sense

of identity and pride among the libre population, pardo and moreno militia companies which provided the Louisiana free men of color the obviously distinctive honor of constituting a major portion of the defense of the colony against both external and internal threat. They served with distinction in the forces led by Bernardo de Galvez against the British in the American Revolutionary campaigns, participated in tracking down runaway slaves, helped in guarding against and repairing breaks in the Mississippi River levees, and in fighting the ravages of fire in New Orleans, particularly in the great conflagration of 1788. But aside from its casting of free men of color in an honorable and important role in the life of the entire community, the libre militia gave them a structured organization in which to develop interrelationships, and Hanger is particularly effective in detailing how such factors as uniforms, ceremony, and public display contributed to a libre self-identity and claim upon a favorable status in the community. The centrality of the militia companies to the independent place of the free people of color did not escape the notice of the Americans at the time of the Purchase, and in a less than admirable performance, President Jefferson and his cabinet on October 4, 1803, agreed "that the militia of colour shall be confirmed in their posts, and treated favorably, till a better settled state of things shall permit us to let them neglect themselves." [1]

By its very nature, the colored militia constituted an essentially male institution, but Hanger's chapters on "Work and Property Accumulation" and "Family Values and Kinship Strategies" demonstrate the dominant position of women in the everyday affairs of the libre community, giving her work importance in gender as well as ethnic history. Throughout the colonial period, females constituted the majority of the libre class and the census of 1795 shows them as the heads of 96 households as against 61 males in that capacity. Most sales of slaves to libres in the colonial period went to free women of color, and not al-

ways simply to free a relative from bondage. Libres frequently held slaves as assets in their business affairs, not insensitive to the additional tie to the white community which such ownership entailed.

Despite their upward move from slave status, libres always remained in a definitely secondary level when measured against white society. Several basic factors emerge clearly from Hanger's data. The accommodations of the Spanish legal system and the constantly pressing need for labor provided the libre class with a wide variety of economic opportunities. They could enter into contracts, even partnerships with whites, and could lodge civil suits in colonial courts. No craft guilds or labor regulations restricted the fields of their endeavor, but the professions, membership in the clergy, and government positions remained closed to them. They generally worked for lower wages and enjoyed lower income than whites--women largely as seamstresses, house servants, milliners, tavern and boarding house keepers; males as carpenters, shipbuilders, tailors, and shoemakers. Lower or middle class whites generally provided their competition, not the white elite, and they consequently tended to identify their interests with those of the group with which they had most contact. Those born free did better than those manumitted, and best of all if family or patronage ties resulted in bequests and inheritances from wealthier white connections. Some, not most, amassed considerable property, often including slaves. During the Spanish period, thirty-one of the sixty-one libres who left wills listed bondsmen as part of their estate, ownership usually limited to one or two, with one holding numbering thirteen. Three-fifths of the slaves enumerated in these testaments were females, as were two-thirds of their owners.

With so much of consequence deriving from family relationships, Hanger gives considerable attention to the subtleties of what by its very nature was and remains a sensitive area of enquiry.

From her account it is clear that sexual contact among the several classes--white, libre, and slave--was an accepted fact of life in Spanish New Orleans, whatever might have been the pronouncements of government or church. But as would be true in the decades of American control in the antebellum city, this openness of miscegenation, often involving persons of the highest level in the society, could never breach the barriers to any true integration of its non-white product into the privileged domain of the ruling class. Nonetheless, its acceptance allowed for intricate patterns of relationship and patronage between libre and white classes, involving not only that between white males and their natural progeny but also that of the important "compadrazgo" connection in which godparents of a libre child might be chosen from white relatives or patrons. These natural and fictive kinships did much to separate the libre class even further from the enslaved portion of the community and encouraged libre ambitions for closer approximation to the status of whites.

The prevalence of these cross-racial relationships leads Hanger to the conclusion that formal marriages were, as she puts it, "definitely not the norm for persons of any race in late eighteenth-century New Orleans" (p. 90). But the data presented to establish this finding are inconclusive at best. They seem to show, for example, that in 1791, formal marriages of white couples represented 2.1 percent of their portion of the population, actually a considerably better record than the comparable percentage for the total population of the city in 1996, which the state bureau of vital statistics reports as having been approximately 1.1 percent. Hanger's figures do show clearly, however, a consistently lower incidence of formal marriages in the libre community than in the white. With special governmental and parental consent, marriages might even be sanctioned for a mixed white-libre couple, though such unions were apparently rare.

The degree to which the libre community had by the end of the Spanish period developed a true sense of identity marking it off as a self-conscious entity distinct from the other two tiers of the society remains unclear. Hanger finds signs of such self-awareness in the affairs of the militia companies, the formalization of almost ritualistic natural and fictive relationships, and the eruption of at least minimal revolutionary sentiments among a few libres committed to the liberal sentiments spawned by the French and Haitian revolutions. But her final measured judgment holds that "the city's free blacks did not develop a strong sense of group identity until the antebellum period (p. 168)." When that later solidarity emerged, Hanger maintains, it built upon the accomplishments of the Spanish colonial period, which served "as a foundation for the emergence of New Orleans' many, prosperous, and much-acclaimed Creoles of Color in the antebellum era of the United States South (pp. 1-2)." It is not clear why Professor Hanger has chosen thus to employ the highly questionable term "Creoles of Color," which she correctly notes elsewhere as having been unknown to Spanish Louisiana (p. 177). The almost certain fact is that it is a usage equally unknown to the antebellum period as well. Native free blacks in antebellum New Orleans called themselves "creoles," without reference to race or status, and were so identified in the press, judicial records, and common parlance. The qualification "of color" seems to have been largely an adaptation by Reconstruction-era whites determined to have the unmodified title of "creole" restricted to members of their own race. Despite its popularity even in recent professional publications, the "of color" emendation conveys a false impression as to the always delicately balanced racial nuances in antebellum New Orleans society, implying a divided concept of creolism in the city which actually did not exist.

This reservation aside, Professor Hanger's work eminently deserves the honor which it has

recently received as the winner of the 1997 Kemper Williams prize in Louisiana history.

Note

[1]. Jefferson's notes on the cabinet meeting of October 4, 1803, in the Thomas Jefferson Papers, Library of Congress.

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