



Cécile Vidal. *Caribbean New Orleans: Empire, Race, and the Making of a Slave Society.* Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2019. 552 pp. \$49.95, cloth, ISBN 978-1-4696-4518-6.

Reviewed by Kristin C. Lee (University College, Washington University in St. Louis)

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Connecting and Complicating French Colonial New Orleans

In 1809 and 1810, nine thousand refugees originally displaced by the revolution in Saint-Domingue arrived in New Orleans, doubling the population of the city and preserving a French heritage threatened by Anglophones after 1803. For Cécile Vidal, this migration emphasizes the close relationship that existed between the Louisiana settlement and the Caribbean island during the former's French colonial period (1718-69). It has become a bit of a popular adage to describe New Orleans as the northernmost port of the Caribbean, but Vidal's *Caribbean New Orleans: Empire, Race, and the Making of a Slave Society* demonstrates the substance behind these claims. Moreover, while most who make this Caribbean argument use it to explain the exceptionality or uniqueness of New Orleans in the North American story, Vidal does so to highlight its larger relevance.[1] New Orleans is the missing link, a late-forming city that largely inherited its founding ideas, practices, peoples, plants, and laws from its longer-established imperial neighbors. It thus offers the ideal case study in which to consider how colonies around the Americas developed in conversation with one another and how their paths diverged in response to local circumstances. And in French New Orleans, according to Vidal, the

most significant of these discussions were those related to race.

In particular, *Caribbean New Orleans* provides an in-depth examination of how race making systematically shaped the history of an early American city. Vidal convincingly argues that New Orleans was a "slave society," or a settlement in which racialized slavery informed every part of everyday life from its inception, whose physical construction was done alongside the "construction of racial categories" (p. 1). This is an important shift within Louisiana historiography, which has long stood by Ira Berlin's argument that early New Orleans offered the semi-unique example of a "slave society" devolving into a "society with slaves." Abandoned by the French following the spectacular failure of the Compagnie des Indes, the standard story goes, New Orleans became an isolated backwater until the 1770s, struggling to survive and permitting, out of sheer need, less disciplined contact between residents of European, Indigenous, and African birth and descent.[2] Vidal, in contrast, shows that, while Louisiana struggled to create a full-fledged plantation economy during the French era, this did not prevent its capital from organizing itself along the highly stratified lines of the Caribbean islands.

Furthermore, she argues, because New Orleans did not see many new residents after 1731, free or enslaved, and because it was a smaller settlement, white inhabitants were able to build upon these ideas in a relatively stable environment—focusing much of their energies on surveilling, containing, and disciplining the enslaved and free persons of color (p. 26).

Across nine chapters, Vidal reveals the ways in which racial hierarchies touched everyday life across the French colonial city. Chapters 1 through 4 focus on spaces of interaction, starting broadly and narrowing in. Chapter 1 emphasizes New Orleans's continued connections to the outside world, highlighting the ways in which pen and sword officers, goods, and news circulated between the Gulf Coast and metropole throughout the French period—typically with a stop-over in Saint-Domingue. Chapter 2 adds in the relationship between New Orleans and its surrounding territories as well as with regional Indigenous groups. Vidal especially points to the 1729 Natchez attack and ensuing Natchez Wars as pivotal moments in the militarization of white New Orleanians, who “never completely lost their fear of violence” from non-European groups (p. 116). Subsequently, a scrupulous supervision of racial boundaries became the norm for the rest of the French era and fostered “a sense of community among white urbanites” (p. 141).

Chapter 3 takes readers to the streets, levees, and other public spaces of New Orleans, where whites sought to sculpt the privileges of “whiteness” against both residents of African birth and descent as well as one another. Elite men and their wives scuffled over the best seating at church in an effort to recreate France's *ancien régime* culture; socially lower soldiers and nonslaveholders, meanwhile, carefully guarded their weaker claims at mastery through street violence that frequently targeted the enslaved and free individuals of color. Chapter 4 in particular focuses on intimate, multiethnic spaces of contact: the home,

hospital, Ursuline convent, and barracks. Beginning with a careful reading of census categories, Vidal traces how distinctions between European settlers, namely householders and servants, were increasingly replaced with those centered exclusively on race by 1763. These efforts were paralleled by segregating practices in other domestic spaces. Close interactions, then, as Vidal forcefully shows, effectively strengthened, rather than weakened, urban racial hierarchies.

The final five chapters adopt a more thematic approach, each focusing on a different genre of interaction roughly corresponding in reverse with earlier chapters. Chapter 5 returns to the home to look in detail at *métissage*, an area that scholars traditionally have argued afforded enslaved and free/d women and their children a degree of agency.^[3] Vidal, in contrast, shows that white fathers rarely acknowledged these interracial relationships, instead preserving through racial definitions of legitimacy the imagined “binary division on which society was based” (p. 281). Meanwhile, chapter 6 parallels earlier analysis of French-era censuses. It follows the ways in which the demographically diverse workforce of the early colony—made up of white indentured servants, convicts, and soldiers in addition to enslaved Africans—gave way to associations of difficult and degrading labor limitedly with the enslaved. Chapter 7 examines the relationship between trade, credit, and honor, particularly changing contemporary ideas of commerce as reputable work for social elites. As white New Orleanians were having this conversation, though, Vidal makes clear that enslaved persons engaged in retailing challenged it—revealing a not-as-apparent association between trade and trust that whites conveniently ignored.

Chapter 8 returns to the wider picture, showing how French Louisiana inherited racial categories from the Caribbean but adjusted them to fit local needs, experiencing “not so much a loosening, but a more complex transformation” of its racial regime, largely through violence (p. 371). Vid-

al documents how the Superior Council utilized targeted prosecutions and punishments to increasingly “imprint terror and instill obedience” on the enslaved (p. 390). This chapter also most effectively engages with French New Orleans’s small population of free men and women of color. Vidal argues that, although these individuals’ militia participation and occasional land holdings challenged contemporary racial stereotypes, their segregation from white units and white spaces also contributed to assumptions that white meant free and African descent entailed enslavement. Chapter 9 concludes with the 1768 rebellion against Spanish rule, a moment when white New Orleanians vocally reasserted their French and imperial connections. These Old World identities, Vidal notes, pointedly were not extended to the enslaved or free persons of color, whose potential ethno-labels largely were reduced by white neighbors to the term “creole.”

Caribbean New Orleans thus details a society in which racial hierarchies were asserted and supported through both top-down and bottom-up policies and practices, as “no social institution or relationship was left untouched by race” (p. 504). To this end, Vidal speaks to important conversations by historians of enslaved women in the British Caribbean, including Jennifer Morgan and Marissa Fuentes. These authors have used a similarly wide range of sources as well as a critical interrogation of their archives to underscore the invasive nature of colonial racism.[4] *Caribbean New Orleans* is not, however, a history of slavery. While offering fascinating vignettes of daily life as experienced by both free and enslaved, Vidal is more interested in the institutions and activities that bound the early American city to other transatlantic “slave societies” and to the hierarchical world of France. Racial prejudice and discrimination, she shows, was one such key factor linking New Orleans to cis-Atlantic and transatlantic worlds, but it was largely a white reaction and creation. Vidal does recognize moments of agency, boundary crossing, and rebellion by nonwhite

urbanites, such as the purchase of illicit alcohol by the enslaved, free families of color receiving inheritances from white patriarchs, assertions of enslaved ethnic identities, and even a few foiled slave revolts. But she also acknowledges that “the crossing of racial boundaries did not erase them. White people were well aware of what they were doing, and the color line could be reactivated when necessary” (p. 506). Some readers may wish for more pronounced agency on the part of the enslaved and free people of color in the text, but this is a difficult balance to achieve, and *Caribbean New Orleans* clearly shows the challenges that these individuals faced in their everyday lives, thus enriching existing studies on experiences of Louisiana and Caribbean slavery.

The book makes several more corrections to the traditional story of French colonial New Orleans. Vidal argues, for example, that experiences of urban slavery were not easier than those on plantations. As she articulates, “physical proximity” could just as easily breed “social distance” (p. 5). Vidal also contends that racialization in the early Americas did not depend on having large-scale threats to imagined racial binaries, often envisioned in interracial sexual encounters or in large communities of free people of color. French New Orleans had plenty of the former, although officially unacknowledged, and few of the latter. It is clear across the text, however, that local processes of racialization—and their reach—extended much further than these two concerns. This noted, Vidal does mention an additional population whose presence intensified racial divisions in the early city: Indigenous nations. Yet, after discussion of the Natchez Wars, Indigenous communities play only an occasional role in the book. The decision, in part, is surely built on Vidal’s goal to decouple lower Louisiana history from the fur traders of New France and to reattach it to the planters of Saint-Domingue. But it would be interesting to know how the presence of Indigenous men and women in New Orleans during the *entirety* of the French era contributed to the ways in

which divisions initially seen as European/non-European came to focus exclusively on persons of African birth and descent. I suspect there is an important story here.

Caribbean New Orleans ultimately offers a thoughtful exploration of the founding of New Orleans and of the critical role that race and racism had (and continue to have) in the city's history. Combing through administrative papers, censuses, laws, parish registers, correspondence, and judicial records from both sides of the Atlantic, readers will get a sense that there is little Cécile Vidal has not seen or considered. Her book will prove essential reading for scholars of early New Orleans, and it hopefully will convince an even wider audience of historians to embrace the value of the Gulf Coast capital in their comparative, cis-Atlantic, and transatlantic studies of imperialism, race, and slavery. *Caribbean New Orleans* thus succeeds in showing the city's historical importance and relevance to these essential conversations and within wider ones about race and racism today.

Notes

[1]. For a summary of this exceptionality argument, see Mark L. Thompson, "Locating the Isle of Orleans: Atlantic and American historiographical perspectives," *Atlantic Studies* 5, no. 3 (2008): 305-33.

[2]. Ira Berlin, *Many Thousands Gone: The First Two Centuries of Slavery in North America* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1998).

[3]. See, for example, Jennifer Spear, *Race, Sex and Social Order in Early New Orleans* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2009).

[4]. Jennifer L. Morgan, *Laboring Women: Reproduction and Gender in New World Slavery* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004); Marisa Fuentes, *Dispossessed Lives: Enslaved Women, Violence and the Archive* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016).

An updated bibliography would also include Jessica Marie Johnson, *Wicked Flesh: Black Women, Intimacy, and Freedom in the Atlantic World* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2020); and Jennifer L. Morgan, *Reckoning with Slavery: Gender, Kinship and Capitalism in the Early Black Atlantic* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2021).

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