New Orleans has long presented an awkward problem for American historians. Sited to control the gateways between the Gulf of Mexico and the Mississippi basin, it has been a strategic fulcrum of war, commerce, and politics in southeastern North America since the eighteenth century. In the antebellum age, it was the largest city south of Baltimore, a rising industrial port, the great nerve center of the cotton traffic, and the hub of the internal slave trade; in the Confederacy, it dwarfed the next largest city by more than four to one. Yet far from typifying the region as customarily understood, New Orleans stands out in the southern landscape as a predominantly Catholic city, in which languages, laws, and customs deriving from the city’s French founding allowed for the emergence of a large and sometimes prosperous free population of color and for a degree of social intermingling across what was, in most of Anglo-America, a rigid color line.

American popular history usually resolves the New Orleanian paradox by trivializing the city’s Francophone and Creole heritage as the romantic (or even morbid) vestiges of a declining Old World culture, fated to be swept away by the Civil War and the march of modernity. The tragic view of the Creole city had its roots partly in the 1880s writings of George Washington Cable, which combined a degree of realism with Anglo-Protestant condescension. It was captured most fully in the 1930s play and film *Jezebel*, which cast the catastrophic yellow fever epidemic of 1853 as a harbinger of doom for a decadent and corrupt society. Meanwhile, scholarly histories of the American South tend to gloss over or ignore the New Orleanian paradox. For instance, studies of the Civil War and Reconstruction usually treat Louisiana as typical of the Deep South, set apart only by the unusual length of Reconstruction in the state (from occupation in 1862 until the withdrawal of federal troops following the compromise of 1877) and by
its degree of violence and tumult, instantiated in the 1866 New Orleans massacre.

The central question facing recent scholars of colonial and nineteenth-century New Orleans, then, has tended to be whether the city’s French Catholic background should be understood to set it apart in a politically significant and impactful way from the rest of the American South or merely to provide quaint local color to what was otherwise a typical North American slave society. The debate has been haunted by the notorious “Tannenbaum thesis”—named for sociologist Frank Tannenbaum, who argued that French and Iberian colonial societies established looser laws and norms around race than their northern European counterparts. Support for such an interpretation of New Orleans seemed to emerge from studies of the French and Spanish colonial records, most significantly, Gwendolyn Midlo Hall’s 1992 *Africans in Colonial Louisiana: The Development of Afro-Creole Culture in the Eighteenth-Century*, which argues that the weakness of the French regime and its comparatively loose laws and customs defining slavery allowed for autonomy and strong social bonds among Africans and Afro-Creoles, giving rise, in turn, to political resistance, such as the attempted Bambara uprising of 1731. Hall’s argument offers to cast a new light on subsequent events in Louisiana, including such upheavals as the 1811 German Coast slave rebellion, the largest in American history.

Later works sought to counter the emergence of what one might call the new Louisiana exceptionalism—and more fundamentally, the romantic image of New Orleans as a free-wheeling French outpost. Thomas N. Ingersoll, in *Mammon and Manon in Early New Orleans: The First Slave Society in the Deep South, 1718-1819* (1999), argues that irrespective of events in the outer parishes, colonial New Orleans was a rigid society based on slavery and racial repression, fundamentally similar to such Anglo-American slave societies as South Carolina—hence its easy and swift integration into the United States. Ingersoll’s book has been followed in more recent years by studies emphasizing the centrality of slavery and racism to early New Orleans, such as Rashuana Johnson’s *Slavery’s Metropolis: Unfree Labor in New Orleans during the Age of Revolutions* (2016) and Cécile Vidal’s *Caribbean New Orleans: Empire, Race, and the Making of a Slave Society* (2019).

Caryn Cossé Bell’s latest book may constitute the most important intervention in this debate since the 1990s. Bell presents a novel and powerful case for New Orleans’s distinctiveness in the American landscape while largely ignoring Louisiana’s French and Spanish colonial history. Bell’s book stresses instead the large migration into New Orleans of refugees from Saint Domingue that followed the Haitian Revolution and culminated in the 1809-10 wave that doubled the size of the city. Bell argues that the multiracial influx from the Caribbean brought with it dense interracial networks of kinship and politics, bolstered the city’s Francophone Catholic population, and fortified its French-style social and legal systems, just in time to withstand the onslaught of hostile Anglophone migrants. She points out, for instance, that Louis Moreau-Lislet, the jurist who wrote Louisiana’s civil law code of 1808 and delivered the court ruling that enshrined mixed-race citizens’ right to a presumption of freedom, was an 1804 migrant from Haiti.

More importantly, Bell’s argument largely avoids reliance on French essentialism, sidestepping the quagmire of the Tannenbaum debate in favor of an effort to link New Orleans politics to the legacy of the Age of Revolutions. “Nowhere else in the United States,” Bell concludes, “did the French and Haitian Revolutions exert as enduring an influence as in New Orleans and south Louisiana” (p. 231). In support, the book presents a cavalcade of statements and actions by New Orleanians of all colors who trumpeted the ideals “Liberty, Equality, and Fraternity” and doggedly
carried the banner of the revolutionary era all the way through the nineteenth century.

Drawing on sources from the New Orleans press, as well as memoirs, correspondence, and biographical dictionaries, the book strings together an astonishing array of incidents that shocked Anglo-American observers at the time, just as they may modern-day readers who imagine New Orleans to be an ordinary antebellum city: large companies of Black men bearing arms in the state militia and serving under Andrew Jackson’s command, before volunteering to fight in support of the revolutionary republican government of Mexico and securing for it a crucial foothold in Texas; Creole ladies of various colors worshiping together, circulating radical French Romantic tracts, opening interracial schools for girls, and attempting to found an interracial convent; Spiritualists holding séances to communicate with the dead and taking the spirit world as a template for the free and equal republic that ought to exist on earth; fraternal societies embracing republican ideals and calling for “the acquisition of rights which assure the liberty of man in every country” (p. 162); large gatherings celebrating the 1848 revolution in France, marching through the city singing the “Marseillaise,” and holding memorials for fallen revolutionaries in the Cathedral of St. Louis; legislators electing to the US Senate a French republican dissident who had fled to New Orleans to escape arrest by Charles X’s regime; a missionary priest openly preaching against slavery in the city’s cathedral as late as 1850.

Although sometimes meandering and disjointed, Bell’s book uncovers a continuing thread of experimentation, opposition, and radical hope that crossed boundaries of time and space. The dissident milieu linked New Orleans to the French-speaking world, with many reformist scholars and doctors, including men of color, studying in Paris and imbibing the heady ideas of the Revolution and the Romantic age. Ironically, whereas Jezebel casts the 1853 yellow fever outbreak as a symbol of New Orleans’s descent into decadence, in Bell’s book it serves as an arena for Parisian-educated physicians of color to debunk the racist myths of so-called states-rights medicine and to demonstrate revolutionary new techniques of diagnosis and public health.

Moreover, Bell’s narrative effectively links New Orleans’s Creole heritage with the events of the Civil War and Reconstruction. General Benjamin Butler’s enlistment of Black New Orleanians into the Union army under the command of Black officers in 1862 (the first such action in the Civil War) is unsurprising in light of the long precedent of Black men in New Orleans—including most of those who enlisted under Butler—having served in uniform. Butler’s occupation regime and the subsequent Reconstruction governments went far beyond the southern norm by desegregating public transit, schools, and all places of public accommodation; under universal male suffrage, Louisiana voters elected Black officials to more statewide executive offices than in any other state. Even as armed white mobs and paramilitary groups from 1866 to 1877 attacked the state government in a series of riots and insurrections, interracial coalitions attempted to maintain stability: in 1873, the “Unifier” movement proposed to maintain equal civil rights while dividing state offices evenly between whites and Blacks, and whereas the program gained traction in New Orleans, it failed in the rural parishes. Ultimately, as racist violence undid interracial democracy after 1877, Afro-Creoles sought to secure their rights through a long campaign in the courts, culminating in the Plessy decision of 1896, in which the Supreme Court rejected a New Orleans Creole man’s suit against transit segregation. Whereas the ruling, which placed the court’s imprimatur on segregation, has customarily been seen as the start of the age of Jim Crow, in Bell’s story, it appears as a last stand by Afro-Creole New Orleans against the Anglo-American racial order.
Ultimately, Bell’s narrative serves to challenge the conventional periodization of American and Atlantic history. Whereas, from the Anglo-American perspective, a long gap intervenes between the revolutionary period and the Civil War, Creole New Orleans, with its continuing links to the Caribbean, Latin America, and France, saw no such interruption; the upheavals of the Civil War and emancipation could be seen by many as the fulfillment of a continuing revolutionary quest. Throughout the war and Reconstruction period, the New Orleans Francophone press championed radical reforms, such as the breakup and redistribution of large estates in language recalling the revolutionary movements of Europe and the Americas. The premiere bilingual newspaper, the *Tribune*, which served for a time as the official outlet of the Reconstruction regime, was edited by Jean-Charles Houzeau, a Belgian astronomer and dissident who had fled to America after 1848.

Nonetheless, the impact of *Creole New Orleans* is likely to be blunted somewhat by problems of organization and interpretation. Bell takes some time to circle in toward her main theses, which are stated more clearly in the conclusion than in the introduction. The latter proposes rather broadly to fulfill the need for “an overall study” of “the city’s history in the revolutionary age” but gives the reader fairly little guidance as to how to assign significance to the mass of evidence in the book, which becomes overwhelming—in the negative as well as positive sense of the word (p. 2). The book comprises three sections: on the Haitian Revolution and migration to Louisiana, the Romantic movement, and the Civil War and Reconstruction. In the book’s first and third sections, the narrative meanders and leaps among a wide array of characters, who enter the stage with dizzying rapidity only to exit again, too soon in many cases to gain a sense of their distinct personalities or their significance. The experience of reading becomes taxing in the absence of clear explanations as to how this prosopographic phantasmagoria relates to Bell’s larger argument.

Moreover, Bell’s introduction forecasts that the book will use as its “backbone” the memoir, published in 1883, of the Creole writer Hélène d’Aquin Allain, who grew up mainly in antebellum New Orleans (p. 2). However, Allain’s *Souvenirs* is only alluded to in the entire first section of *Creole New Orleans* and is discussed extensively only in the book’s second section, dealing with the Romantic movement. This section stands out dramatically from the other two, drawing on the essays, books, and diaries that emerged from a vibrant bilingual intellectual scene, composed mainly of women, which promoted the new mystical, egalitarian, and humanitarian strains of French Catholicism in mid-century New Orleans. Only this section brings to life the social and emotional lives of some of its characters, often through remarkably vivid scenes, for example, a maiden aunt’s austere attic room in which she spent her days in prayer and reflection before finally joining a convent and a Congolese-born bride’s *tignon* (turban) tied off in knots in the shape of cowrie shells to recall her African birth. This second section might easily be expanded into a book of its own. In this context, it seems slightly cramped in ways that also typify the book as a whole, such as in its curious lack of visuals, even as the text discusses visual evidence like portraiture.

More crucially, the link between this middle section and the other two is tenuous and underdeveloped. Although the ideas and arguments that antebellum Creole women promoted clearly have political import, Bell presents them uncritically as “revolutionary” and “emancipatory.” Her interpretation elides distinctions among several different currents of thought—for example, republicanism, abolitionism, humanitarianism, Romanticism, mysticism, and the traditional French three-tiered system of race—which did not always align and sometimes came into conflict. Thus, Bell overlooks important nuances and contradictions in her sub-
jects’ worldviews. For instance, Bell quotes Allain, in defending the reputation of the New Orleans Creole community against slander, asserting that in her uncle’s household, “masters and servants were part of a truly Christian family” and that Creole chroniclers should emphasize “the role played by these good masters” (p. 100). Such a passage might have prompted a commentary on how Christian and Romantic humanitarianism could be folded into an apology for slavery. The lack of such an ideological analysis is driven home a few lines later when Allain is quoted as asserting that many Louisiana planters espoused the rights of man and “were ready to make any sacrifice to reconcile their lawful interests with their humanitarianism” (p. 100). One might reasonably ask whether these planters’ commitment to their humanitarian ideals actually extended to sacrificing their right to own slaves. Similarly, when another apologist, Éléonore Ligeret de Chazey, pleads that Louisiana slave mistresses, though “unable to stop slavery ... soften it with all their might,” it is left to the reader to consider how Creole humanitarian rhetoric might have fit into the wider stream of ameliorationism (p. 147). In this light, Creole New Orleans might appear less as a radical hotbed than as a place, like Maryland in Barbara J. Fields’s study, Slavery and Freedom on the Middle Ground: Maryland during the Nineteenth Century (1985), where eighteenth-century muddled thinking about slavery was able to persist into the antebellum age.

Such a superficial and uncritical interpretation presents less of a problem in the book’s first and third sections, which draw on political tracts and slogans with far less ambiguous rhetoric. Nonetheless, these sections might have been more powerful with the support of quantitative evidence, such as census numbers and election results, which could have helped to map out the political factions of the city and could have conveyed a more precise sense of how large and prevalent the radical wing actually was. Finally, Bell’s argument would have been strengthened by a consideration of class stratification in New Orleans, including within the Afro-Creole community, to show how tangible class interests could reinforce and sustain revolutionary ideals.

In sum, Creole New Orleans in the Revolutionary Atlantic can be seen to contain within itself two different books—one dealing with the mostly male-dominated world of revolutionary politics and the other with the mainly female world of Romantic philosophical ferment—which never entirely meld together. Each side of Bell’s work has its own strengths and weaknesses, and each one might have been strengthened with more critical interpretation, such as to make a complete and powerful book in its own right.

Nonetheless, the book that exists should hopefully have a deep impact, effectively demolishing any notion of New Orleans as fitting easily or unproblematically into the nineteenth-century South. Bell’s research pays tribute to the imagination and the persistence of radicals of various stripes that made New Orleans a laboratory of revolutionary vision in the nineteenth century. As I have noted in my own work, there is a great irony in the fact that when the US Congress, in the 1810s, debated the possibility of Louisiana joining the Union, many Anglo-Americans warned that the Catholic Creoles would be unable to assimilate to a democratic-republican government—conveniently ignoring the long history of rebellion and republican ferment on the lower Mississippi, even predating the American Revolution. Bell’s book, irrespective of its flaws, should help put to bed this form of Anglo-American condescension and promote in its place an appreciation for the revolutionary spirit that has long thrived in New Orleans.
If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at https://networks.h-net.org/h-caribbean


URL: https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=60594

This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.