

## Caribbean New Orleans: Empire, Race, and the Making of a Slave Society

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**Reviewer:** Matthew Stallard

In *Caribbean New Orleans* Cécile Vidal has brought together a prodigious volume and range of archival research in what is the most detailed social history of the city during the French period. This book asserts that New Orleans was a “slave society”, with race as the defining social factor from its foundation, and this is argued through eleven chapters of deep microhistorical analysis of social interactions and relationships, ranging across race, gender, class, labour, identity, and geography which juxtapose and intertwine the social formation of the white and enslaved and free black sections of the population.

Addressing the titular premise in Chapter One, Vidal argues for both a “top down” or “bottom up” phenomenon of race formation from the city’s inception, with a distinct Caribbean influence. The legal basis of racialisation through codes and directives of the French state was based almost entirely upon laws concerning Caribbean plantation slavery colonies, whilst the only previous lived experiences of race and slavery for Atlantic arrivals in the colony was gained in Caribbean ports, where each arrival in the city had first called. Saint Domingue, in particular, “exhorted a profound influence on New Orleans society” (p. 9) as the closest and most frequent source of Caribbean mercantile, travel, and correspondence contact.

By bringing together scattered archival references, Vidal also argues for a higher rate of importation of enslaved labourers from the Caribbean after 1740 than previously attested, a trade encouraged by slave-owners desperate to acquire any additional labourers following the cessation of direct slave trading with Africa. According to the author, this led to an increased “Caribbeanization” of the local enslaved population, which has previously been viewed as more stable in composition. In reaction to this, a ban was placed on the importation of enslaved people to Louisiana from Saint Domingue and Martinique in the 1760s, amid fears that these arrivals were a destabilising element to local order, suggesting a sizeable contingent of enslaved persons who had been removed from the Antilles because of high levels of resistance to discipline and labour.

Where previous historians have debated whether early New Orleans and its hinterland should be considered a classically North America slave society or was more “Canadian” or “Caribbean” in terms of racial attitudes, Vidal firmly sees the Caribbean influence as paramount. [\(1\)](#) The wider intention is to transcend

these debates by framing the city within the wider paradigm where, “the Caribbean can be considered the epicenter of this global process of racialization within the English and French Atlantics” (p. 504), locating “early North American history on the periphery of Caribbean history” (p. 2). For Vidal, New Orleans’s inheritance and local re-tooling of Caribbean mores and laws is analogous to the wider process of transplantation of the plantation and slavery complex from older to newer colonies, such as from Barbados to South Carolina, and the individualised development of this common framework along unique lines in each locale.

Another key target of this shake-up of historiographic categories is the exceptionalism (and commensurate exoticism) ascribed to New Orleans from which Vidal hopes to rescue the city and assimilate it into a wider model, in the process refuting the position that attests to widespread racial openness and a lack of “evidence of racial exclusiveness and contempt that characterises more recent times”. Researchers such as Hall and Spear, in assessing the development of racial attitudes and classification have begun their analyses in the scattered coastal and riverine outposts prior to the foundation of the city, whereas the year zero of this study is the Company of the Indies’ major settlement project, where enslaved African people were present from the first wave of arrivals. (2) Whilst clear not to project anachronous theories of biological or scientific racism backward, Vidal attests that “race-thinking” was current from the city’s foundation, pointing out that “contrary to what Shannon Lee Dawdy asserts, the category of “white” was used in all kinds of official documents in French New Orleans early on” (p. 384). (3)

Most studies have described the “chaos” of French rule, particularly the starvation and disease which led to the death of thousands of the first settlers. It is in this chaos and the mutual reliance of colonists upon Indian support and African labour and expertise for survival that the interpretation of New Orleans as a site of unique racial openness and fluid racial dynamics has previously been constructed, apparently creating more lenient attitudes towards white supremacy and strictness of racial boundaries than other contemporary slave colonies.

Vidal by no means denies the catastrophes of the first decade of the city’s foundation but, rather than find the chaos as undermining “race-thinking”, in the interpretation in Chapter Two white colonists saw the city from the beginning as a place where the concept of race and its policing was fundamental. Describing the deep scars inflicted by the murder, enslavement, and sexual exploitation of white colonists by the Natchez, the city became “a place of refuge” (p. 118) which could be policed against the pervading twin fears of native attack and the collaboration and rebellion of enslaved Africans, who had quickly developed their own “rival geography” and ways of moving about the settlement, *petits marronages*, and interacting with each other which sought to escape the surveillance of owners and authorities.

A broad array of the manifestations and practice of race formation are addressed throughout the volume, with Chapter Three describing a pervasive white culture of public male violence from which all black men were excluded. Painstaking analysis of court recordings and testimonies demonstrates how black persons were disregarded as social agents, despite being key witnesses to crimes and disputes committed by and involving white defendants. The development of class distinctions in the white population were linked to race, as slave-ownership became the defining marker of rank and interactions between lower class whites and enslaved persons were limited by close policing measures in the relatively small and surveillable city. Concurrently, behaviour of free black and enslaved persons which threatened to undermine the racial privileges of whites on the lowest rung of the social ladder led to incidences of violence against blacks.

The social invisibility imposed upon enslaved people within households is explored, again through close reading of court records, in Chapter Four, which analyses households, mastery, and gender, treating both white male violence against white women (who had some recourse to public protection in extreme cases) and the physical abuse of enslaved people through the lens of an ancien regime patriarchal culture situated in a New World slave society. The chapter continues by explaining how social institutions developed to provide charitable support to the poorest sections of white society, such as hospitals and the Ursulines convent, became agents of racial formation, exploiting the labour of the enslaved to both fund and staff their

operations.

Another key historiographical intervention, Vidal's insistence that historiographical silos of biracial North American and tripartite Caribbean models are outdated, is explored in Chapters Four and Five. Again, a race formation approach is taken, which describes the specific local development of New Orleans and takes aim at histories which focus on metissage and the social position of free people of colour as of paramount importance in understanding and classifying slave societies.

As throughout this volume, the juxtaposition of minute explorations of intra- and interracial experiences and relationships is used to draw out the inherent role of race. In the case of interracial sex and children of mixed heritage, the comparison is made between the strong social and political support for the institution of legal marriage between male and female white colonists and, taking a lead from Philip D. Morgan, the counterpoint that sexual relationships between white men and non-white women were mainly hidden, illegitimate, and private. (4)

Taking issue with the idea of French Louisiana as a bastion of racial openness, where the large number of children of mixed racial heritage indicated that the regime of racial oppression was somehow more lenient in New Orleans than elsewhere, Vidal argues that the nature of sexual relationships between white men and non-white women where "most were exploitative" (5) was a feature of all slave societies in the Americas and a fundamental by-product of white supremacy. Calculating that there were more children of mixed racial heritage in New Orleans than Saint Domingue, yet a surprisingly sparse acknowledgement of these relationships and children by white fathers, the logic of many previous New Orleans scholars is turned on its head, arguing that the more frequent interracial sex was, the less open public acknowledgement and propriety of acceptance would be.

This interpretation is a decisive attempt to banish the New Orleans exceptionalism developed by popular folklore from the 19th century onwards and previous scholarship of the French period. Through close archival inspection Vidal introduces a suggestion for the undercounting of free persons of colour, speculating that many were living as "quasi-free", without the legal manumission granted by the Superior Council, but with their owner's acceptance of their free status. Another recurring assertion, with illustrative examples, is that many free (and quasi-free) people of colour were still likely living with, and economically dependent upon, their former owners. Although the figure of just 19 for the city's free population of colour in 1763 is included, there is no attempt here to estimate what the "real" figure would be (p. 203). For some previous scholars, the need to estimate a figure of 200 or 250 is important in underlining the population's "real" size as it goes some way to proving their point that New Orleans was more racially open than comparable cities. Researchers who are attached to this idea might assail the lack of an estimate from a study which is otherwise so exhaustive, and the interpretation of economic and household situation, as a deliberately pessimistic reading which supports the author's assertions, but from the point of view of Vidal's thesis, the size of the population, difficult to guess as it is, is irrelevant to the wider theoretical correction.

The free coloured militia have been another important focus of previous scholarship and, whilst Vidal does not argue that those studies have not demonstrated the opportunities offered for free men of African heritage to gain social prestige and official recognition, in keeping with the focus upon New Orleans as a local development of a broader pattern of race formation, it is explained that the militia could not but contribute to the perpetuation of a social order that saw "whiteness as the ultimate fault line that confined nonwhites to the lower ranks of the free population" (p. 430), being co-opted into the defence of a system which subjugated them. (6) In this interpretation, the creation of the militia, which seems to distinguish Louisiana and New Orleans from many other slave societies was simply the production of the pressures of potential invasion on the sparsely-populated and undermanned French colonial outpost, rather than an expression of an exceptional racial openness.

Chapter Six of the book exhibits an exhaustive analysis of class among the white population in the French period combining microhistorical analyses of criminal incidents and official records with demographic

statistics to analyse the economic and labour situation in the city. It is shown that, in 1732, 60% of white household heads were not slave-owners and 54% of slave-owning households held only one or two enslaved persons, with 14% of slave-owners holding more than six, pointing to a decisive stratification on the lines of class which was manifested in ownership of enslaved Africans, a disparity which became greater over time (pp. 318-20). Race and class intersected in complex ways in the arena of labour also, as slave-owners encroached on white labourers' ability to dictate wages by training enslaved labourers in skilled crafts. These analyses go a long way to countering the apparent lack of class-based tensions during the French period found by Thomas Ingersoll. (7)

Two particularly fascinating examples in this chapter concern individuals described in original documents as "bohemian", *i.e.* people of Roma background (pp. 300, 313). A narrative is elaborated from court records telling of the attempted suicide of a indentured "bohemian" man who was treated as a "slave" and beaten mercilessly by a soldier when he refused to do labour deemed to be reserve of enslaved Africans, demonstrating how the presence of racial slavery created an acute sensibility among lower class whites that they must draw a firm racial boundary around particular working activities and practices. That an egregious example of a European convict or labourer pressed into "slave-like" labour would concern a Roma man implies that the "race-thinking" that Vidal ascribes as present from the very foundation of the city was at work in even more complex ways, and that this man was not necessarily considered as "white" as other European ethnicities outlined in Chapter Eight were. Pleasingly, that chapter does include a paragraph with discussion of the treatment of "bohemians" listed and classed separately on militia lists to "whites" and "free blacks". As Vidal has clearly completed such an extensive survey of the available primary material, presumably there is little more to go on but these examples seem to strengthen, as well as complicate, the race formation thesis in ways that would be fascinating to explore more deeply.

The exploration of sociocultural categories is extended even further in Chapter Nine, exploring the interplay of ethnic, colonial, and racial identities in both the white and black sections of the population, exploring the interplay of "Frenchness" and other European ethnicities and the overlapping and mutable identifications as "Louisianian" and "creole" alongside them dictated by the wider imperial and transnational situation the white colonists faced in different periods.

Another theoretical correction to previous scholarship is put forward in this chapter as Vidal unpicks questioning of enslaved African people by court officials which ask for specific breakdowns of geographic and ethnic origins, finding them to be plastic and highly individualised. In comparison to other contemporary slave societies, it is argued that "the enslaved were rarely categorized with ethno-labels. Because the colony's direct access to the slave trade from Africa ceased early on, race quickly became the most important marker of identification", manifested by the dearth of ethnonyms recorded in white-produced records in the colony (p. 464). In historiographical terms this intervention is a correction on what Vidal sees as a lack of interrogation by Hall of the ethnonyms recorded in primary sources of enslaved Africans (although she is clear to express admiration for much of Hall's Afrocentrist approach). Through the prism of interrogation and recording in court by white authorities, the French terms of "nation" and "pays" are shown to be interpreted by enslaved persons in differing manners and including both African and New World reference points, reflective of complex but also inconsistent and mutable definitions and Vidal finds that the generally stable enslaved population led to an early creolization and reorganisation of identities, where shared race and attachment to Louisiana were more important than asserted by Hall's thesis which argues that African identities were strengthened by populational stability. (8)

In total, the complex elucidation of race formation throughout the book, covering every aspect of the city's social development, makes a strong case for this theoretical re-evaluation of New Orleans as a slave city from its inception and its efficacy as a case study of a "Greater Caribbean" pattern which downplays its exceptionalism or peculiarity as a local variation on a broader social pattern common to both North America and the Caribbean. Particularly effective in this regard is the framing of the study mainly on the urban centre itself, which is deemed to form its own unique local community, and not the wider (Lower) Louisiana plantation region. In this context Vidal also points to the importance of considering the range of slaveries

that developed in the New World, rather than focusing on a definition based on monolithic accounts of plantation slavery as the “classical” norm. By evaluating the urban community discretely, further commonalities emerge for fruitful comparisons with locations such as Charleston, Kingston, or Bridgetown, also maritime urban commercial nodes connecting plantation hinterlands with the wider Atlantic which further reduce the exceptionalism ascribed to the “chaotic” “rogue colony” of New Orleans. (9)

There may be scholars who will attempt to refute the challenge made here to the major silos of biracial/North American versus tripartite/Caribbean slave societies, particularly if the approach is deemed to elide a colony-wide approach to Louisiana by focusing upon an urban-centred study but this line of argument would, for Vidal, one assumes, be missing the point. What is certain is that this volume is likely to stand as the defining and comprehensive study of French New Orleans for many years to come.

[1] For a summary of these debates see Paul Lachance, “Existe-t-il un seul modèle colonial français en Amérique du Nord? Recherches récentes sur les relations raciales en Louisiane,” in *De Québec à l'Amérique française. Histoire et mémoire*, ed. Thomas Wien, Cécile Vidal, and Yves Frénette (Sainte-Foy, 2006), pp. 139-53.

[2] Quote from Gwendolyn Midlo Hall, *Africans in colonial Louisiana: the development of Afro-Creole culture in the eighteenth century* (Baton Rouge, 1992), p. 155. See also, Jennifer M. Spear, *Race, sex, and social order in early New Orleans* (Baltimore, 2009).

[3] Shannon Lee Dawdy, *Building the devil's empire: French colonial New Orleans* (Chicago, 2008).

[4] Philip D. Morgan, *Slave counterpoint: black culture in the eighteenth-century Chesapeake and Lowcountry* (Chapel Hill, 1998).

[5] Quote from Spear, *Race, sex, and social order*, p. 7.

[6] See, for example, Kimberly S. Hanger, *Bounded lives, bounded places: free black society in colonial New Orleans, 1769-1803* (Durham, 1997).

[7] Thomas N. Ingersoll, *Mammon and Manon in early New Orleans: the first slave society in the Deep South, 1718-1819* (Knoxville, 1999).

[8] Hall, *Africans in colonial Louisiana*.

[9] Vidal cites as a recent example Trevor Burnard and Emma Hart, “Kingston, Jamaica, and Charleston, South Carolina: a new look at comparative urbanization in plantation colonial British America”, *Journal of Urban History*, 39(2), pp. 214-34. Quote from Dawdy, *Devil's empire*, p. 13.

The author is happy to accept this review and does not wish to comment further.

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