Cécile Vidal, *Caribbean New Orleans: Empire, Race, and the Making of a Slave Society*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2019. xv + 533 pp. (Paper US\$ 49.95)

In the context of eighteenth-century empire building, New Orleans was something of an anomaly. It was founded late in the imperial game, emerging as a planned city with its treacherous levees reinforced by the king's engineers in the 1720s. It had no overland road connecting it to other parts of French North America. Even by the 1760s, its population had reached only a struggling three thousand inhabitants. Both fluvial and oceanic port, it was so far down on the list of desirable places to trade that after 1731 the direct trade in slaves with Africa ceased, and European goods virtually always came through Saint-Domingue. Historians have generally treated this imperial backwater as part of French North America, the southernmost extent of the vast Louisiana territory which enfolded the mighty Mississippi River. The historical orthodoxy has been that the French heritage of New Orleans tempered its ambitions to plantation slavery, leading to an ameliorated, more flexible approach to race than the biracial order rapidly emerging in British North America. Race, according to this line of thought, was not important in the Crescent City or, by extension, the French empire.

Cécile Vidal explodes this formulation with an extensive and incisive examination of race in New Orleans that considers racial formation as a process that happened from the ground up as well as the top down. Taking its cues from Saint-Domingue, she argues, made New Orleans a decisively Caribbean city where racial prejudice imbued every element of daily life, lived experience, and administrative process from the city's inception. She treats New Orleans as simultaneously a distinctive place with its own local racial codes and conditions; a part of the French empire that stretched across the Atlantic and encompassed territory from the St. Lawrence River to the Caribbean Sea; and a colonial slave society that resonated with others throughout the Americas. And she argues that this combination of Caribbean outlook and local conditions formed the crucible for a strict racial order, and a color line that could both be crossed and "reactivated when necessary" (p. 168).

Throughout, Vidal demonstrates a stunning knowledge of archives in New Orleans and in France. (She also cites sources from the Archivo General de Indias in Seville.) Her in-depth familiarity with the judicial records in particular allows her to consider the roles played by elite Whites, soldiers, poor Whites, free people of color, and urban and rural enslaved people in race formation, always with consideration of gender. Her attention to the way Whites of different orders participated in creating constructions of Whiteness partic-

ularly stands out. She moves readers around eighteenth-century New Orleans and systematically introduces its spaces, denizens, institutions, and practices. Her chapters address urban space, Catholic rituals, Ursuline nuns, hospitals, domestic life, labor, trade, judicial systems, and the construction and emergence of a specifically “Louisianan” identity in the context of brewing Atlantic revolutions; each chapter is tightly woven with the others yet able to stand alone for scholars who wish to read selectively or assign portions to students.

Caribbean New Orleans is truly an Atlantic study that draws on and is influenced by scholarship on North America, the Caribbean, and France. Vidal pays fine-grained attention to New Orleans as an *ancien régime* society, and takes historiography on metropolitan France into serious account in a way that is unusual among scholars of North America or the Caribbean. Through her extensive knowledge of these varied fields, she brings forth a textured comparison of New Orleans and Louisiana with the Caribbean and North America, both within and across imperial boundaries. This exceptional attention to comparison carefully places New Orleans in a larger imperial, Atlantic, and Caribbean context. Although Africa is largely left out of this triangulation, Vidal argues that the racial system in New Orleans was strong enough from its inception to allow little room for African influences (see note 30, p. 465).

This study is destined to become an instant classic on New Orleans, yet other readers should not be misled by the title. Its far-reaching implications and comparative context make it important reading for scholars of France, colonial North America, the Caribbean, Native Americans, imperialism and colonialism, slavery, and the Atlantic world. Its broad appeal testifies to Vidal's ability to weave together the local and the imperial, all the while engaging with multiple historiographies. This is a book with intellectual heft, which will prompt scholars to rethink their approaches to race formation, including Whiteness; connections among circum-Caribbean plantation societies; and the role of cities in perpetuating systems of enslavement.

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