Cécile Vidal, ed.


This collection of essays is a welcome addition to the variety of Atlantic historiography that attempts to place local and regional developments in an Atlantic context while examining what doing so can tell us about broader Atlantic systems and structures. Further, its focus on Louisiana, situated as the editor, Cécile Vidal suggests, at the “crossroads” of a variety of Atlantic networks and imperial systems makes it a contribution that is likely to be of interest to a wider range of Atlantic historians than much otherwise valuable “cis-Atlantic” history.

Vidal’s opening essay deftly reviews recent debates regarding the prizes and pitfalls of Atlantic history, making a strong case that colonial Louisiana “constitutes a prime location” for its practice. Not only was it located “at the crossroads of two distinctive socioeconomic and commercial systems [the circum-Caribbean plantation complex and the North American indigenous frontier], but it also refracted the sovereignties of three distinctive European empires and an American nation-state”. (pp. 3–4) As such, not only are Atlantic perspectives needed to understand Louisiana’s history, but using Louisiana as a test case allows us to “steer clear of a problematic tendency in Atlantic studies, which paradoxically have adopted mainly a national and imperial perspective” (p. 4). Indeed, one of the great merits of this volume is that while focusing on a place and time in all of their particularities, it prods us, as Sylvia Frey suggests in the conclusion, to consider “an alternative paradigm that transits national borders and deploys a different framework of fault lines of race, demography, religion, gender, and geography” (p. 185).

The volume’s essays largely make good on these ambitious promises. Guillaume Aubert’s chapter demonstrates the roles that seventeenth-century trans-Atlantic and trans-Imperial debates over racial slavery and French Caribbean jurisprudence played in the formulation and explicitly racial structuration of Louisiana’s 1724 Code Noir. Pointing towards exchanges between Louisiana administrators, their West Indian counterparts, and metropolitan authorities, Aubert’s essay suggests the limits of James Pritchard’s and Kenneth Banks’ arguments that no true ancien regime French Empire with an explicitly imperial worldview or ideology existed, a critique reinforced by Alexandre Dubé’s chapter on the French colony’s civilian officers and the “imperial” bureaucracy of the Ministry of the Navy. Together with Vidal’s contribution on the Church, _métissage_ and the language of race, which demonstrates that the colony’s racial taxonomies directly derived from those of Saint-Domingue,
these essays suggest that administrative and missionary networks, as Dubé puts it, gave “birth to a certain practice of empire” (p. 67).

Other essays (Sylvia Hilton’s, and read together those by Vidal, Mary Williams, and Emily Clark), explore the nature and effects of Louisiana’s shifting sovereignties. Together, they highlight the real changes brought by these shifts as well as the ways those changes were modified and limited by what might be called the persistence of former empires and the on-going vitality of networks that transcended imperial and national borders (e.g., migrations). The three essays by Vidal, Williams, and Clark also allow us to connect such large scale phenomena to local and even private histories, showing “how sexuality, marriage and family or household formation lie at the heart of both the development and the contestation of the racial order” (p. 15), phenomena that were shaped by, but transcended changes of flag.

In contrast with the other essays’ imperial and trans-imperial framings, Sophie White’s and Jean-Pierre Le Glaunec’s contributions examine the development of Louisiana’s slave society and culture, emphasizing the significance of highly local and temporally contingent factors such as “the smallness of Louisiana slavery” before the 1820s (p. 117). This smallness led to both closer interactions with other colonists – White suggests that those with poor French immigrants led to “theft cultures … [being] profoundly shaped by European cultures of consumption pertaining to the act of thieving and the use of those consumer networks in place for the … redistribution of stolen clothing” (p. 91) – and significant constraints on the formation of slave cultures and communities. Both essays encourage us, in Le Glaunec’s words “to break free from one of the foundational dichotomies of the history of Louisiana slavery: the ‘Creolization’ vs. the ‘Africanization’ models [by] a return to the ‘historical particulars’ and more specifically a return to what T.H. Breen called the ‘constraints upon choice’ and ‘upon cultural adaptation’” (pp. 105–106).

As a whole, this volume admirably demonstrates the benefits of bringing an Atlantic perspective to Louisiana histories and the potential of regional studies to reconfigure our understandings of larger-scale Atlantic processes, albeit within certain limits. Frey’s concluding chapter exemplifies the larger volume in these regards. Highlighting one of the book’s major undercurrents, i.e., the development of racial orders, she suggests that this volume shows us that “[t]he mental habit of dividing populations into distinct social categories was a transnational phenomenon, and future studies will necessarily involve crossing national boundaries and linguistic frontiers” (pp. 203–204). With this, Frey points towards one of the most significant contributions that this book may make to broader Atlantic historiography. Nonetheless, while the particular imperial histories of Louisiana may bring that development into bold relief,