Exiles at Home: The Struggle to Become American in Creole New Orleans (book review)

Mary Niall Mitchell
University of New Orleans, mnmitche@uno.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarworks.uno.edu/hist_facpubs

Part of the United States History Commons

Recommended Citation
Rogers, however, pays comparatively little attention to the origins or consequences of scientific racism or the role of visual technologies in it. Instead, she widens the frame of the photographs to permit the context behind them—the cotton plantation economy, South Carolina slaveholders, and naturalists like Agassiz—to come into view. Rogers aims for a general audience; her style is mostly narrative. Although the book shows careful research, it does not cover much new scholarly ground. Even as a narrative history, however, its various strands do not entirely come together. Rogers has widened her scope so far that the overall purpose or thrust of her story becomes lost in all of the detail.

The most striking parts of Rogers’ narrative are the fictional vignettes that she has created for each of the photographed slaves to counteract the dehumanization of slaves that the images represent. Indeed, if Zealy’s daguerreotypes stand as any kind of evidence, it is of the objectification to which slaves were routinely subject. Rogers fictionalizes Delia and the others in her narrative to allow them some subjectivity and to re-animate them as human beings. The concept has merit, but, unfortunately, Rogers’ prose, which is otherwise lucid, comes across as strained and self-conscious in these sections. Furthermore, because she imbues all of the characters with the same tone and voice, these vignettes tend to flatten them as historical figures. She would have done better to use testimonies, speeches, and other documents to convey the experiences of slaves within her larger narrative, as she does to some degree with Frederick Douglass.

Amy Wood
Illinois State University


The people who inhabit the pages of this book—New Orleans’s nineteenth-century Creoles of color—make difficult, yet fascinating, subjects of historical and cultural study. They are difficult for two reasons: (1) Their story, which is complicated and unfamiliar to most readers, requires Thompson to explain the precarious yet prosperous existence of a group of French-speaking free people of color, with ties to Europe and the Caribbean, in the midst of a U.S. slave society; (2) although most were well educated, and many of them were writers and intellectuals, few of their personal papers are stored in archives (most of those that have survived remain in private hands). Scholars, therefore, must look to a variety of sources to piece together the history of Creoles of color. In the book under review, this array of documentation includes legal and property records, Romantic poetry, newspaper editorials, and evidence of the built environment. To address such disparate sources, Thompson
wields a number of methodological tools, from theories of urban space to literary criticism, historiography, and legal analysis.

The fundamental problem that frames this book, according to the author, is the Creole of color community’s “struggle to become American.” This fight centered on the transformation of New Orleans from a Creole to an American society during the course of the nineteenth century—that is, the “move away from an emphasis on place and history towards an emphasis on race” (38). This transformation left Creoles of color “exiles” in their own land (15). Rather than endure such a fate, some of them became literal exiles, setting sail for Europe or the Caribbean. But most of them remained in New Orleans to face an increasingly repressive society built along racial lines that threatened to obscure the legacy and identity of an ethnic group that did not fit into an American hierarchy (whether confronting these circumstances was the same as struggling “to become American” is questionable).

The author retrieves important pieces of this legacy, examining, for instance, traces of the business dealings of François Lacroix—a wealthy tailor and property owner—and the political ideologies of such writers and educators as Paul Trévigne and Armand Lanusse. She addresses several facets of the racial dilemma of the home “exile”: contested claims to whiteness among light-skinned Creoles, the social and legal consequences of plaçage (a formal, extralegal agreement between a white man and a free woman of color for sexual companionship in exchange for financial support), and formerly free people’s decisions to align themselves politically with African Americans after the Civil War. In her most innovative chapter, Thompson considers how Creoles of color staked their claim on the city through property ownership, neighborhood development, and institution building.

Because of its imaginative forays into sources, this book may well give too much weight to the issue of plaçage, at the expense of day-to-day survival strategies of free people of color. Although plaçage was common, it did not define the Creole of color community to the extent that many accounts suggest. Several of the sources that Thompson uses—sensational court cases and literary works, for example—drew heavily upon the symbolism of these interracial relationships. But the study of more prosaic archival sources, such as marriage records, would reveal many unions between Creoles of color, as well as the extended families that supported those marriages. Moreover, although one of the community’s most important institutions, the Couvent School, was established, in part, to aid the “half-orphaned” offspring of plaçage, it also served many children of two-parent families of color, providing them with an education previously only available to white children and preparing them for the difficult task of living at home, in exile.\(^1\) Attention to these facets of Creole life would have made the author’s focus on the

---

Financial Fraud and Guerrilla Violence in Missouri’s Civil War, 1861–1865.
By Mark W. Geiger (New Haven, Yale University Press, 2010) 306 pp. $55.00

In September 1861, Major General Sterling Price, commander of the Missouri State Guard (soon to be mustered in as Confederate troops), defeated a garrison of federal troops stationed at Lexington. The federal commander had been instructed to secure this Missouri River town and to remove the funds deposited in the Farmers’ Bank of Missouri. With the defeated federal commander at his side, Price ceremoniously returned the funds to the bank. As Geiger explains in this groundbreaking study in economic and social history, Price’s action underscored the importance of banks to the southern cause in Missouri.

Price—a state bank commissioner when the Civil War began—and other leaders of the state’s central slaveholding region had won the passage of a new banking law in 1857 that secured their interests. As Geiger points out, men like Price were not opposed to capital markets. Indeed, they were determined to shape those markets to their advantage. The new banking law required the establishment of new branch banks, and almost all of the banks established after 1857 were in the state’s largest slaveholding counties. These new banks “shifted capital out of St. Louis and into the high-slavery counties” (30). In the secession crisis, as pro-Confederate Missourians began to form the Missouri State Guard, they funded it with promissory notes. “Missouri Confederates gained control of most of the banks’ money, leaving behind a mountain of paper promises” (81). Price returned the confiscated funds to the Farmers’ Bank in Lexington confident that the bank’s director would continue the practice of funding promissory notes.

Geiger refers to this practice as “fraud.” The men of southern principles who signed the promissory notes had no intention of repaying them. If the debt were to be honored at all, they expected it to be funded by the Confederate state of Missouri. Unfortunately for those who signed the notes, Price’s army and the pro-Confederate state government were driven from the state. Unionists took control of the banks and began to file civil suits to recover the debt created by the promissory notes. The litigation continued for several years, but “when it was all over, most of the defendants had no property left” (99). As a result, “a disproportionate number of the young men from these dispossessed families joined the guerrilla bands” (3).

Geiger builds effectively on a 1977 study by Bowen that empha-