

2011

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

Mitchell, Mary Niall. 2011. "Exiles at Home: The Struggle to Become American in Creole New Orleans." (book review) *JOURNAL OF INTERDISCIPLINARY HISTORY* 41 (4): 661–63.

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the Department of History and Philosophy at ScholarWorks@UNO. It has been accepted for inclusion in History Faculty Publications by an authorized administrator of ScholarWorks@UNO. For more information, please contact scholarworks@uno.edu.

Exiles at Home: The Struggle to Become American in Creole New Orleans. By Shirley Elizabeth Thompson (Cambridge, Mass., Harvard University Press, 2009) 362 pp. \$49.95

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

1 On the Couvent School, or Catholic Institution, see Mitchell, *Raising Freedom's Child: Black Children and Visions of the Future After Slavery* (New York, 2008), 11–50.

efforts of Creoles of color to establish their own place within American society even stronger.

Mary Niall Mitchell
University of New Orleans