Plumes, Quadroons, and Company Men: Colonial Louisiana and the Atlantic World

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Over the past few decades, the field of Atlantic studies has risen to prominence as an alternative to national histories. Universities now maintain endowed chairs and academic centers to investigate the commercial, political, and cultural links that spanned that ocean from the fifteenth through the nineteenth century. Scholars’ efforts have transformed old perceptions of the Atlantic from that of a barrier between the Old World and the New into a thoroughfare that connected four continents. Yet at times Atlantic historians produce what resembles the old wine of the Age of Exploration poured into the new bottle of an Atlantic world. As Sylvia R. Frey, one of the contributors to *Louisiana: Crossroads of the Atlantic World*, notes, the field “still tends to break along national fault lines” (185). Books and articles on British and Spanish iterations of that “world,” populated by
seaborne Anglo and Hispanic wayfarers on their way to some form of imperial hegemony, dominate the literature of the field.\(^1\)

The Lower Mississippi Valley and its environs—the region the French called La Louisiane—have been no exception to the allure of an Atlantic perspective. Recent scholarship has focused on topics ranging from its slave trades to the histories of indigenous peoples, with strong emphasis on the connections between Europe, Africa, and the Americas. These efforts lend weight to the observation of historian Cécile Vidal that “one cannot write Louisiana history without an Atlantic perspective or study Atlantic history without including Louisiana” (17). But if British and Spanish Atlantics have witnessed a resurgence of nation-based imperial history, a number of contemporary historians have steered a course around national perspectives. The province’s successive regime changes, as well as its location between three competing empires and its incorporation into a nation-state, make it an optimal test case. Louisiana, as Vidal contends, holds the potential to reframe our understanding of social and political practices within individual colonial projects. For instance, under the French regime Louisiana connected two models of colonization: the plantation-oriented, slave-powered possessions of the Caribbean and the system that operated within the heart of the continent and relied on the cooperation of Native Americans. Thus, the patterns that can be found in Louisiana’s past—particularly regarding struggles over authority and conformity—have ready application in other cases.

A quartet of recent books on the region confirm the viability of an Atlantic perspective and demonstrate Louisiana’s potential to breathe new

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life into a field that, despite its drive toward borderless histories, remains fixed upon European civilizations. *Louisiana: Crossroads of the Atlantic World*, a collection of essays by leading scholars of colonial Louisiana, exemplifies this extra-national approach. Emily Clark’s *The Strange History of the American Quadroon* traces the myths surrounding free women of mixed ancestry who resided in New Orleans. She exposes them as locally constructed images of alterity—tropes used to marginalize the city as “an island of exotic, erotic creole something-or-other that is essentially foreign to what is ‘American’” (193). Gordon M. Sayre’s and Carla Zecher’s skills as translators, editors, and commentators lend depth to the previously unpublished journal of Lieutenant Jean-François-Benjamin Dumont de Montigny, a hapless wanderer who never failed to fail whether he was in the colony or in France. Editor Erin M. Greenwald provides her readers with background for Marc-Antoine Caillot’s memoir, a firsthand account of an eighteenth-century Frenchman’s transatlantic journey. Beyond their focus on Louisiana, several key themes run through these works that move the field beyond European and national parameters. Some of them use categories such as race and gender to cross those boundaries. Others circumvent those strictures by investigating religious and administrative practices. Collectively, they unmask some of the mechanisms that underwrote the regimes of power and domination in play within the mainland colony and its Caribbean counterparts.

All of these scholars are in some way indebted to Gwendolyn Midlo Hall and Daniel H. Usner Jr.2 Hall’s 1992 monograph broke new ground when she situated Louisiana within the Atlantic and Caribbean worlds. She argued for the persistence of African culture among the colony’s slaves, a concept that has since made a considerable impact on the historiography of slavery and the slave trade.3 Usner’s book, published the same year, looked inward toward the social and economic interactions between Native Americans, European colonists, and their captive laborers, both African and indigenous, in the Lower Mississippi Valley. He challenged Frederick Jackson Turner’s “frontier thesis” with his own “frontier exchange economy,” a framework in which no one group could sustain itself alone due to the underdeveloped state of the region. The authors of this latest round of essays and books, however, branch out to explore new terrain beyond the paths blazed by Usner and Hall. Collectively, they illuminate the webs of

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obligation, patronage, kinship, faith, law, and sometimes love that bound together the peoples of three continents.

Vidal divides the essays of *Crossroads* into three parts: “Empires,” “Circulations,” and “Intimacies.” The first section deals primarily with the province’s French and Spanish administrations and their roles within their respective imperial projects. “Circulations” focuses on the movement of goods and people within Louisiana and the implications of those movements. The final section investigates how interpersonal relationships and the institutions that regulated them reinforced or weakened racial and social hierarchies. In her concluding essay, Frey notes that “the great fault line” (185) of race was a primary theme that unified the authors’ various avenues of inquiry.

In an investigation of that fault line, Jean-Pierre Le Glaunec directly challenges Hall’s claims for cultural continuity among enslaved Africans. He begins his essay with an anecdote drawn from Louisiana court papers about the sale of several slaves in 1795. The case reported that one of them, “a negro named Lubin[,] does not know his nation” (104). Le Glaunec builds his argument from that brief entry to demonstrate that studies such as those conducted by Hall extrapolate far too much from documents that listed slaves’ African ethnicities. These records overrepresent the slaves held on large estates and undercount non-slaveholding farmsteads. They also obscure the fact that it was the captives themselves who usually designated their nationalities. Such methodology often overlooks creole slaves such as Lubin or ignores the reality that the vast majority of slaves in Louisiana were bought alone or in pairs and were then dispersed throughout the colony, making the transmission of language and social practices unlikely. He also contends that the national identities provided by the slaves are insufficient evidence for the “re-Africanization” (121) of Louisiana during the late eighteenth century. For Le Glaunec, Lubin’s ignorance regarding his own ethnicity undermines such labels as proof of cultural persistence. Considered collectively, these gaps in the evidence point toward a Louisiana that was a rapidly growing slave society, not “the recreation of an imagined Africa” (121).

Like Le Glaunec, Vidal resists overemphasizing connections within the Atlantic world. Her work focuses on the influence of the French West Indies on rhetorical practices that undergirded the racial hierarchies of Louisiana. Even though Louisiana and Caribbean colonists used an “identical vocabulary of métissage” (127), their attitudes regarding people of mixed ancestry varied widely. These differences arose from local conditions. For instance, the relatively late settlement of Louisiana meant that it did not go through formative stages in which the legal status of interracial unions had yet to be established. Moreover, most Africans arrived in Louisiana from

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4 The quotation is in French in Le Glaunec’s essay: “Un Nègre nommè [sic] Lubin ne connaissant pas Sa Nation.”
1719 to 1731, a very short period compared with the 150 years during which kidnapped workers came to Saint Domingue. This provided Louisianans little time to engage in mixed marriages and manumissions, especially because the newly adapted Code Noir took effect in 1724, only five years after Africans arrived in large numbers. Louisiana also became dependent on slave labor more rapidly than its island counterparts, making slaves too valuable to emancipate.

Religious practices also helped to restrict métissage in Louisiana. Although Catholic missionaries routinely performed marriage ceremonies in which Native American women wed Frenchmen, they supported statutes that forbade Africans from marrying Europeans. At the same time, priests in New Orleans ignored laws requiring that they inquire about the paternity of métis children they baptized. Since nearly all of the mothers of these babies were slaves, concealing their fathers’ identities committed their Euro-African offspring to bondage. Such clerical oversights amounted to an unofficial toleration of métissage and linked mixed ancestry with illegitimacy.

Religion helped to underwrite the construction of racial hierarchies in France’s empire in other ways. Guillaume Aubert argues that concerns regarding the spiritual status of captive workers informed the regulation of chattel slavery by France’s Ministry of the Marine, the branch of the government responsible for the kingdom’s overseas possessions. Considerations beyond the salvation of captive laborers, however, were factors in the resolution of that status. Aubert contends that “the inclusion of enslaved Africans within the French Catholic community” by the ministry’s operatives “was initially intended to reinforce rather than undermine racial hierarchies” (42).

During the mid-seventeenth century Louis XIV’s advisors faced the conundrum of reconciling the practice of slavery in the colonies with French legal traditions that banned slavery in the homeland. Protests by vocal Capuchin missionaries who condemned the injustices of the institution exacerbated tensions. At the same time, owners of the sugar plantations of the Caribbean clamored for more slaves to harvest their increasingly lucrative crops. In an attempt to placate these competing interests, the marquis de Seignelay, the Secretary of the Marine, issued the Code Noir in 1685. It required slaveholders to baptize their captives and instruct them in the Catholic faith. The new law also excluded Protestants and Jews from the colonies, thus bringing the full force of the state to bear against those who challenged the church’s hegemony. The Code Noir simultaneously resolved the disjuncture between domestic and imperial legal practices and transformed the church into an enforcer of France’s racial hierarchies. It also helped to foster a “Catholic Atlantic,” another example of European institutions’ growing impact upon the lives of individuals in Africa and the Americas.

The authors of the Code Noir also dealt with issues of sex and gender in their attempts to stabilize racial borderlines. Sexual liaisons between
Africans and Europeans constituted the most pervasive and serious threats to those boundaries. Consequently, the Code of 1685, and indeed nearly all efforts to create racial hierarchies, employed legal sanctions to discourage relationships between people of different skin color. The laws allowed, however, some measure of autonomy for freed people.

By the early 1720s, Louisianans’ penchant for enacting local slave ordinances and for establishing sexual relationships across racial lines began to reveal the fissures in those hierarchies. Paris reacted by revising its laws in 1724. “The Louisiana Code Noir significantly differed from its predecessor in three areas: manumission, the status of free blacks, and sexual encounters between whites and blacks” (39). The Ministry of the Marine’s jurists required that slaveholders seek permission from the colony’s Superior Council before they freed slaves. It prohibited those who gained their liberty from inheriting property from whites. Rather than merely discouraging interracial unions, it forbade them under pain of fines and forfeitures. For Aubert, the Code Noir of 1724 was the culmination of a process that used gender as a means of domination. That process began with the search for a response to missionaries’ objections to slavery and concluded with the “positing [of] inherent differences between white and black Catholics” (42).

A gendered Atlantic world also animates Mary Williams’s contribution to the volume. She describes the ways in which Spanish officials, after they took control of Louisiana in 1763, relaxed some of the more restrictive clauses of the Code Noir. Their most notable reforms centered on marriages between European and African colonists. Like her fellow contributors, Williams is careful not to overstate the reforms’ effects because the resistance of Louisiana’s planter class blunted much of their impact. She also notes that the legal recognition of mixed unions failed to generate more marriages. In fact, Louisiana’s marriage rates had been declining for some time and remained quite low. The lack of European women left poor white males with few potential brides and therefore little need for weddings. These lower-status men, however, tended to have more daily contact with people of color and were therefore more likely to develop sexual relationships with women of African descent.

In 1778, Spain extended the Royal Pragmatic, legislation issued two years earlier in the homeland, to its colonies. The Pragmatic had been intended to prevent those of lower social status from marrying above their rank. It contained clauses, however, that allowed white subjects to transfer property to free or enslaved blacks and thus enabled some fathers to provide for their families. The new laws also protected the inheritance rights of “natural children and bastards” (158). Despite the limited success of Spain’s

5 Natural children were offspring born out of wedlock to parents who could have legally married at the time of their birth. These individuals stood apart from “bastards” who had been conceived in adulterous relationships.
reforms, they created the legal and economic foundations necessary for Louisiana's nascent community of *gens de couleur libres* to grow.

Clark's essay on free people of color in *Crossroads* simultaneously grapples with the law and gender as well as the "great fault line" of race. She demonstrates that during the forty years of Spanish control, Louisiana's system of jurisprudence opened up pathways to freedom unavailable under the French regime. The expanding population of free blacks fostered communities that were stabilized by the bonds generated by officially recognized marriages. The change of colonial overlords also provided a new source of prestige: military service. Militia units comprised of free men of color allowed their members to participate in a Hispanic tradition of honor built upon exploits of martial prowess. This tradition facilitated the construction of masculine identities, analogous, if not equal, to those of European males.

The construction of gendered identities was not limited to the free men of color. Women, too, found legal and social spaces in which they rooted their own personal autonomies. The influx of immigrants from Saint Domingue introduced new social and economic practices, including the employment of professional household managers. Few French women immigrated to the island colonies of the Caribbean, leading their male counterparts to seek competent administrators to supervise their homes. Free women of color, who negotiated contracts that outlined their responsibilities and compensation, took up that role during Saint Domingue's colonial era.

The turn of the nineteenth century witnessed wars and revolutions that displaced thousands of people from the island, some of whom came to New Orleans to rebuild their lives. Gossip and rumor transformed these *ménagères*, who had arrived with their employers, into a fantasy: women who engaged in a system of *plaçage*. According to the legends that grew during the early 1800s, the parents of beautiful young women of mixed ancestry arranged to place their daughters in the homes of well-to-do white men. These parents allegedly executed notarized contracts that spelled out what the man was to provide: a furnished home, jewelry, clothes, and money—all the basic elements of *plaçage*.

Clark significantly expands her analysis of *plaçage*, rumor, and public memory in her book, *The Strange History of the American Quadroon*. As Thomas Jefferson defined it, a quadroon was a person with "1/4 negro blood" (3), although Clark demonstrates that such clarity of blood quantum was far from the point. Clark also illuminates the myth of *plaçage* and its origin in Saint Domingue. In late eighteenth-century New Orleans, the term became a synonym for hypersexual free women of color who sought relationships with white men, preferably the wealthy kind.

As the nineteenth century progressed, the myth accumulated further attributes. Masked balls, held by French-speaking immigrants, furnished locales for these new components. At these gatherings, white males, faced
with a shortage of Euro-American brides, mingled with women of color who supposedly also lacked suitable mates. Soon stories began to circulate that the parents of beautiful quadroons came to these dances to place their daughters with wealthy Euro-Americans. Visitors to the city heard these tales and included them in their travelogues and novels. Fiction writers of the day soon fashioned the quadroon into a tragic literary figure: a beautiful yet vulnerable woman who was neither black nor white and was destined for ruin when her Caucasian lover inevitably abandoned her for a respectable bride from his own race. Despite the popularity of the trope of *plaçage*, Clark demonstrates that there was little substance behind it—she could not find a single *plaçage* contract, or similar document, in any of New Orleans’s numerous archives. What she found instead was a vibrant community of free people of color linked by endogamous marriages. Its men bore arms in the militia and ran businesses much like their white neighbors. Clark also discovered that free women of color managed a large proportion of the region’s hospitality industry.

The myth of the quadroon performed another service. Imagining *plaçage* as a phenomenon unique to New Orleans exiled relationships that crossed color boundaries to the margins of the Anglo-Atlantic world. As victims of the system, quadroons validated white male dominance over women of color. Moreover, the myth held that women of color who violated racial boundaries to engage in sexual relationships met with tragic ends. Although the open acknowledgement of such dominance and racial borders has fallen out of vogue, quadroons are intrinsic components of a persistent image of New Orleans as an exotic, foreign place that is not fully American. The mythic quadroon also exemplifies a gendered Atlantic, one in which sexual, legal, and marital practices marginalized its subaltern groups and simultaneously enhanced the power of Europeans and their white American descendants.

A drive for intelligible rules to create and control authority informed seventeenth-century French officials’ attempts to establish clear guidelines for their government’s institutions. Alexandre Dubé’s contribution to *Crossroads* identifies the efforts by the king’s ministers to bring order to the Ministry of the Navy (Ministry of the Marine). Dubé challenges the perception present in the historiography of a Bourbon empire that “could be safely relegated to the wrong side of the threshold of modernity” because it lacked a “rational, centralized administration” (45). To do so, he focuses on the navy’s codification of expectations for its civilian operatives. The *Ordonnances* of 1689 inaugurated a system of commissions, or “brevet[s],” by which “the navy recognized and enforced a bureaucratic division between the employees who had been accepted by the minister and those who were only the result of local agreements” (62). These brevets liberated the *commissaires* from dependence on well-connected sponsors in France for promotions. At the same time, they allowed brevetted administrators to build their own patronage
networks within the corps. By rotating these men “of the plume” (50) through its stations around the globe, the naval ministry standardized its operating procedures. Through several case studies, Dubé demonstrates that brevetted administrators used their postings in Louisiana to improve their careers—debunking the perception that a position in the colony destroyed any chance to move up the chain of command. Moreover, the Ordonnances created a system flexible enough to account for the variety of conditions throughout the French Empire, while it attracted and retained talented individuals by offering consistent criteria for advancement.

Sylvia L. Hilton’s essay also investigates the search for an administrative system that was flexible yet rational. She focuses on Spanish officials in North America who recognized the exigencies born of the intrinsic diversity and mutability of their section of the Atlantic world. These men, rather than applying a singular imperial style of government, had to adapt their policies to local interests and situations while responding to the pressures generated on the other side of the ocean. Hilton, like Vidal, notes the role played by geography: “the specific locations of Luisiana and the Floridas made these colonies especially sensitive to the international transatlantic conflicts of the age” (68). These conditions encouraged Spain to embrace “a highly adaptive approach to their internal government” (68), one that was quite different from the more rigid systems employed in South and Central America. Spanish governors co-opted the French-speaking elites of the colony by appointing them to key government posts. Unlike their counterparts in Spain’s southern possessions, in their negotiations with American Indians Luisiana officials made “deliberate efforts . . . to accommodate Native customs and values” (81).

In the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, Louisiana’s governors tried similar approaches with English-speaking immigrants. By that time, the United States had displaced Great Britain as the colony’s closest nemesis. These Spanish officials hoped that offers of free land and limited religious toleration would prompt legal Anglo newcomers to repel American interlopers who threatened to overwhelm the province. These locally initiated practices “can be explained only in the . . . contexts of Spanish defense strategies” (79), Hilton writes. It was pragmatism, not reformist impulses from Madrid, that encouraged Spanish leaders in situ to grant concessions.

Some of Louisiana’s population lacked the power to leverage concessions. Sophie White reveals that by stealing clothes and circulating them throughout the community, slaves created an informal economy that supported a subaltern network of tailors, fences, and peddlers to move the garments. This informal economy indirectly reinforced the colony’s racial hierarchy. The disproportionately severe sentences the Superior Council meted out to black convicts allowed white New Orleanians to project the criminality of the system onto Africans, although many whites were part
of it. Conversely, the distribution of European-style items carried other meanings; they resonated with sub-Saharan patterns of “the consumption of exotic or prestige trade goods” (98). These clothes also became symbols of resistance against the sumptuary laws that limited slaves’ apparel to rough-spun shifts and trousers. By stealing and reusing these garments, Africans simultaneously defied their captors, kept old trade patterns alive, and cultivated their own standards of fashion and beauty.

In contrast to Clark’s and White’s inward focus on New Orleans and its inhabitants, A Company Man, the recent translation of Marc-Antoine Caillot’s eighteenth-century journal edited by Erin M. Greenwald, looks outward onto the Atlantic world. It recounts one man’s search for prestige and wealth in the midst of disorder and danger. The first half of Caillot’s journal begins with his departure from Paris for Lorient, France, the headquarters of his new employer, the French Company of the Indies. Caillot described his Atlantic crossing, weaving dramatic tales of hurricanes, corruption, and mutiny. The second part of the journal chronicles his time in Louisiana. Although he seems not to have strayed far from the colonial capital, he cataloged the region’s animals, plants, and indigenous peoples. The Natchez Indians and their war with the colony dominate the last quarter of the memoir.

Greenwald’s introductory essay and notes make the manuscript accessible for a wide range of readers. They help to transform Caillot’s adventure into a road map to the Atlantic world. She reveals the networks of patronage and kinship that informed its author’s career from its beginning to his death off the coast of India. His rising fortunes provide counterpoints to Dubé’s argument for systematic paths of advancement within French administrative institutions. Caillot’s father attended Louis XIV’s brother at his château in Meudon. Even though he became redundant when the royal family stopped using that castle, Caillot’s father had garnered enough support for his son to acquire a good position in the French Company of the Indies. That organization held the royal patent to run the colony of Louisiana as one of its many commercial holdings. It also held the exclusive right to trade with India and China. Greenwald reveals that after he left New Orleans, he rose through the firm’s ranks to reach his highest point in India. There he became wealthy by capitalizing on his acquired privilege to engage in private trade, marrying into one of the company’s leading families in Pondicherry. Consequently, Caillot exemplified Dubé’s seasoned bureaucrat whose skills made him useful in his employer’s outposts around the globe. On the other hand, his access to the patronage networks in France launched and sustained his career—a path that challenges Dubé’s argument for the Ministry of the Marine’s system of promotion based on merit as well as internal connections. Incidents in which Caillot’s status provided him with access to patronage also appear in his journal. One of the most striking examples occurred when
he shot a French soldier who had attempted to arrest him. Madame Sicardy, the wife of the commandant at La Caye Saint Louis, in Saint Domingue, intervened in his case. She arranged for his release from prison after he had spent less than an hour in custody.

If patronage underwrote Caillot’s success in the Atlantic world, then the career of Dumont de Montigny—a desperate and ultimately futile bid for status and authority—is an example of a fiasco accelerated by patronage’s darker side: favoritism. Sayre’s and Zecher’s notes and introduction, the products of decades of research on French Louisiana in general, and on Dumont in particular, place the lieutenant’s saga within the contexts of the Atlantic world. Through them the editors reveal the networks of favoritism and influence—a system that the hapless Dumont never learned to navigate. The scholarly depth Sayre and Zecher bring to this previously unpublished manuscript is a boon not only to those studying the history of French Louisiana or the Atlantic world but also to students of eighteenth-century travel literature. Their work also puts an important primary source on Native American culture within reach of a wide audience. In short, the publication represents a significant advance for several academic fields.

Despite the differences in the lieutenant’s experiences, Dumont’s memoir bears some resemblance to Caillot’s since both recount Atlantic crossings. Descriptions of Louisiana’s flora and fauna command significant attention in each, as do their ethnographic sections. The violence of the colony’s final war against the Natchez takes up a good portion of both works, as well. Both protagonists worked for the Company of the Indies, both spent their last years in India, and both perished at sea during the Seven Years’ War.

Yet these similarities only go so far. Unlike Caillot, Dumont was, by his own admission, a failure. If Caillot’s single voyage ranked him among the denizens of the Atlantic world, Dumont’s three round-trips made him even more so. Dumont spent nearly two decades in Louisiana in contrast to the other man’s two-year stint. The lieutenant served in stations throughout the colony, including a posting to Fort Rosalie in Natchez country. It was there that he learned the Natchez language and observed their customs. He witnessed many of the events and knew the people who were the subjects of his writings, whereas Caillot filled his memoir with secondhand accounts. Dumont also had an unusual knack for saying the wrong thing at the wrong time to the wrong person. Soon after arriving in Louisiana, he inadvertently disparaged the reputation of a relative of Jean-Baptiste Le Moyne

de Bienville, a man who rarely forgot a slight. Bienville used his position as the commandant general of the colony to make Dumont's life miserable. Dumont also clashed with his superior officer at Natchez, who then clapped him in irons. Once back in France, he found himself in jail again. Consequently, Dumont's career never got off the ground: he failed to rise above the rank of lieutenant, he lived and died in poverty.

Dumont's failures demonstrate the limits of patronage in the French Atlantic world. His sponsor, the duc de Belle Isle, had little influence on the lieutenant's situation once he returned to France. During the 1740s, he went through great pains to collect his back pay for his service in Louisiana that Bienville had withheld. Belle Isle's tacit support restrained some of Dumont's would-be tormenters, but it did not keep him from being imprisoned for debt. In short, the lieutenant's experience was a study in disappointment.

If Dumont was anything, he was honest about his situation when he compared himself to Robinson Crusoe, a man who went to sea and lost everything. When Dumont's candor or descriptiveness was lacking, Sayre's and Zecher's notes stand in to provide context or to set the record straight. Employing a lighter touch, Greenwald permits Caillot to speak with fewer interventions, allowing some of his tales to stand on their own. A Company Man also contains more material on Caillot's experiences in Europe, so Greenwald provides ample background on France and the Company of the Indies to aid casual as well as academic readers. Sayre and Zecher, in addition to their critical presentation of Dumont's writings, engage with an exhaustive list of secondary works relating to the field. Perhaps one of the most helpful examples of their editing is near the end of the book: the appendix that contains thumbnail biographies of the array of personalities Dumont encountered. These constitute a handy reference and exemplify the editors' thorough knowledge of the subject. Both accounts, however, add to our understanding of Louisiana and its place within the Atlantic world.

Together, these four volumes reveal the promise of several new avenues of inquiry. Clark shows how novelists and historians transformed resourceful women of color into literary tropes to underwrite American racial hierarchies. Dumont's journal, written after decades of disappointment, is especially useful in providing character studies of the "big men" of Louisiana's colonial era. Caillot quite literally made colorful sketches of buoyant New Orleans with an optimism born of youth. Hilton and Williams illuminate the dynamic tensions that prompted colonial officials to accommodate the colony's interest groups. Aubert and Dubé train their focus on France's efforts to establish legal and administrative uniformity. In Dubé's case, the possibility of upward mobility kept good men in the naval ministry long enough for them to disseminate standard operating procedures to its stations around the globe. For Aubert, the tender consciences of legal and religious authorities were the
objects of the Code Noir’s slave laws. The code satisfied each group to the extent that clerics and judges became enthusiastic guardians of slavery and its bastard stepchild, racial hierarchy. White investigates thefts of clothing to unveil intricate networks of illicit trade operating within the shadows of colonial society. Hidden within the folds of this informal economy were subtle discourses of resistance, continuity, and of course fashion. Le Glaunec, Vidal, and Hilton warn us to true our methodological compasses and not to steer toward theoretical mirages in an effort to see connections where none exist.

Perhaps as important, these works open up further inquiries regarding frameworks that might be equally tenuous. The global reach of the Company of the Indies and the careers of its employees, Caillot and Dumont, lead one to wonder about the limits of the Atlantic world—where exactly does it end? How viable is that “world” as a paradigm? As Frey notes, the work presented in Crossroads “deploys a different framework of fault lines of race, demography, religion, gender, and geography” (185). One can see the same forces at work in Clark’s monograph and the Caillot and Dumont memoirs.

As a field, early modern Atlantic history is still dominated by studies that focus on its British and, to a lesser extent, Spanish actors. These four publications go some distance toward remedying that situation, investigating Louisiana under multiple regimes and across broad spectra of time and place. On the other hand, these works also illustrate the risk of replacing a “British Atlantic world” with a French one, as several of their titles imply. In other words, unless scholars of the Atlantic world proceed with caution as the field matures, the vintage it produces might come to taste much like the old wine of the Age of Discovery that has simply been poured into new bottles.

7 Peter A. Coclanis, “Atlantic World or Atlantic/World?” William and Mary Quarterly, 3d ser., 63, no. 4 (October 2006): 725–42.