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Shannon Lee Dawdy, *Building the Devil's Empire: French Colonial New Orleans*. Chicago, Ill.: University of Chicago Press, 2008. 334 pp. \$22.50 U.S. (pb). ISBN-13: 978-0226138428.

Review Gwendolyn Midlo Hall, Rutgers University, emerita.

This charming and fascinating book is a major contribution to the study of French New Orleans. It presents some important new and original research and interpretations with verve and enthusiasm. Dowdy uses colorful, graphic, engaging language interspersed with smooth, witty sarcasm. The author is a specialist in archeology who describes herself as a historical anthropologist. She makes innovative interpretations in several chapters each of which look at French New Orleans using data and from the point of view of several other disciplines making some comparisons with other times and places. Dowdy uses the intellectual tools of literary criticism, comparative urbanization, cartography, historical architecture, and history.

Her most original research and conclusions are the contrast between the enlightenment ideals of French colonialism with the realities of Louisiana and the colonists' often successful battles to implement their own plans. It is innovative and insightful about French New Orleans' complex, layered relationship with France and its enlightenment tradition. The author diligently sought out and published an impressive number of high quality, illuminating maps and illustrations. She skillfully uses the tools of literary criticism to challenge some of the literal-mindedness of some historians. Following in the path of Ira Berlin's *Many Thousands Gone*, published in 1998, Dowdy distinguishes between the "founder generation" and the "first creole generation" coming of age in New Orleans during the 1730s. The book skillfully discusses smuggling as trade which was illegal but licit (meaning accepted) in a broader Caribbean and Atlantic context.

But there are several problems with this book. Surprisingly, it veers towards economic determinism and oversimplifies the entire question of smuggling. It states: "Smuggling, then was quintessentially the practice of free trade" (p. 243). While, at first glance this might seem true, Dowdy misses the grim reality of the smuggling business. Smugglers are often strongly opposed to free trade because if their trade goods became legal, prices would plummet. In general, smugglers and the officials and police they bribe so they can pursue their illegal activities without interference from the law *oppose* free trade or legalization of their illegal trade goods. Here are only a few examples. During the nineteenth century, the Captains-General of Cuba collected several pieces of gold for each enslaved African introduced illegally into Cuba. Of course they opposed the free slave in slaves or any measures to prolong the lives of slaves or encourage their natural increase.[1] During the twentieth century, the Al Capone gang in Chicago obviously did not want to repeal prohibition. Certainly, the illegal drug smugglers along the border between Mexico in the USA today do not want to legalize and establish free trade in marijuana, and neither do many members of the police and public officials on both sides

of the border because they would lose their huge bribes. And arms merchants in the USA selling automatic weapons to Mexico also oppose the legalization of marijuana because drug-related violence and the market for automatic weapons would be sharply reduced.

Dowdy overlooks important patterns of legal maritime trade among Louisiana, France, and the French West Indies.. There was a strategic/economic factor involved in opposition to Spanish rule which involved *legal* maritime trade patterns, not smuggling. There was a highly specialized market for Native American deer skins and furs in France, not in Spain. This trade involved New Orleans and only two French ports: Bordeaux and La Rochelle. These were also the only ports exporting trade goods in demand by Native Americans in French Louisiana. Native American support to France was contingent upon her ability to supply them trade goods which France's British rivals generally supplied cheaper and of better quality. The fur trade was unknown in the ports of Spain or its colonies. Although Havana was fairly near New Orleans and winds and tides were favorable for ships departing from New Orleans, initially there was little demand for Louisiana products in Cuba including construction lumber and sugar boxes before Cuba's sugar monoculture really took off as late after 1775. The first few voyages from New Orleans to Havana after New Orleans came under Spanish control were unprofitable.[2]

While the book is new, original, and informative about the impact of the French Enlightenment on New Orleans and its major players, its discussion of Africans and Naïve Americans is cursory. Indeed, it comes very close to Sarah Palin's assumption that Africa is one country. It states: "Louis Congo . . . had to live with the fact that he played a major role in enforcing the enslavement of his fellow countrymen." Louis Congo was freed to serve as the colony's executioner in 1725 and through the rest of the 1720s and most of the 1730s; he publicly tortured and executed Africans, Native Americans and poor whites indiscriminately. He was paid a set fee for each of his *hautes oeuvres*. Dowdy discusses Louis Congo extensively, and mentions him several times throughout the book.[3] But unless Africans are considered all the same people, there were very few of Louis Congo's fellow countrymen among Louisiana slaves while Louis Congo was performing his *hautes oeuvres*, which is probably why a Congo was freed to serve as executioner. There was only one French transatlantic slave trade voyage from West Central Africa to French Louisiana. It landed 294 enslaved Africans in 1721 during a time of famine and starvation. There were at least twenty-three French transatlantic slave trade voyages leaving from France for Africa to bring slaves to Louisiana and landed 5,951 enslaved Africans two-thirds of whom came from Senegambia and less than one-third from Whydah. All but one of the voyages from Whydah had arrived by 1721, years of war and famine and comparatively few slaves survived before 1722.[4]

Smuggling of slaves into Louisiana was unlikely to be significant during the 1730s after Louisiana's economy collapsed with the Natchez Revolt of 1729 and France de facto abandoned Louisiana. Slave owners or would-be slave owners were too poor to buy slaves. They could not pay for the slaves they had already bought. Although smuggling of enslaved Africans resumed during the 1750s and a much higher proportion of West Central Africans (almost always recorded as "Congo" in the documents) began to arrive in Louisiana, Louis Congo was no longer performing his *hautes oeuvres*.

Scholars of the Americas need to be more precise about the varied peoples who were enslaved in Africa and brought to the Americas over time and place and transformations taking place throughout the Atlantic world including in Africa. Africa really is not one country. Africans are not really one people. There is an enormous literature on this subject beginning many decades ago, none of which was engaged in this book about French New Orleans.

In Dowdy's book, Africans are all described as part of the underclass: "They are the articulate and angry survivors of the plunder of Africa, such as Louis Congo, Etienne La Rue, and Kakaracou" (p. 242). These three people were located on quite distinct places on the continuum of social privilege. As we have seen, Louis Congo was freed to serve as the executioner and his "fellow countrymen" even if all the Congo were all the same, which they were not, were a tiny minority of African-born slaves in Louisiana while Louis Congo held office and even fewer if we include the Creoles (Louisiana-born slaves). Etienne La Rue was not, as described in this book, simply a free mulatto sailor from Senegal. He was not a member of the Many-Headed Hydra. He was a member of an elite Senegalese family deeply involved in the trans-Atlantic slave trade.

The first documented evidence about the La Rue family in Louisiana dates from December 1733, when a sixty ton ship commanded by the mulatto captain La Rue arrived in New Orleans from Léogane, St. Domingue and was still in port in November, 1734 while Capt. Larue negotiated a contract with the Louisiana Superior Council to bring slaves from Africa to Louisiana. The contract was finally signed by both parties. His ship was to go to Martinique to sell its Louisiana cargo (unspecified) and then to Guinea (sp. *Guynée*) to buy slaves to bring to Louisiana. Captain La Rue proposed that while he was in St. Domingue or in France he would purchase and fit out his own 150 ton ship to go to Guinea to get slaves for Louisiana and sell them for 450 *livres per pièce d'Inde*.^[5] In 1747 when Etienne La Rue was arrested in New Orleans during the War of Jenkins Ear, he was a privateer: the pilot and conquest captain of the caravel *L'Unique* which he had seized and then sailed into New Orleans. It was noted in the margin of the first page of this document that he was the son of the commander of the ships of the Company of the Indies in Senegal. The three French soldiers he had scuffled with could not sign their names, but Etienne La Rue signed his. The La Rue family profited handsomely from the plunder of Africa. Charlot dit Kakaracou was not an African. He was a Creole. He was born in Louisiana of African parents, although he was known by his African name among his fellow slaves. He was not baptized, and identified his nation as Coneda. He was considered a Creole, not an African by the Bamana slaves.

Dowdy understates the continuation and escalation of official violence, public torture, maiming and executions perpetrated against poor whites as well as slaves in French New Orleans. This distortion stems from what Michel-Rolph Trouillot aptly named in the title of his book *Silencing the Past. Power and the Reproduction of History*, published in Boston in 1995. Dowdy sometimes consulted the original documents rather than the highly selected and racially biased translations of the Louisiana Superior Council Records published in the *Louisiana Historical Quarterly* during the most racist period of historiography throughout the Americas. But she focused on accuracy of translation instead of biased omissions. For example, Dowdy drew the unwarranted conclusion that after Louis Congo ceased performing his *hautes oeuvres*, public torture and execution of

poor whites only involved conspiracies or revolts and not crimes against individuals and the perpetrators were only were fined, not even imprisoned. She claims that masters rather than the French colonial authorities assumed responsibility for punishing and controlling slaves after the end of Louis Congo's career as public executioner. But this impression stems from the silencing of history in the translations published in the *Louisiana Historical Quarterly*.

The public violence, torture, executions, the level of violence perpetrated on slaves and poor whites by District Attorney Nicolas de la Fréniere and Ordonatuer Denis-Nicolas Foucault, the two heroes of the New Orleans Revolt of 1768 were never mentioned. These gruesome documents are housed in the Louisiana Historical Center of the Louisiana State Museum but were never translated or published in the *Louisiana Historical Quarterly*. These translations end with September 20, 1763 (LHQ, 1942, vol. 25, p. 1183), although its editors promised to go forward in time. The numerous spectacles of public tortures and executions ordered by Nicolas de la Fréniere when he was attorney general of the Louisiana Superior Council might have been too gruesome even for these editors and translators. If Dowd had consulted them, she surely would not have written: "We have no indication that they (slaves) participated in the Revolt of 1768 nor evidence of what their ideas about it might have been" (p. 240).

Although these documents are difficult to access at the Louisiana Historical Center and are hard to read, she could have consulted and/or downloaded the *Louisiana Slave Database*, available online free of charge since 2001. There are 291 examples of court testimony given by slaves in French New Orleans alone, including those tortured privately and publicly by Nicolas de la Freniere. Slave involved with reports of runaways, interrogation of captured runaways, and testimony by slaves about runaways. Or she could have downloaded the entire database and selected all testimony by slaves in French New Orleans including those accused of crimes through 1769 aside from conspiracies or revolts or running away.

The writer distorts and romanticizes the wars for independence throughout the Americas. She writes: "What made revolution possible was precisely the conjuncture of economic interests and idealism between the highest and the lowest creoles of the New World" (p. 244). Dowdy does not discuss the prominent and often decisive preoccupation of the Creole elites with slave control including their right to buy, sell, overwork, beat, starve, imprison, torture, maim, rape, or kill their slaves at will without interference from the colonial authorities. She does not discuss the widespread and often effective opposition of slaves to independence to avoid strengthening the power of the Creole elite and/or earn their own freedom in return for military service to the colonizing powers.

This pattern far transcended New Orleans. Throughout the Americas, there were ongoing conflicts between the European powers owning colonies and the masters of slaves and Native American peons and other forced laborers over control of the labor force. The creoles supporting independence wanted free trade, political representation and public offices for Creole white male elites, reducing taxation and conveniently writing off their debts to metropolitan merchants. But a major factor in the independence struggle throughout the Americas was the centuries-long battle over who

would control the labor force. The European colonizing powers had a more long-range point of view. They wanted to continue their flow of revenue and wealth by avoiding killing off the goose which laid the golden (and silver) eggs: the labor force in their colonies.

The metropole wanted to avoid provoking servile revolts provoked by neglect and abuse by the slave masters and the *patrones* of *peones*. That is why the French and Spanish colonial authorities passed laws protecting slaves from neglect and abuse by their masters. That is why the Spanish colonial authorities outlawed Native American slavery and eventually managed to abolish the *encomienda* after a very long battle with the Conquistadores and their Creole elite descendants during the sixteenth century. The Creole elites had a much shorter range point of view. They wanted their wealth right now! If it was cheaper to kill off slaves by overwork and neglect than provide for and protect them so they would have long, productive lives and reproduce themselves, they could always buy and bring in more slaves from Africa when their own slaves died. Trans-Atlantic slave traders imported twice as many African men as women and neglected the children who were so inconveniently born. That is why the trans-Atlantic slave trade lasted for four centuries.

Thus, another major motive for independence was the Creole elite's indignant refusal to tolerate interference from the colonizing powers with their cheap help. These conflicts between the European colonizers and the Creole elites came to a head during the wars for independence. In the United States, the British Army freed slaves who fought on their side during the American Revolution and the War of 1812, including during the Battle of New Orleans in 1815. Some of these slaves freed by the British ended up in Nova Scotia, Canada and in the British West Indies. Although patterns of independence varied throughout the Americas, the unity across the lines of race, class and status of those fighting for independence imagined in this book never existed anywhere except in the minds of scholars glossing over racial and social conflicts in our past and present.

The book properly emphasizes the racial openness of French rule in New Orleans which all scholars, with the one exception of Thomas Ingersoll, have researched, written, published, and accepted for years.^[6] But as much as we can admire French racial openness, which was at times even official during the earliest stages of colonization in the Americas, the brutality of French rule, not only in its colonies but in France was quite possibly unprecedented and left an enduring legacy of brutality in New Orleans and throughout Louisiana.^[7] One final note: a bibliography would have been helpful.

NOTES

[1] Gwendolyn Midlo Hall, *Social Control in Slave Plantation Societies: a Comparison of St. Domingue and Cuba*, Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1996, pp. 28-31, 108-112.

[2] November 22, 1771. François Marie Reggio au Roy, Reggio Family Papers, Msc #363, Special Collections, Hill Memorial Library, Louisiana State University: Baton Rouge, Louisiana.

[3] See pp. 189-91, 200, 223, 231, 242. For a more complete discussion of Louis Congo, see Gwendolyn Midlo Hall, *Africans in Colonial Louisiana: the Development of Afro-Creole Culture in the Eighteenth Century*, Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1992, p.131-32.

[4] Hall, *Africans in Colonial Louisiana*, Table 2, p. 60; Figure 1, p. 10.

[5] October 22, 1734. Salmon to Ministry, Archives Coloniales, C13A, 88-89, Aix-en-Provence, France. Microfilm consulted at the Historic New Orleans Collection.

[6] Jennifer Spear, *Race, Sex, and Social Order in Early New Orleans*, Baltimore, Md.: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2009.

[7] For the most recent study of the tradition of brutality in Louisiana see Daniel Rasmussen, "Violent Visions: Sugar, Slaves, and the 1811 German Coast Uprising," (undergraduate honors thesis, Harvard University, 2009).

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