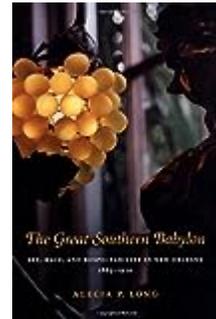




Alecia P. Long. *The Great Southern Babylon: Sex, Race, and Respectability in New Orleans, 1865-1920.* Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2004. xviii + 286 pp. \$19.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8071-3112-1; \$39.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8071-2932-6.



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Sex in New Orleans or Sex in the South?

The reputation of New Orleans as the “great Southern Babylon” and the “Sodom of the South” stands aside from its reputation as a Roman Catholic island within a Protestant region. Itinerant cultural critics of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries highlighted the complexity of this distinction and set in motion a long tradition of reflecting upon life in New Orleans’ society. Some observers expressed shock and disgust at the spectacles of the slave trade, miscegenation, sexual liberality, economic disparity, and indifference to Protestant moral standards. Other observers emphasized the irony, tragedy, and comedy of a place that epitomized the racial and religious diversity of the United States. Recently, historians such as Judith Schafer and Walter Johnson, among others, have introduced readers to the disorderly, creative, and violent worlds of enslaved and free persons of color in New Orleans.[1] They have also complicated the ways in which historians situate New Orleans within larger discussions of southern and American history. Alecia P. Long, an assistant professor of history at Georgia State University, has carried the academic discussion of cultural creativity and identity to the brothels, bars, and boardinghouses of New Orleans’ (in)famous

vice district known as Storyville.

As the title suggests, Long’s *The Great Southern Babylon: Sex, Race, and Respectability in New Orleans, 1865-1920* is a history of racism and sexuality set within the context of the commonly mythologized erotic pleasure land of the Crescent City. In five chapters, Long uses the legal records of five important court cases to elaborate upon the public representation of the sexual culture of New Orleans and the private lives of those who contributed to that culture. Women stand at the center of her chronological narrative. Immediately following the Civil War, Long argues that many women and men of different races maintained committed relationships, but they also experienced public scrutiny for engaging in “sex across the color line” as a result of an emerging formalization of racial segregation and new standards of respectability (p. 6).[2] The contest over “cross-racial socialization” had important ramifications for New Orleans business owners who claimed an economic stake in the reputation of the city (p. 61). Concert saloons and other commercial attractions became venues for citizens and visitors to negotiate the meaning of manhood and woman-

hood in the South. By the 1890s, self-described reformers successfully passed ordinances which mandated the segregation of prostitution within the spatial boundaries of Storyville. And though this new vice district was not the first of its kind in New Orleans, Long argues that it was exceptional because “the Story Ordinances placed people of color on a plane with prostitutes and other sexual sinners, both conceptually and in terms of physical proximity” (p. 138). In the last two chapters, Long focuses on the lives of two successful madams of Storyville—Mary Deubler and Willie Piazza—in an effort to demonstrate the preoccupation of even “allegedly disreputable people” with the idea of respectability (p. 149). Yet, by 1917, the passage of a bipartite system of racial categorization effectively dissolved the legal representation of oneself as a woman of color, which in turn prevented many “quadroons” and “octoroons” from obtaining the economic benefits of New Orleans’s sexual culture (p. 222).

Long employs a feminist approach to the subjects of sex, race, and respectability in New Orleans. In doing so, she hopes to join other historians of prostitution who have “shifted the focus of such studies away from strictly legal issues toward questions about women’s lives” (p. 7). Long’s inventive use of legal records provides vivid biographies of subaltern persons as well as informative descriptions of the social and cultural circumstances of the period. Yet her footnotes are nonetheless thin, due in large part to the lack of primary sources produced by people involved in the sexual commerce of New Orleans. As a result of this scarceness of first-hand material, Long intermittently turns toward assumption and conjecture. There are many things that “probably” happened during court proceedings and inside boardinghouses. Such is the nature of a cultural history which relies so heavily upon a limited pool of documentary evidence.

On a more general note, Long’s treatment of Protestantism and Roman Catholicism in New Orleans demonstrates larger problems with the historical study of religion and sub-region in the American South. Where does New Orleans fit within the sometimes misleading concept of “the South”? And where does Catholicism fit within the sometimes misleading notion of a “solid Protestant South”? Long invokes the words of the Catholic southerner Flannery O’Connor in her initial approach to these issues. “If I had to live in a city,” O’Connor wrote, “I think I would prefer New Orleans to any other—both Southern and Catholic and with indications that the Devil’s existence is freely recognized” (p. vii). The aptness of this ironic statement is evident,

but so is its insufficiency as an academic approach to the study of religion and place in the South. Uncritical distinctions between “Catholic New Orleans” (p. 106) and “the prevailing Protestant evangelical culture that dominated life in the South” (p. 170) does not allow for an appreciation of diversity within the Catholic Church and cooperation between Protestants and Catholics. The multiplicity of Protestant traditions is also evident in Long’s emphasis on liberal Protestant reformers, not evangelicals, to describe the segregation of prostitution in the Crescent City. Interestingly, when Long refers to those who indulged in New Orleans’s sexual culture, she highlights the participation of tourists from around the evangelical South. She links the tourist activities of evangelical southerners with the idea of a “geographic and metaphoric safety valve—a place where southerners came to escape, if only temporarily, from the racial, religious, and behavioral strictures that dominated their home communities” (pp. 5-6). In this respect, many evangelicals were attracted to the entertainments of New Orleans just as they were attracted to the rural recreations of hunting, fighting, and taking trips to town.[3] With this in mind, historians should take caution in describing New Orleans as a non-evangelical escape from evangelicalism. Such a position gives too much cohesion to an ideal evangelical institution and too little credit to the diffuse boundaries of evangelical Protestantism in the practice of everyday life. The recent work of Donald Mathews, Beth Barton Schwieger, Paul Harvey, and James Bennett is instructive in regard to the academic study of religion in the American South.[4]

In addition to raising questions of religion and society, Long’s study of “the great Southern Babylon” presents historians with new insight into the association between racial and sexual segregation in the Jim Crow South. This is perhaps her most important contribution to the study of sexuality in America. Protestant reformers equated persons of color with sexual depravity, and thus constructed similar arguments for segregation by race and segregation by sexual conduct. Long also provides a general description of the ways in which New Orleanians—women and men of various racial and religious backgrounds—collectively produced a distinctive sexual culture with lingering implications for the contemporary romanticization and actual circumstances of life in the Crescent City. By weaving a legal and political narrative of Storyville with the cultural constructions of gender, sexuality, and race, Long brings New Orleans to the center of southern imaginations and southern inhabitants to the center of New Orleans. She allows his-

torians to recognize the mobility of bodies and imaginations in the southern reaches of the United States, which in turn allows historians to consider the racial, religious, and sexual diversity of New Orleans less as an irony and more as a fact of life in the South.

Notes

[1]. Judith Schafer, *Becoming Free, Remaining Free: Manumission and Enslavement in New Orleans, 1846-1862* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2003); Walter Johnson, *Soul by Soul: Life Inside the Antebellum Slave Market* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999).

[2]. Long prefers the phrase “sex across the color line” instead of “interracial sex,” as distinguished by Martha Hodes, *White Women, Black Men: Illicit Sex in the*

Nineteenth-Century South (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997).

[3]. Long relies upon the work of Ted Ownby in reference to evangelical culture in the American South. Ownby, *Subduing Satan: Religion, Recreation, and Manhood in the Rural South, 1865-1920* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1990).

[4]. Beth Barton Schweiger and Donald Mathews, eds., *Religion in the American South: Protestants and Others in History and Culture* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004); Paul Harvey, *Religious Culture and the Shaping of the South from the Civil War through the Civil Rights Era* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2005); James Bennett, *Religion and the Rise of Jim Crow in New Orleans* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005).

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