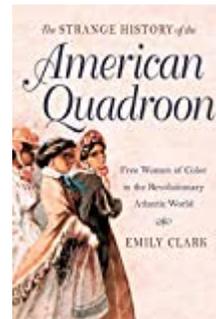




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Rethinking the American Quadroon: Unmasking the *Plaçage* Complex

When Harriet Martineau wrote of the American quadroon in 1837, she wrote of an archetype that has become familiar to many of us: a fair-skinned beauty whose mixed-race heritage made her vulnerable to the sexual predation of wealthy white men. “Every young man early selects one,” Martineau penned, “and establishes her in one of those pretty and peculiar houses, whole rows of which may be seen in the Remparts” (p. 153). Martineau is one of the most commonly cited writers on this system of New Orleanian concubinage, better known as *plaçage*. But what did Martineau see? What did she hear from others? Did the “American quadroon” of legend ever really exist? And why has her story been so alluring to the rest of us—not just readers of literary luminaries like Kate Chopin or William Faulkner, but to scholars as well?

Emily Clark’s *Strange History of the American Quadroon* jumps headlong into this intersection of history, memory, and mythmaking. Clark traces the construction of the American quadroon and what she terms the *plaçage* complex on the one hand, while decon-

structing them on the other. She contends that the luxuriously kept quadroon woman sold by her mother to the highest bidder was probably the projection of male fantasy leavened with just enough gossip and sightings at the ballroom and the theater to make the legend as plausible to the men whose writing disseminated it as it was to the reading public titillated by it (p. 170). In other words, Clark argues that writers from Martineau to Thomas Ashe to Karl Bernhard did not see what they thought they saw.

Marshaling an impressive array of sources in English, French, and Spanish, from travel literature, poetry, fiction, and abolitionist narratives to marital and baptismal registers, court cases, and wills, Clark offers a credible alternative history to that of the *plaçage* system. What, then, did those writers see? Clark answers this question deep in chapter 5: “What Bernhard encountered in New Orleans in the 1820s,” Clark argues, “and the *plaçage* complex that he described, were likely manifestations of an adaptation made by refugee and refugee-descended women to their circumstances” (p. 154). Instead of be-

ing part of a longstanding tradition of creole women disdaining men of color for wealthier white partners, the quadroon balls that Bernhard and others experienced were part of a more recent manifestation of Dominguan traditions and strategies deployed by waves of refugees from Saint Domingue in the aftermath of the Haitian Revolution.

Clark pinpoints Philadelphia of the 1790s as the site of the American quadroon's arrival. There, the specter of Toussaint L'Ouverture and angry revolutionaries gave way to the similarly dangerous quadroon temptress. But it was in New Orleans that the avatar of Haiti was transformed from a bloodthirsty, rebellious black army into a feminine seductress who submitted willingly to white male control (p. 38). While the arrival of Dominguan *mâtresses* in New Orleans sparked outrage as a challenge to the idealized American racial order, they offered a saving alternative to the rapacious and violent black rebel (p. 54). Thus, the book's first two chapters consider the emergence of the iconic quadroon in the refugee crises following the Haitian Revolution; the next two examine strategies of family formation for free women of color from the French colonial era to the heyday of the American quadroon in the 1830s; and in the final two, Clark examines the making and the selling of the quadroon in turn.

Free women of color *did* enter into relationships with white men. But the range of these relationships does not match up with the quadroon lore. Auguste Tessier transplanted mixed-race balls to New Orleans as early as 1805. Clark argues that there is no evidence that these balls were a space for parents to place daughters with wealthy white men. Marie Louise Tonnelier is remembered as a *placée*, for example, but she fought in court for her rights as *une mâtresse*: a household manager who negotiated her own contract, but at times became the lover of her employer. This is a distinction with a difference. The *placée* as concubine matched off by her mother was several degrees less dangerous than the independent *mâtresse* (p. 70). By 1809, Americans expected new waves of Dominguan refugee women to be seductresses; they ignored that marriage, not concubinage, typified free black family formation and likely remained unaware of the occupation of *mâtresse*. Even the concept of *placée* was a Haitian import. In a true archival find, Clark shows that in the poetry of Henri Lanusse and Haitian sources, there is a longer history of male and female *placés*, but in same-race relationships.

Chapter 4 will likely most interesting to H-Law read-

ers. Here Clark argues that a combination of demography and law explains the trends of Orleanian *mâtresse*. The heyday of white bachelor patriarchs entering partnerships with free women of color was the 1770s to 1790s, under the Spanish, but such relationships persisted even after interracial marriage became illegal in 1808. An 1806 law prohibited the settlement of free black men in Louisiana so that by the late 1820s, there were 2.2 free women to every man of color in New Orleans (p. 62). While Spanish laws and legislators registered disapproval for interracial relationships, the territorial and American governments—especially in the Civil Codes of 1808 and 1825—aimed to disinherit natural children. Thus, if a white father had any illegitimate relatives, no matter how remote, mixed-race children lost rights to any property save what was necessary for subsistence (p. 110). Using the cases of Jean Pierre Cazelar, Augustin Macarty, and Samuel Moore, Clark highlights the tragic struggles that mixed families experienced in attempting to protect kin from this aggressive legal racism.

The larger legal and political landscape is harder to appreciate in *The Strange History of the American Quadroon* than in say, Jennifer Spear's *Race, Sex, and Social Order in New Orleans* (2009), but it is clear that this is not of primary interest to Clark. Instead, this book's ambition is more cultural. A core element of Clark's thesis is that Americans used the mythic quadroon to paint New Orleans as perpetually foreign—more a product of French and Spanish colonialism than Anglo-Protestant values. This must be read beside the argument, at the close of chapter 4, that while the Americanization of Louisiana marked the decline of the bachelor patriarch, the same Anglo-Protestant men charged with upholding the racial binary were most responsible for spreading quadroon lore (p. 131). Chapter 6 details how such far-ranging parties as slave dealers specializing in the fancy trade, abolitionists, and prostitutes produced and benefited from *placée* fantasies. In other words, contrary to popular perception, the *placée* complex was more Anglo than French or Spanish. This is a richly provocative argument that raises questions about the meaning of the quadroon mythos not only for New Orleans, but also for the rest of the nation. But the book is more suggestive than expository on this subject. Clark argues that the quadroon was a product of American domestic colonialism in the vein of Ann Laura Stoler's edited collection, *Haunted by Empire: Geographies of Intimacy in North American History* (2006).^[1] But what does this help us see about structures of intimacy and power in early America? To what extent were the men responsible for

upholding the law connected to local values versus national values, especially in the immense upheaval of the early nineteenth century? What were the private lives of that 1820s generation of Kaintuck and American men on the make like relative to that earlier generation of âbachelor patriarchsâ? Moore is given as evidence that culture did not keep Anglo-Protestant men from such relationships, yet Moore seems more a vestige of the previous era than representative of the arriving Americans. The implication seems to be that the narrative of New Orleansâ exceptionalism contributed to the artifice that interracial sex simply did not occur elsewhere within the United States. Thus, how thick was the veneer of law and culture that marked interracial intimacy as illicit, if New Orleans was so readily cast as a space of forbidden desire?

The Strange History of the American Quadroon is a work of ambitious scope, deliciously so. Even as the book delves into treasure troves of literary and artistic sources from Europe, the Caribbean, and the United States, it never loses sight of the complex realities of family strategies for Dominguan and Orleanian women of color. The book offers eloquent and persuasive evidence that race was not simply a byproduct of slaveryâs racism, but was diligently and deliberately produced. It will surely prove impossible to look at the American quadroon the same way again.

Note

[1] See also Gary Nash, âThe Hidden History of Mestizo America,â *The Journal of American History* 82, no. 3 (December 1995): 941-964.

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