

Exiles at Home: The Struggle to Become American in Creole New Orleans

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New Orleans has always captured our imagination as an exotic city in its racial ambiguity, moral permissiveness, and pursuit of *les bons temps*. Despite its image as a place apart, the city played a key role in forging a national identity in nineteenth-century America. New Orleans served as a testing ground for America's highest aspirations towards justice and equality as well as a laboratory for its most pernicious experiments in injustice and inequality.

As French-speaking people of African descent, the city's Creoles of color stood at the crux of the monumental shifts characterizing Americanization. As emblems of ambiguity and paradox in the literary and legal imagination, their experiences crystallize the problems of living on the "color line," which W.E.B. Du Bois would articulate at the dawn of the twentieth century. In their cultural production and their legal wrangling in the New Orleans civil courts, Creoles of color transposed for national and global audiences the meaning of the French revolution in 1789 and 1848; the Haitian Revolution of 1804; the yellow fever epidemic of 1853; the American Civil War; Reconstruction; and the emergence of de jure segregation.

Exiles at Home highlights the costs and benefits of becoming American as Creoles of color passed among various racial categories and through different social spaces. In order to secure their legacy, they grounded their claims to identity in an intensely local network of interracial kinship and ownership. By passing as white, many grasped after equality and opportunity on an individual basis. By passing as black and insisting on their civil rights as people of African descent, they exposed themselves to the perils of white supremacy but discovered the least compromised path to collective freedom.

In a moving study of a world defined by racial and cultural double consciousness, Shirley Thompson illuminates the role ordinary Americans played in shaping an understanding of identity and belonging.