

Emily Clark's nuanced exploration of a community of energetic New Orleans nuns between 1727-1834 tackles themes we might better expect to find in modern newspapers: radical religious education, affirmative action and women's rights, pro-black family campaigns, and Louisianan urban regeneration. The prelude recounts the European origins and development of the Ursuline order, with some sharp contextual writing that quickly affirms that this is a work well-grounded in the literatures of Counter-Reformation religious and social history. Early chapters on the French colonial era analyse scattered correspondence, convent records, Superior Council proceedings, marriage contracts, library holdings, and obituaries to shed light on the Ursulines' lifestyle and impact on Louisiana. Self-confident in their mission to spread a new femininity rooted in enlightened, spiritualised motherhood, they maximised on the opportunities presented by frontier conditions, and perceptibly improved the literacy of women in the colony. The second part of *Masterless Mistressess* explores the changes that accompanied Spanish and later Anglo-American control of Louisiana, as the province launched wholeheartedly into staple crop agriculture. It also elaborates on work that Clark has published in article form, using sacramental records to explore the Ursulines' multifaceted relations with people of African origin, many of whom they used as slaves on their plantations.

The transplantation of France's distinctive female religious tradition to the miserably disease-ridden and underpopulated Louisiana of the 1720s was initially sought for its public health benefits as much as its moral reform. The cloistered Ursuline order, which was fairly hands-off, middle class, and carried Jesuit associations, was not the first choice of colonial administrators, but the nuns undertook to nurse the many sick of New Orleans, literally contracting themselves to "the service of the hospital" (p.53). To the frustration of the Company of the Indies, despite this prospective enlarged role, the French Ursulines quickly prioritised their own objectives: establishing a program of female education, conversion, and devotion. In good times, they exploited the respect, even deference, showed to them by elites and authorities on account of the institutions and values they represented. In hard times, they stubbornly rallied against external pressure to nurture a remarkably heterogeneous sorority on the margins of the city, which encompassed women of all social and racial backgrounds. Clark carefully explores how the Ursulines were able to mingle their

conservative custodianship of hierarchical Catholic tradition with a set of jarringly inclusive policies and practices that often challenged civil power. Testament to their conservatism and formality, for example, was their refusal to abandon the lesser category of a “converse” nun in Louisiana – this despite their ownership of slaves who did most of their hard labour, and might therefore have rendered Old World converses redundant. But while protective of internal stratification, the Ursulines were far less vexed than many of their contemporaries about racial or class intermixing, as evidenced in the diverse attendees at their convent schoolroom, or their support for a laywomen’s confraternity in 1730 that included the whole social spectrum from wealthy plantation mistresses to lowly women of color.

In the last quarter of the eighteenth century, creole Ursulines constituted a majority for the first time, prompting sharp contests between French and Cuban factions over the convent’s direction and program of popular education. The hardening of plantation society outside the convent walls, along with the arrival of Iberian influences that stressed *limpieza de sangre* (purity of blood), probably moderated the extent of racial inclusiveness in the boarding school’s enrolees, as segregation was instigated in 1797. Clark views such compromises as minor concessions, prices the Ursulines thought worth paying to allow continuity in their wider mandate – which by the early nineteenth century included the instruction and acculturation of Spanish and Anglo-American parvenus. Occasionally, this insistence upon a singular, assertive, inclusive institutional ambience born out of her subjects’ shared femininity is overplayed, and overshadows a more multilateral conception of the institution’s practical operations. As suggested by the convent’s rigid demarcation of facilities for orphans, mixed day-students, and elite boarders, or in the strict punishments meted out to licentious bondwomen, class and race remained profound influences, as did familial status. One wonders how the nuns reconciled their Marian devotion and emphasis on universal spiritual motherhood with their “investing strategically” (p.208) in bondwomen for reproduction? Needless to say, the sparse evidence about the education and participation of women of color is difficult to infer from.

But Clark’s enjoyable, punchy account of this distinctive community sparks and crackles despite lacunae in the historical record, and is assisted by a range of evocative illustrations and helpful footnotes. Clark has not only explained through institutional microhistory how a community of Old World nuns adapted their methods to become a significant, enduring force among the people – and especially the women – of New Orleans. She has also splendidly cast the process in a convincingly Atlantic (rather than bilateral) context. For this reason, like her historical subjects, this book will prove valuable not only for what it brings to the history of New Orleans and Louisiana, but also what it signifies about the intertwining of Franco-Iberian-Anglo-American societies and their faiths in the Americas. Because the Ursulines circumvented the ideological and practical restrictions built into normative female life-cycles, they offered a potent challenge to changing male authorities well into the antebellum era.

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