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## American Routes: Racial Palimpsests and the Transformation of Race

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*American Routes: Racial Palimpsests and the Transformation of Race*, by **Angel Adams Parham**. New York: Oxford University Press, 2017. 277 pp. \$69.00 cloth. ISBN: 9780190624750.

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In *American Routes: Racial Palimpsests and the Transformation of Race*, Angel Adams Parham suggests that sociologists overuse the well-worn twentieth century European immigration narrative at the expense of other migration stories addressing people of color. Parham, a New Orleans transplant and faculty member at Loyola University–New Orleans, has taken an innovative approach to U.S. immigration by mapping out the case of refugees from St. Domingue/Haiti to Louisiana in the early 1800s, at the beginning of its American period. En route, she has taken on the subject of Creole identity, a topic geographically and conceptually intertwined with New Orleans. Parham argues the significance of the St. Domingue-to-Louisiana case for our continued understanding of post-1965 non-white immigration to the United States, as well as the racial rules and hierarchies immigrants encounter once here.

*American Routes* takes on the comparative historical endeavor by examining historical archives and secondary sources alongside original participant observation, survey, interview, and oral history data. Parham compares two racial standpoints via the experiences of white and black St. Domingue/Haiti immigrants and their descendants, tracing the transformation from being St. Domingue refugees to becoming Creole Louisianans over more than two hundred years. The twenty-first century survey and interview participants were people who lived in and out of Louisiana and were involved in genealogical research groups based in New Orleans. Many were involved specifically with St. Domingue family history research and had interest in their Creole ancestry (several appendices carefully detail the methodology).

Parham intuitively organizes *American Routes* in three main parts. Following the introduction, the first pair of substantive chapters historically overview Louisiana's and St. Domingue's contexts. She first details the contrasting Latin/Caribbean and Anglo-American racial systems that ultimately influenced southern Louisiana. Parham applies the metaphor of an artistic palimpsest, or secondary layer of painting over an original layer, to explain the layering of the two racial systems. She defines the "racial palimpsest" as a "a preexisting racial system [...] almost fully eclipsed by a new racial system that comes into place as a population that lives according to a different racial logic begins to numerically or administratively dominate a region" (p. 2). The racial palimpsest of interest here developed after the 1803 Louisiana Purchase.

Parham then contextualizes St. Domingue's racial system, situating the refugees in a society that allowed free people of color a middle position, and also sanctioned social and cultural mingling between racial groups. St. Domingue refugees escaping the Haitian Revolution and its aftermath brought major demographic changes to New Orleans, almost doubling the total population of the city and more than doubling the free people of color population (p. 7, 66). These migratory shifts heavily influenced New Orleans' racial system by slowing its transition to the newly introduced American binary system of racial understanding and helping to maintain its original Latin/Caribbean system.

Parham structures the remaining two sections by clearly demarcating the white and black experiences in alternating chapters. The next two substantive chapters comparatively examine each group of nineteenth century migrants side by side with their counterparts in Louisiana—white St. Domingue refugees and white Louisiana Creoles (Chapter 3) and St. Domingue free people of color and Creoles of color (Chapter 4). We learn how each refugee group integrates once they became part of the Louisiana social landscape. Parham traces the use of Creole, revealing how for the first twenty years white St. Domingue refugees kept a distinct identity

grounded in its Latin/Caribbean origin, while their descendants eventually backed away from self-identification as Creole because of the American binary tendency to associate Creoleness with racial mixture. On the other hand, St. Domingue free people of color eventually merged with Louisiana Creoles of color and held on to the label much longer because it reinforced privilege of the “third rung” in the racial hierarchy originating with French and Spanish rule (p. 94). The Creole label became primarily used by people of color.

Parham shifts to the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries in the subsequent pair of chapters to understand how the racial contexts shifted over time for descendants of the original St. Domingue immigrants and people who identified with Creole ancestry. Using original interviews and secondary sources, Parham first empirically illustrates how whites with Creole ancestry understood and navigated the loss of a white Creole identity. She then uses a small section of newspaper content analysis from *The Times-Picayune* (1989–2015) to demonstrate how white Creoles were usually only historical figures and Creoles of color were contemporaries in New Orleans’ public imagination. Next, Parham asserts that contemporary Creoles of color also negotiated their positions within the binary racial structure, often dealing with colorism and other forms of internalized racism within their families and communities. Creole of color responses were more varied, including embracing blackness along with Creole, passing for white, or resisting the Anglo racial system altogether. This last response, Parham maintains in a relatively short section of data analysis, is a foreshadowing of Latin American and Caribbean immigrants.

It is in *American Routes*’ final chapter that the full implications of the case become most clear. In conversation with the foundational and recent iterations of sociological literature on immigration and assimilation as well as its critiques, Parham inserts her study as a remedy for the racial blindness that the more conservative forms of immigration theory purvey. Here the

author aligns herself with scholars such as Bonilla-Silva and those who argue the American binary system of race is indeed transitioning to a new system. But she also pushes beyond the question of what the color line will be and qualifies this as a long-range and layered process by showing that the two racial systems in the Louisiana case overlapped throughout the 200-year Americanization period. The St. Domingue-to-Louisiana immigration case is one of the few parallels to immigration streams that include people of color and Parham takes lessons learned from history to project that contemporary Latinx and Caribbean immigrants will continue to rail against the American system of racial understanding for many decades to come. She contends that in some immigrant-dense locales the layered racial systems will be more visible; in others where immigrant populations have less of a demographic influence, the American binary system will remain more prevalent. In all scenarios, race maintains its structural significance as a source of inequality.

Overall, *American Routes*, opens up the way for shifting the focus from the same old perspectives on immigration and immigrant incorporation, toward including non-traditional theories and cases highlighting the social processes at work when people migrate between distinct racial systems. This scholarship also contributes to refreshing the research on Creoles in Louisiana by providing updated data. Much of the previous work was solely historical or incorporated qualitative interviews collected decades earlier, just after the post-Civil Rights period. And though Parham's findings confirm many of the earlier conclusions about Louisiana Creoles, her framing of the case as one of historical immigration and incorporation treads new territory in the literature.