



Introduction

In May 1809, Jean Boze and Jean-François Henri de Miquel, Baron de Sainte-gême, known in the Americas as Henri de Ste-Gême, set sail on Ste-Gême's corsair *The Beaver* from Santiago de Cuba. Both men had lived through the Haitian Revolution at the turn of the century. In late 1803, both men had fled what was still then called Saint-Domingue—although for only a few weeks more—and both men had found refuge in Cuba. Both men had tried to rebuild their shattered lives in the Cuban *Oriente*,¹ before being forced to flee once more. On May 20, 1809, together they reached New Orleans, where, for the second time, they took refuge from the disturbances of the Atlantic world.

Their epic encompasses two forced flights, one triggered by a major revolution of this Atlantic world and one induced by the European wars that reverberated throughout the Atlantic space. Their adventure also bridges the gap between the colonial worlds of the previous centuries and the American independences of the turn of the nineteenth century. It is also an itinerary—from a French colony to a Spanish one, and then to a new territory of the young North American republic—that shows the porosity of the colonial worlds of the Americas and of the Atlantic space more generally.

Whether the two men had been acquainted in Saint-Domingue is not known, although there is reasonable certainty that they had, Jean Boze being the captain of the harbor of Port Républicain (formerly Port-au-Prince) and Ste-Gême a high-ranking officer in the French expeditionary corps sent by Napoleon to try to regain control of the colony that the French empire was on the verge of losing forever. Maybe their long-lasting friendship only started in Cuba, or even in their last moments on the island. What is certain is that they fled together on Ste-Gême's corsair when the Spanish authorities declared all non-naturalized French people living in Cuba *personae non gratae*, in response to Napoleon's imperialistic views regarding Spain.²

Expelled from their first refuge, with their property sequestered by the Cuban colonial authorities, the two men eventually dropped anchor in New

Orleans. For nine years, Ste-Gême and Boze lived there, manifestly in close proximity. When Ste-Gême returned to his native castle of Bagen, in the vicinity of Saint-Gaudens, not far from Toulouse, in southwestern France, Jean Boze stayed behind. They never saw each other again, and they died, both in the early 1840s, an ocean apart. Their separation was, however, what enables us today to reconstruct their itinerary and get a grasp of what the Atlantic world was like in the early nineteenth century. Indeed, for more than twenty years, from April 20, 1818, to August 6, 1839, Boze wrote 158 letters, covering almost 1,200 pages, to his friend and benefactor, Henri de Ste-Gême.

The story of these two men is exemplary, but it also epitomizes many transatlantic adventures. It reveals the narrowness of the Atlantic space, criss-crossed by incessant movements between Europe and the Americas, but also within the Western Hemisphere, in the Caribbean and between North and South America. The Atlantic was a space of crossroads, a complex network of commercial movements, of departures and returns, of transatlantic families and correspondence.

Much letter writing went on between the colonial Americas and Europe, and there are innumerable testimonies of Atlantic experiences over the centuries. In recent decades, historians have started using these letters as important sources to study the Atlantic world. In Europe and in the Americas, scholars have compiled and analyzed Atlantic letters, devising rich methodologies for the study of correspondence.³

Very few sets of correspondence, however, are as rich as Boze's. Few are as voluminous and continuous between two individuals over such a long period of time. And not many emanate from as keen an observer and articulate a writer as Jean Boze. Many reveal more about the function of letter writing in the Atlantic world than about the world the migrants discovered. Most of the time, the world shared by the writer and the recipient was the world the migrant had left behind, and it was the topic most often addressed in the letters, in order to maintain the bond that migration had disrupted.⁴

Not so for Boze and Ste-Gême. Other than their relationship and family stories, what these two men shared was a common epic in the Americas and a shared life in New Orleans. For once, the correspondence is almost entirely about the Americas, not about the country in which both men had been born, where they had no shared history. And what the 1,200 pages reveal is, of course, two individual narratives, those of Jean Boze and Henri de Ste-Gême, but also the narrative of their transatlantic friendship. This is the first interest of the correspondence. The letters are also a narrative history, or rather several intricate narrative histories: the individual narrative of Boze

and Ste-Gême, but also the narrative history of the Saint-Domingue refugees and, more importantly, the larger historical narrative of Louisiana in the first three decades after the end of its colonial history.

The early decades of Louisiana's American destiny are a fascinating period in Louisiana history. A period of mutation, evolution, and development, this early American era was also one of increased importance of New Orleans in the Atlantic space, at what Atlantic historians consider a very late period in its history. Although it is an essential period of transition between more than a century of Latin colonial history and the incorporation of the former colony into the fabric of the young American republic,⁵ this early American era is surprisingly understudied in Louisiana history.⁶

For a long time, historians have insisted on the radical changes undergone by New Orleans, and Louisiana more broadly, in this period. It is true that the early nineteenth century was a crucial period of development for the Crescent City. It is, however, closer to reality to assert that these decades were further marked by a complex dialectic of continuity and change. Recent historiographical revisions have started insisting on this dialectic and emphasizing continuity more than historians had done in the second half of the twentieth century.⁷ There is still much to write about the transitional early American period and the pattern of ethnocultural rivalry often used as the structuring element of the narratives of early American New Orleans, which most certainly needs to be qualified. Although it was a striking feature in early nineteenth-century New Orleans, the modes of interaction between the various groups living in the city were more complex than is usually thought. The web of social, economic, and political relations should probably be assessed less in terms of ethnocultural rivalry than in terms of increasing interaction, mingling, and, ultimately, possibly, Creolization.⁸ New Orleans changed much in the four decades following its purchase by the United States, and those years were influential in the formation of what journalist John Popham called "a special South within the South,"⁹ and in the shaping of an identity specific to the city.

While New Orleans was becoming the urban core of the South, however, it was also undergoing evolutions that made it resemble more closely the developing cities of the northeastern Atlantic coast of the United States.¹⁰ Boze's narrative clearly shows that the city followed a model of development that was common to the main Atlantic cities of the young American republic. Yet this narrative clearly makes New Orleans a special city of the Atlantic world, turned toward the southern American continent as much as toward Europe. While the Crescent City remained part of the traditional Atlantic

world, it also participated in the inauguration of a new Atlantic era, that of the American revolutions and independences, when the Caribbean became a new space of exchanges. People moved back and forth across the Caribbean, initiating networks—including family ones—and favoring transfers of culture and knowledge within this new Caribbean space. This space did not replace the Atlantic one, but it made the Americas something more than the margin of the Atlantic space. New Orleans was pivotal in this recentering of the Atlantic space. This is still largely unknown territory in the historiography of New Orleans. Boze's narrative will open a few windows onto this history, which scholars will need to focus on in the decades to come.¹¹

Although it may sometimes read like a piece of economic, social, intellectual, and cultural history, this book is not meant to be a comprehensive history of early American New Orleans, for Boze's letters must be taken for what they really are: an individual perception of New Orleans, a very personal description of what Jean Boze, with his past, his origins, his education, and his experience, saw unfold before his eyes.¹² They are, in fact, an "entry into his mental universe."¹³ Although what he narrates can by no means be taken as simple fact, his correspondence has the merit of offering diverse points of view, through testimonies he reports, newspaper articles he paraphrases or quotes, and hearsay he transmits. It also calls the reader's attention to aspects of New Orleans that are very often neglected in the history of the city. It chronicles two decades of life in New Orleans from the vantage point of a foreigner who had made New Orleans his final home and was moving in restricted social circles but was intent on drawing an extremely detailed description of the city for his addressee. The reader will follow him in his meanderings around the city and his wandering through the city's history. The reader will discover how Boze saw New Orleans, will hear the words he used to describe it,¹⁴ and will catch glimpses of the deeply original chronicles he wrote of the Crescent City in the 1820s and 1830s.

The book opens with the narrative of the epic stories of the two protagonists of the correspondence, to situate the two men in the vast context of the Atlantic space in the early nineteenth century and to better understand Boze's very specific perception of his new port of call. It then focuses on New Orleans, at a time when it was still close to being the small colonial town it had been two decades earlier and when it was struggling to enter a new era of modernity within the expanding and developing young American republic. Chapters 2 and 3 examine successively the still rudimentary conditions of the city and the march to progress of the then capital city of the infant state of Louisiana. Chapter 4 broaches the increasing importance of the city