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Sara E. Johnson, *The Fear of French Negroes: Transcolonial Collaboration in the Revolutionary Americas*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012. xxii + 289 pp. \$49.95 (pb). ISBN 978-0-520-27112-8.

Review by Jeremy D. Popkin, University of Kentucky.

Most of the burgeoning scholarship on the impact of the Haitian Revolution focuses either on the anxieties it caused among whites in other slave societies or on its possible role in inspiring slave conspiracies elsewhere.[1] The ambition of Sara Johnson's *The Fear of French Negroes* is to take a broader look at the ways in which people of African descent in the Americas remembered that event and incorporated it into their lives and their culture, as well as to show the extent of exchange between different territories around the Caribbean during this period. Johnson recognizes that her project is a difficult one. With the exception of one chapter devoted to periodicals published in the 1830s and early 1840s, her sources are examples of what she calls "expressive culture," non-verbal artifacts that she hopes will provide "a transcript of politics that are often hidden from view" (p. 190). They include visual images, dance patterns and musical rhythms, and fragments of the life stories of figures who left no testimonies in their own words, all of which are often enigmatic and subject to multiple interpretations.

Historians may conclude that Johnson's arguments are excessively speculative and not always convincing. She has nevertheless challenged the notion that the black experience of this period is beyond recovery. At the same time, she is at pains to question the myth that the Haitian Revolution drew all people of color into a transnational movement for freedom. Not all blacks were necessarily ready to emulate the Haitians, and, as Johnson shows, some even collaborated in the enslavement of others. As she writes, "The notion that 'blackness' was in and of itself enough to unify people and trump critical differences in socioeconomic circumstances is an anachronistic idealization" (p. 93).

The five chapters of *The Fear of French Negroes* are only loosely connected to one another. The first deals with masters' use of dogs to control their slaves, a practice made notorious by the story that the French trained dogs imported from Cuba to kill blacks during the violent conflict of 1802-1803.[2] A second chapter interprets visual and literary images of Haitians from what is now the Dominican Republic in the first half of the nineteenth century, exploring the tensions between the two halves of the island of Hispaniola in a period in which they were sometimes joined together and sometimes separated. This is followed by an account of the activities of Joseph Savary, a free man of color from Saint-Domingue and associate of the notorious pirate Jean Lafitte, who was involved in privateering and slave-trading in Louisiana during the early nineteenth century and whose story underlines Johnson's argument that not all "French Negroes" espoused the "politics...of the abolitionist postrevolutionary state" (p. 114) created in Haiti in 1804.

A chapter on the spread to Jamaica and elsewhere of dance rhythms that may have originated in Saint-Domingue is perhaps the most speculative in the book. It is one thing to suggest that distinctive musical patterns may have traversed the Caribbean. It is another to assert that "what many of these black performers were marking as Saint-Domingueness/Frenchness among both themselves and for outsiders was their own association with revolutionary struggle" (p. 135). A final chapter brings together periodicals edited by free blacks in the United States, France, and Haiti. Johnson shows that their

editors transmitted news across political and linguistic boundaries and that they all referred to the Haitian Revolution, but she concludes that these papers could “rarely find either the sympathy, or, more importantly, a strategy, that could re-create the sorts of temporary fusions across cleavages of language, degrees of intermixture, place of birth, or status under white law that might reproduce the events of Saint-Domingue from which so many drew inspiration” (p. 180).

The varied materials Johnson draws on certainly make the point that there is more to the impact of the Haitian Revolution than the by now familiar catalogue of subsequent slave conspiracies, on the one hand, and the regularly expressed fears of white slaveholders throughout the Americas, on the other. The question much of her material raises, however, is whether all her evidence actually bears on “the impact of the Haitian Revolution,” as opposed to documenting interchanges between neighboring societies that were regular features of Caribbean life both before and after that event. Even if the five-beat *cinquillo* rhythmic pattern that powers the Cuban *tumba francesa* and the Puerto Rican *bomba* originated with drummers in Saint-Domingue, is its spread truly testimony to the diffusion of revolutionary ideas? Johnson’s efforts to squeeze meaning out of non-textual materials and to read written testimony in new ways are stimulating, but they also underline the fragmentary nature of the sources and the difficulties in interpreting them. Echoes of the Haitian Revolution certainly resonated throughout the Atlantic world, but the challenge of analyzing what those echoes meant remains a daunting one.

#### NOTES

[1] Major works along these lines include David Barry Gaspar and David Geggus, eds., *A Turbulent Time: The French Revolution and the Greater Caribbean* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1997); David Geggus, ed., *The Impact of the Haitian Revolution in the Atlantic World* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2002); Ashli White, *Encountering Revolution: Haiti and the Making of the Early Republic* (Baltimore, Md.: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2010); and Alejandro E. Gómez, *Le Spectre de la Révolution noire. L’impact de la révolution haïtienne dans le monde atlantique, 1790-1886* (Rennes: Presses Universitaires de Rennes, 2013).

[2] Horrifying as the stories of these atrocities are, it appears that the dogs were actually used more for tracking black fighters than for killing, and that efforts to train them to devour victims were not very successful. On the evidence concerning the breeding of these dogs, see Georges H. Lutz, “Un avatar de la domestication canine: les chiens à esclaves ‘Buscadores’ de Cuba et de Saint-Domingue,” in Marcel Dorigny, dir., *Haiti première république noire* (Paris: Publications de la Société française d’histoire d’outre-mer, 2003), pp. 61-81.

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