

---

H-France Review Vol. 20 (September 2020), No. 170

Sophie White, *Voices of the Enslaved: Love, Labor, and Longing in French Louisiana*. Williamsburg, VA and Chapel Hill: Omohundro Institute of Early American History and Culture and the University of North Carolina Press, 2019. xx + 286 pp. Illustrations, notes, and index. \$37.50 U.S. (cl). ISBN 978146954041; \$25.99 U.S. (eb). ISBN: 9781469654058.

Review by Jennifer L. Palmer, University of Georgia.

There was no French Equiano. While the anglophone Atlantic archive is dotted with the life stories of the formerly enslaved, thanks to the tradition of Protestant conversion narratives, neither first-hand accounts (such as Equiano's) nor second-hand documentations of life stories (such as WPA narratives) exist in the French colonial context. This accepted dogma has allowed scholars of slavery to essentially ignore the French colonies, in spite of nearly 2.2 million enslaved people forcibly transported to the French Caribbean during the eighteenth century; it has obliged scholars of slavery in the French empire to draw indirect conclusions about the emotions and reactions of the enslaved based on British accounts; and it has facilitated the tendency among historians of metropolitan France to ignore the significance of slavery and colonialism in French history.

No more. Sophie White's beautifully conceived and written *Voices of the Enslaved* reconceptualizes what we can consider autobiography and self-narrative, and it positions the testimony of enslaved people in French colonial Louisiana as an essential source for understanding slavery, the Atlantic world, French colonialism, and French legal history. Her source base comprises eighty criminal trials that took place in and around New Orleans from 1723 to 1750, in which almost 150 enslaved Africans and some enslaved Indians testified. The plantation system was still emerging during this key quarter century, and this period of economic, administrative, and agricultural change offered some flexibility: in social status for whites looking to get rich quick, in the boundary between slavery and freedom, and in understandings of race. White delves deeply, creatively, and analytically into these testimonies of enslaved people, offering compelling and eloquent analyses of what we can learn from them about people whose voices often purposefully were excluded from archives. In the process, she vivifies the lives of enslaved people, piecing together individual experiences and responses that reveal vibrant emotional lives that are seldom found in other sources, even well-known autobiographies, including their approaches to religion, labor, sexuality, motherhood, childhood, and love.

White's book is at the crest of a wave of scholarship that centralizes slavery in France and its empire in French history, written primarily by Anglophone scholars but drawing on and indebted to earlier Francophone scholars, including Pierre Pluchon and Gabriel Debien.[1] She also

engages with historians of the Anglophone world, particularly recent scholarship that, following Michel-Rolph Trouillot, criticizes, deconstructs, and searches for alternatives to “the archive” to write the history of the enslaved.[2] Indeed, the primary argument of this book is methodological: that the testimony of the enslaved should be read as a form of life writing. In this claim White also makes a broader contention about how historians should approach archives and sources: with open minds and without preconceptions about what they can tell us. She asks, “why not let our guard down, shake ourselves free from assumptions, rethink received wisdom—for example, about what constitutes a slave narrative or what determines the gold standard for autobiography—and allow ourselves to bumble along, immersing ourselves deeper and wider until we see, and hear, in sometimes new and unexpected ways, what was always there in the silences and words” (p. 225). This is precisely what White does, approaching her sources with an openness that leads her to explore them at great depth and in multiple directions. She connects statements made in Louisiana with practices in West Africa, France, Saint-Domingue, Mauritius, and British North America, thereby employing a new type of global history. While recent histories of Atlantic slavery have emphasized mobility, White instead privileges people who, for the most part, remained in one place, thereby underscoring the persistent residues of global links rather than the movement of particular people, ideas, or things.[3] By making these connections she firmly situates Louisiana in Caribbean, Atlantic, and imperial contexts.[4] While occasionally Saint-Domingue might seem a better point of comparison than the Indian Ocean island Mauritius, her acknowledgement of a broader picture of French colonialism is a refreshing broadening of a primary focus on the Atlantic colonies among scholars of eighteenth-century French colonialism.[5]

*Voices of the Enslaved* builds on a body of historiography, traceable to Natalie Zemon Davis, that is committed to identifying the voices of the subaltern and centralizing them in historical writing. Recently, scholarship on slavery, race, and the experiences of people of color in the French empire has been among the most energetic and innovative fields in French history, and these scholars often draw on court and other legal records to write such history from below.[6] Yet White’s source base, rooted in testimony, is distinctive in both the French empire and in the Atlantic world: the enslaved in British colonies could not usually testify, making depositions much less detailed, and officials in the French Antilles purposefully pursued a policy of destroying judicial records that included the voices of the enslaved.

Chapter one outlines the judicial procedure of the Louisiana colonies, tracing it to the 1670 *Code Criminel* in France. As she points out, “What made French law distinctive was that it hinged on testimony as central to judicial procedure” (p. 6). The enslaved could not always testify—they could not bear witness against their owners (as wives could not against their husbands), and the testimony of free people always took precedence—but even in cases where their testimony was not used in reaching verdicts they still sometimes gave depositions. More remarkably, in these depositions the enslaved were allowed to speak as they wished, at least to some extent; they did not simply respond to set questions with one-word answers. While White is attentive to the power dynamics of free white men soliciting and recording the testimony of enslaved people of color, it is clear that deponents could choose what they wanted to say, even if unrelated to the crime under investigation—and it was written down. White’s foregrounding of the testimony of the enslaved demonstrates the intertwining of French and French colonial law, and raises questions about the extent to which France’s nascent empire and slave system influenced French law defining who could testify.[7] Furthermore, her careful formulation of what made French law distinctive and what scholars can cull from the resulting records goes a long way towards

articulating the importance of including francophone territories in any history of North America, the Atlantic world, or the Caribbean, a project scholars have struggled with. Her work also makes it much more difficult for scholars of slavery or the British Atlantic to ignore scholarship on French-speaking parts of the world.[8]

Chapters two through five each focus on case studies of court cases with an enslaved person at the center. These chapters begin with an extensive quotation from a deposition of an enslaved person. (One of the delights of this book is that each of these quotations, and indeed I believe all quotations of the testimony of the enslaved, is given in both English and in French.) Over the course of each chapter White makes her way through the deposition, pulling out key people, places, points, and phrases. Each piece of testimony, of course, only offers a glimpse of the lives of the people involved. By approaching this testimony as autobiography, White makes the most of that glimpse, introducing other relevant examples and cases that help to fill out possibilities and that offer the reader rich and specific context. One of the most poignant is the story of Kenet and Jean-Baptiste, told in chapter five. Both enslaved, they belonged to different owners. Not quite star-crossed lovers, they rather were lovers whose desperate desires to carve out some sort of autonomous household and space to define their own relationship were repeatedly thwarted because of their enslaved status. They ran away together twice (the second time with the connivance of Jean-Baptiste's owner) so they could "[gain] autonomy over corollaries of spousal relationships such as sexual, physical, and emotional intimacy but also [wrest] control from their masters over their domestic arrangements" (p. 178). As the chapter unfolds, White delves into the backgrounds and histories of the couple, ranging well beyond the court records to draw on records left by their owners, maps, and more. She also zooms out, however, placing their particular story in the context of marriage of the enslaved, a practice prohibited in the British empire but permitted by the French and relatively common in New Orleans, where the enslaved comprised up to 25% of all people who married (p. 194). Here and throughout the book she pays particular attention to how West African practices and worldviews would have influenced the actions and choices of the enslaved.

The Omohundro Institute's signature commitment to editorial quality is very evident--occasionally too evident. The book is lavishly illustrated, with forty color plate inserts. All of these are also reproduced in black and white in appropriate places in the text. Although unfortunately there is no bibliography, the footnotes are thorough and wide-ranging, demonstrating the breadth of fields with which White engages. The press clearly envisions that individual chapters could be assigned for classroom use, as key terms are defined every time they are introduced. (The definition for *sellette*, "a special interrogation conducted in the prison so named for the low stool on which the defendant was made to sit," appears word for word no less than six times [pp. 15, 35, 53, 106, 179, 219]. Curiously, though, *sellette* has no entry in the index, which is primarily of the names-and-places variety.) And indeed, I can envision assigning any one of the chapters in classes on France, the Atlantic, slavery, emotions, the law, or methodology.

There are few criticisms to levy against this book. While some scholars might want a more specific analysis of change over time or the relationship between metropole and colony, White's close focus on the enslaved makes such arguments superfluous. Her goal, rather, is to flesh out their intimate and emotional landscapes, which she does with creativity and virtuosity. In sum, this vivid and engaging book builds bridges among fields and models innovative methodology. All scholars of France and its empire have something to learn by listening to *Voices of the Enslaved*.

## NOTES

[1] Gabriel Debien, *Les esclaves aux Antilles françaises (xvii<sup>e</sup>-xviii<sup>e</sup> siècles)* (Basse-Terre: Société d'histoire de la Guadeloupe, 1974); Pierre Pluchon, *Nègres et Juifs au xviii<sup>e</sup> siècle: le siècle des lumières* (Paris: Tallandier, 1984). More recent scholarship on race and slavery in France includes Sue Peabody, *There Are No Slaves in France: The Political Culture of Race and Slavery in the Ancien Régime* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996); Pierre H. Boule, *Race et esclavage dans la France de l'ancien régime* (Paris: Perrin, 2007). On the French empire, foundational works in a rapidly-growing field include Dominique Rogers, "Les Libres de couleur dans les capitales de Saint-Domingue: fortune, mentalités et intégration à la fin de l'ancien régime" (Ph.D. dissertation, Université Michel de Montaigne, Bordeaux III, 1999); John Garrigus, *Before Haiti: Race and Citizenship in French Saint-Domingue* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2006); Brett Rushforth, *Bonds of Alliance: Indigenous and Atlantic Slavery in New France* (Williamsburg, VA and Chapel Hill: the Omohundro Institute and the University of North Carolina Press, 2012); Sue Peabody, *Madeleine's Children: Family, Freedom, Secrets, and Lies in France's Indian Ocean Colonies* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017).

[2] Michel-Rolph Trouillot, *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1995); Saidiya Hartman, *Lose Your Mother: A Journey Along the Atlantic Slave Route* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2008); Jenny Shaw, *Everyday Life in the Early English Caribbean: Irish, Africans, and the Construction of Difference* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2013); Tiya Miles, *Tales from the Haunted South: Dark Tourism and Memories of Slavery from the Civil War Era* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2015); Marisa Fuentes, *Dispossessed Lives: Enslaved Women, Violence, and the Archive* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016); Sasha Turner, *Contested Bodies, Pregnancy, Childrearing, and Slavery in Jamaica* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2017).

[3] Studies that use mobility to tell the life stories of the enslaved or formerly enslaved include Jon Sensbach, *Rebecca's Revival: Creating Black Christianity in the Atlantic World* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2005); James Sweet, *Domingos Álvares, African Healing, and the Intellectual History of the Atlantic World* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2011); Rebecca Scott and Jean Hébrard, *Freedom Papers: An Atlantic Odyssey in the Age of Emancipation* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2012). As Julie Hardwick points out, considering immobility is essential to understanding gender and family in the Atlantic world. Julie Hardwick, Sarah M.S. Pearsall, and Karin Wulf, "Introduction: Centering Families in Atlantic Histories," *William and Mary Quarterly* LXX (2013): 205-224; Julie Hardwick, "Family Matters: The Early Modern Atlantic from the European Side," *History Compass* 8:3 (2010): 223-257, part of a cluster on "Rethinking Gender, Family, and Sexuality in the Early Modern Atlantic World."

[4] Shannon Dawdy, *Building the Devil's Empire: French Colonial New Orleans* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008); Emily Clark, *The Strange History of the American Quadroon: Free Women of Color in the Revolutionary Atlantic World* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2013); Cécile Vidal, ed., *Louisiana: Crossroads of the Atlantic World* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2014); Nathalie Dessens, *Creole City: A Chronicle of Early American New Orleans* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2015); Cécile Vidal, *Caribbean New Orleans: Empire, Race, and the Making of a Slave Society* (Williamsburg, VA: Omohundro Institute of Early American Culture, 2019).

[5] Recent works that expand considerations of French colonialism to include the Indian Ocean include Megan Vaughan, *Creating the Creole Island: Slavery in Eighteenth-Century Mauritius* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2005); Danna Agmon, *A Colonial Affair: Commerce, Conversion, and Scandal in French India* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2017); Peabody, *Madeline's Children*; Laurie Wood, *Archipelago of Justice: Law in France's Early Modern Empire* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2020); Nathan Marvin, "Bourbon Island Creoles: Race and Revolution in France's Indian Ocean Colonies," (unpublished manuscript-in-progress).

[6] Peabody, *There Are No Slaves in France*; Garrigus, *Before Haiti*; Malick Ghachem, *The Old Regime and the Haitian Revolution* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012); Dominique Rogers, *Voix d'esclaves: Antilles, Guyane et Louisiana françaises, xviiie-xix siecles* (Paris: Karthala, 2015); Deirdre Lyons, "Work, Family, and Public Order: Emancipation and Civil Rights in the Nineteenth-Century French Antilles" (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Chicago, 2020). Scholars of metropolitan France who have turned to court and legal archives to access "history from below" include Julie Hardwick, *Family Business: Litigation and the Politics of Economy of Daily Life of Early Modern France* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009).

[4] While few scholars have connected French and French colonial law, those who have include Ghachem, *The Old Regime and the Haitian Revolution*, and Matthew Gerber's research-in-progress on the relationship French between colonial and metropolitan law.

[8] It is rare for published works on the British Atlantic, early America, or slavery in North America to cite scholarship on French territories. A recent and notable exception is Trevor Burnard and John Garrigus, *The Plantation Machine: Atlantic Capitalism in French Saint-Domingue and British Jamaica* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016), which treats Jamaica and Saint-Domingue comparatively.

Jennifer L. Palmer  
University of Georgia  
[palmerjl@uga.edu](mailto:palmerjl@uga.edu)

Copyright © 2020 by the Society for French Historical Studies, all rights reserved. The Society for French Historical Studies permits the electronic distribution of individual reviews for nonprofit educational purposes, provided that full and accurate credit is given to the author, the date of publication, and the location of the review on the H-France website. The Society for French Historical Studies reserves the right to withdraw the license for redistribution/republication of individual reviews at any time and for any specific case. Neither bulk redistribution/republication in electronic form of more than five percent of the contents of H-France Review nor re-publication of any amount in print form will be permitted without permission. For any other proposed uses, contact the Editor-in-Chief of H-France. The views posted on H-France Review are not necessarily the views of the Society for French Historical Studies.