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Michael Harrigan, *Frontiers of Servitude: Slavery in Narratives of the Early French Atlantic*. Manchester: University of Manchester Press, 2018. xii + 330 pp. Figures, notes, and index. \$120.00 U.S. (cl). ISBN 9781526122261.

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French and francophone programs have begun important efforts to combat anti-Black racism and white supremacy in curriculum, recruitment, and research, and yet, the work has only begun.[1] A radical reconsideration of the early modern francophone world—one that takes Blackness, colonialism, race, and slavery as central topics—is long overdue, especially in French literary studies. Though some early modern scholars bring important attention to these questions, the increasing interest has been largely limited to modern and contemporary periods.[2] Other fields such as English and Spanish, provide important models and lay significant groundwork for essential interdisciplinary connections to, for example, Critical Race, francophone, and postcolonial studies.[3] What would it mean for early modern French literary scholars to seek out collaboration, work beyond our comfort zones, and bring our particular insights to the table in conversations on the colonial past and its afterlives?

By placing Atlantic slavery at the center, Michael Harrigan's *Frontiers of Servitude: Slavery in Narratives of the Early French Atlantic* provides a welcome contribution for a more global study of the early modern French-speaking world and the place of enslaved Africans in it. This is an essential read for scholars of early modern studies, colonialism, and slavery, in the francophone world and beyond. Harrigan intervenes by offering a rich account of narratives of slavery from the early French Atlantic up to c. 1750. His compelling analysis argues for a nuanced reconsideration of this foundational but understudied period of French colonialism. Harrigan's focus on narrative strategies provides new insights into power and resistance in early modern bondage. Perhaps most importantly, he confronts the absent presence of enslaved people, that is, the complex representations of Africans and people of African descent in European-authored texts. In close readings of a wide-ranging corpus, the book demonstrates the unique and complex nature of the first century or so of French presence in the Caribbean. During this unstable but foundational period, multiple ideas, perspectives, and systems coexisted. As Harrigan demonstrates, the seventeenth-century Antilles truly encompass the shaky bridge that is the "early modern," a contradictory in-between that cannot be grasped through either genealogical or teleological approaches.

One of the greatest strengths of *Frontiers of Servitude* is its remarkable erudition. With a rich bibliography of Atlantic narratives including published texts, manuscript chronicles, and archival

documents, Harrigan seems to leave no stone unturned. For example, Dominican Jean-Baptiste Du Tertre's volumes are examined alongside ecclesiastics' unpublished letters sent to the Propaganda Fide in Rome. The reader encounters the perspectives of missionaries, colonial officials, merchants, philosophers, and adventurers. Despite this dizzying heterogeneity of voices, the author places each in context, carefully identifying the competing traditions and goals their positions implied. In so doing, Harrigan makes the corpus more widely available for scholars of diverse fields, languages, and periods.

Although centered in the Caribbean, the study is nonetheless truly Atlantic in scope, linking developments in the Antilles to France and West Africa. Brief references to a wider network that extended to the Indian Ocean gesture toward the important work that remains to be done in tracing the global nature of the early modern world in French studies.[4] As he focuses on the early French narratives, Harrigan astutely engages with interdisciplinary scholarship on slavery, including studies of the English-speaking world. His analysis often draws on the theoretical frameworks outlined by foundational thinkers such as David Brion Davis and Orlando Patterson. At the same time, Harrigan is in conversation with scholarship on the French Atlantic, particularly by literary scholars like Madeleine Dobie, Doris Garraway, and Christopher Miller.[5] While Harrigan is primarily focused on deciphering the contradictory colonial discourses that circulated in the early Atlantic, there are important references to tensions and resistance throughout *Frontiers of Servitude*. I found these moments to be some of the most evocative pages in the book, as in Chapter Four, which I discuss in more detail below.

While I do not have space to summarize all aspects of this rich book, I will highlight some of the key themes from each chapter, with emphasis on the passages that strike me as especially innovative and important. The introduction outlines the goals and defines the terms at the center of the project. For a book that covers such wide and largely uncharted territory, it is useful to refer to the three key questions Harrigan identifies in his opening pages. In readings of Atlantic narratives, the book interrogates criteria for enslavement, structures and limits of mastery, and linkages between narratives and power. Harrigan explains enslaved "*condition*" by evoking both early modern definitions and more recent theoretical understandings of slavery to introduce the varying importance of qualities such as social status, honor, and commoditization. Drawing on Michel de Certeau, he identifies the importance of the "script" as a tool of colonial domination that undergirds his focus on written texts.

Chapter one introduces readers to the primary sources with a focus on the contents, influences, and a theoretical approach to slavery within the texts. He directly confronts the slippery question of genre in his discussion of the intertwined literary and historical qualities of the corpus. Harrigan develops a systematic vocabulary—often trios of terms—through which he breaks his analysis down into parts. For example, he emphasizes authors' varying interactions with the social, ecological, and religious environments (pp. 52-53). A large portion of the first chapter identifies the textual precedents and conceptual influences on colonial understandings of slavery, namely classical, juridical, and Christian sources. Harrigan highlights the deployment of these foundations in new ways, such as the 1698 Sorbonne debate over the legitimacy of the transatlantic slave trade (pp. 59-61). Perhaps most innovative in this chapter, Harrigan analyzes descriptions of colonial space as representing efforts to demonstrate mastery over knowledge and labor. He extends this examination when he concludes with a perceptive study of several engravings from the published chronicles.

Chapter two shifts to the specific frameworks undergirding conceptions of slavery in the corpus. The chapter opens with an overview of diverse European interpretations of African alterity that provides a useful focus on environmental, social, and religious models. In the final sections of this chapter, Harrigan usefully compares early modern understandings of African and Indigenous servitude to European plantation slavery, tracing a multiplicity of influences to identify the unique ways in which colonial Caribbean slavery was conceived.

Chapter three studies representations of enslaved people as “laboring bodies” to uncover complex and contradictory understandings of productivity and corporeality. This chapter is exemplary in its nuanced study of mastery and its limits. The means by which colonial authors asserted power over accumulation (e.g., knowledge, numeracy, writing) indirectly acknowledged the subjectivity and humanity of enslaved people. For example, the subtle ways in which enslaved people nonetheless disrupted colonial time, through which enslavers asserted exploitative productivity, brilliantly illuminate the enslaved perspectives embedded in these texts (pp. 184-86).

Extending this analysis, chapter four presents possibilities for deciphering enslaved people as subjects in European-authored texts through a focus on consciousness and inaccessible knowledge. Without idealizing enslaved “resistance” or “agency,” Harrigan explores the arenas in which we might locate, if not decipher, challenges to colonial hierarchies that vilified Black minds. His analysis of language, for example, astutely identifies mediated voices that expose enslaved strategies of subversion and critique (pp. 209-14). While productively situating these examples in textual conventions, such as edifying exempla in Jesuit texts, Harrigan nonetheless underscores the multivocality of colonial narratives. He productively interprets enslaved people’s cited speech as evidence of competing narratives through James C. Scott’s concept of “hidden transcripts” (pp. 230-31). In this way, Chapter Four evokes current work that interrogates the archive of slavery and proposes innovative methods for reading its apparent silences.[6]

Chapter Five confronts the fundamental tensions and limits to corporeal control in early French slavery. While Atlantic narratives asserted the use of violence as fundamental to social order, some authors like Du Tertre expressed ambivalence over the physical abuse of enslaved people. In his comparisons of the spectacular punishment of maroons and insurgents to European practices of execution, Harrigan specifies the unique colonial strategies of (racialized, I would argue) bodily harm. As he identifies the ways in which power was subverted and reasserted, Harrison ultimately emphasizes the illusory nature of textual assertions of control.

With a focus on metaphorical and literal “frontiers,” chapter six examines the broader social structures depicted in early narratives. On the one hand, boucanier and maroon culture are highlighted as key examples of the outskirts of colonial society that challenged any effort at unified social hierarchy and control. On the other hand, conflicts with royal control challenged the extension of an absolutist colonialism in the Caribbean. Evolving policies of intermarriage, métissage, and manumission further emphasized the tensions within early French slave societies.

As I read *Frontiers of Servitude*, I wondered about the roles of race and gender in the conceptions of corporeality and alterity that the book addresses. While identifying a few examples of inherent, corporeal divisions in texts by authors such as François Bernier and Jean-Baptiste Labat (pp. 106-09), Harrigan largely avoids engaging with the concept of “race.” And yet, the multiple understandings of human difference that Harrigan so eloquently identifies together contributed to a long process of racialization that continues to uphold violence.[7] For example, Harrigan

astutely analyzes the ways hyperbolic comparisons of indentured servants to “slaves” ultimately served to reify distinctions between Europeans and Africans (pp. 186-89). Likewise, Harrigan’s nuanced study of “*esprit*” (pp. 204-06), which he distinguishes from biological race because it was considered mutable, could nevertheless be linked to an extensive history of racial injustice. While gender and sexuality are not the focus of the book, Harrigan does allude to assault, reproduction, and the division of labor (e.g., 8, 178-79, 256-61).^[8] How might discussions of recent historical work on enslaved women illuminate new facets of Harrigan’s corpus?^[9] These two points are not meant as a criticism, since Harrigan’s ambitious book could not be all things for an emerging field. Instead, I see my questions as a promising sign that *Frontiers of Servitude* will bring new and diverse perspectives to this critical content.

This extremely important book provides a nuanced analysis and wealth of information that demands the attention of scholars from a range of fields. It brings to light a crucial historical context and textual corpus that should advance urgent conversations in early modern French studies.

NOTES

[1] For examples of pertinent initiatives, see Bowdoin College’s curriculum, as described in Charlotte Daniels and Katherine Dauge-Roth, “Globalizing the Early Literature Survey: Challenges and Rewards,” *French Review* 93, n. 1 (2019), 92-93; Wellesley College’s fall 2020 “Addressing Racism and Anti-Blackness in French and Francophone Studies” <<https://sites.google.com/wellesley.edu/addressing-antiblackness/schedule>>; Duke University’s fall 2020 “On Inequity and Its Contemporary Forms” <<https://francophone.duke.edu/events/past-events>>.

[2] Exciting recent developments in early modern French include: comparative work by Noémie Ndiaye that crosses linguistic and national boundaries; examples of recent seventeenth-century French literary studies with attention to global networks: Faith Beasley, *Versailles Meets the Taj Mahal: François Bernier, Marguerite de la Sablière, and Enlightening Conversations in Seventeenth-Century France* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2018); Sara E. Melzer, *Colonizer or Colonized: The Hidden Stories of Early Modern French Culture* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2012); Micah True, *Masters and Students: Jesuit Mission Ethnography in Seventeenth-Century New France* (Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2015); Ellen Welch, *A Theater of Diplomacy: International Relations and the Performing Arts in Early Modern France* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2017).

[3] For recent examples in history related to the francophone world, see Celine Carayon, *Eloquence Embodied Nonverbal Communication among French and Indigenous Peoples in the Americas* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press and Omohundro Institute, 2019); Jessica Marie Johnson, *Wicked Flesh: Black Women, Intimacy, and Freedom in the Atlantic World* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2020); Sophie White, *Voices of the Enslaved: Love, Labor, and Longing in French Louisiana* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press and Omohundro Institute, 2019); in Spanish, see Nicholas R. Jones, *Staging Habla de Negros* (University Park, Pennsylvania: Penn State University Press, 2019); in English, see Peter Erickson and Kim F. Hall, eds., special issue on early modern race, *Shakespeare Quarterly* 67, no. 1 (2016). See also Kimberly Anne Coles, Kim F. Hall, and Ayanna Thompson, “BlackKKKShakespearean: A Call to Action for Medieval and Early Modern Studies,” *MLA Profession* <

<https://profession.mla.org/blackkkshakespearean-a-call-to-action-for-medieval-and-early-modern-studies/>>; Folger Library's "Critical Race Conversations" lecture series <<https://www.folger.edu/critical-race-conversations>>.

[4] For two recent approaches to the early French empire that consider the Atlantic and Indian Oceans, see Mélanie Lamotte, *Making Race: Policy, Sex and Social Order in the French Atlantic and Indian Oceans, 1608–1756* (forthcoming) and Laurie M. Wood, *Archipelago of Justice: Law in France's Early Modern Empire* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2020).

[5] David Brion Davis, *The Problem of Slavery in Western Culture* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1966); Orlando Patterson, *Slavery and Social Death: A Comparative Study* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1982); Madeleine Dobie, *Trading Places: Colonization and Slavery in Eighteenth-Century French Culture* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2010); Doris L. Garraway, *The Libertine Colony: Creolization in the Early French Caribbean* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2005); Christopher L. Miller, *The French Atlantic Triangle: Literature and Culture of the Slave Trade* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2008).

[6] James C. Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1992). On archives, see Marisa Fuentes, *Dispossessed Lives: Enslaved Women, Violence, and the Archive* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016); Saidiya Hartman, "Venus in Two Acts," *Small Axe: A Journal of Criticism*, no. 26 (2008): 1–14. For examples of innovative reading strategies, see Cassander L. Smith, *Black Africans in the British Imagination: English Narratives of the Early Atlantic World* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2016); White, *Voices of the Enslaved*.

[7] Rather than distinguish between early modern fluidity and later fixity in ideas of human difference, Peter Erickson and Kim Hall assert that "race, as an ideology that organizes human difference and power, is always protean and sticky, attaching to a range of ideologies, narratives, and vocabularies in ways both familiar and strange." Erickson and Hall, "A New Scholarly Song': Rereading Early Modern Race," *Shakespeare Quarterly* 67, no. 1 (2016): 1–13, quote on p. 12.

[8] Discussing Doris Garraway's *The Libertine Colony: Creolization in the Early French Caribbean* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005), Harrigan claims to "forgo" these questions (24). On gender and sexuality, see also Elsa Dorlin, *La matrice de la race: Généalogie sexuelle et coloniale de la nation française* (Paris: La Découverte, 2006).

[9] For foundational work on enslaved women, see Jennifer L. Morgan, *Laboring Women: Women, Reproduction, and Gender in New World Slavery* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004). On enslaved women in the French Caribbean, see Arlette Gautier, *Les soeurs de Solitude: Femmes et esclavage aux Antilles du XVIIe au XIXe siècle* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de Rennes, [1985] 2010) and Bernard Moitt, *Women and Slavery in the French Antilles, 1635–1848* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2001). For examples of more recent scholarship, see Fuentes, *Dispossessed Lives*; Johnson, *Wicked Flesh*, referenced in notes 3 and 6 above.

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