
H-France Review Vol. 21 (June 2021), No. 94

Jessica Marie Johnson, *Wicked Flesh: Black Women, Intimacy, and Freedom in the Atlantic World*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2020. 360 pp. List of archives and databases, notes, index, and acknowledgements. \$34.95 U.S. (cl). ISBN 9780812252385.

Review by Deirdre T. Lyons, University of Chicago.

This well-written and meticulously researched book examines how African women and women of African descent practiced subversive acts of freedom in Atlantic slave societies that were designed to subjugate them. Centering its analysis on eighteenth-century Senegambia and colonial Louisiana, *Wicked Flesh* integrates Africa into the Americas by drawing on an impressive range of archives from Senegal, New Orleans, and France. For Johnson, Saint-Louis and Gorée are connected to New Orleans through the lives and experiences of the free and enslaved Black women who sought security and autonomy in these places, even as chattel slavery consolidated in the French Atlantic. Through practices of intimacy, pleasure, and kinship, Johnson claims, Black women created their own practices of freedom that did not neatly map onto legal or imperial conceptions of free and unfree. *Wicked Flesh* highlights how these strategies in turn endowed freedom with its everyday meanings, shaped the formation of colonial Louisiana, and “laid the groundwork for the emancipation struggles and tensions of the nineteenth century” (p. 1).

Thoroughly grounded in African and Atlantic historiography and drawing upon interdisciplinary theories that enrich the book’s methodological scope, Johnson expertly transcends imperial, regional, and chronological boundaries to trace the experiences of African women and their descendants in slavery and freedom. She reconstructs the movement and experiences of individual and collective Black women in the Atlantic World, merging Senegambia with French and Spanish colonial Louisiana and revealing how Black women were pivotal actors in creating the social networks and cultural ties of the African diaspora. Each chapter provides an account of an African woman or woman of African descent who lived and moved throughout these worlds, skillfully weaving between a micro approach and macro processes to frame the numerous ways in which individual lived experiences unfolded against broader dynamics in the French Atlantic empire.

The first two chapters expand on the work of Hilary Jones and others who focus on the *signares* of West Africa.[1] Johnson highlights the cultural and social power wielded by these Senegambian women who set the standards for and practices of taste, kinship, property, and inheritance in the French administrative outposts (*comptoirs*) of Saint-Louis and Gorée. In the early eighteenth century, European merchants seeking their fortunes in the region depended on

African-controlled trade networks that linked the coast to the interior. African women were pivotal actors who facilitated European men's access to these local trade networks through hospitality, entertainment, sexuality, and kinship. The exponential growth of transatlantic trade from and through Senegambia furnished those on the Atlantic African coast with access to new forms of material wealth and social and cultural capital. African women, Johnson argues, were particularly adept at acquiring property, status, and influence by integrating themselves into African-European trade networks. Indeed, many elite Senegambian women were wealthy merchants in their own right who hosted Europeans at elaborate dinner parties, modeled the latest fashionable trends, and developed intricate standards of taste, diplomacy, and hospitality that simultaneously brokered African-European relationships and frustrated French attempts to consolidate total control over local trade networks.

As traders, residents, and "stewards of hospitality" in the *comptoirs*, African women successfully accessed the burgeoning commercial networks that stretched from the Senegal river to the Atlantic world—yet they did so on their own terms and in accordance with Senegambian norms (p. 6). Although many women along the Atlantic African coast entered conjugal relationships with European men, they rarely married them in Catholic ceremonies, preferring instead to marry according to local customs, which involved the transfer of property to the bride's family and the accumulation of matrilineal wealth. Called *mariage à la mode du pays*, these interracial conjugal relationships were carefully arranged by African women and their families to secure capital, with any wealth brought by the man to the union retained by the woman following his death or disappearance from Senegal. Property in *mariage à la mode du pays* included homes, material wealth, and enslaved persons. Slave ownership among African women, Johnson demonstrates, was a crucial strategy for accumulating capital, performing hospitality (specifically domestic labor and entertainment), and establishing networks of reciprocity that enabled them to acquire influence and autonomy as propertied women in the *comptoirs*.

While *mariage à la mode du pays* facilitated intimacy and property exchange across racial, ethnic, and religious divides, Senegambian women also adopted French customs such as baptism to cement their social status, create kinship, and "assert their power as heads of households and managers of dependents" (p. 60). Over the course of the eighteenth century, formalizing real or fictive kin ties through church registrars was a crucial strategy for Senegambian women who sought to safeguard their claims to property and place in an exponentially growing African-Atlantic social order. Johnson also emphasizes how Senegambian women who entered conjugal relationships with European men and bore biracial children resisted any attempt by the French to divest them of their property or inheritance following the death or departure of their conjugal partners by making direct appeals to the administrators of the *Compagnie des Indes*. As African women asserted claims to property, acquired wealth through inheritance, intimacy, and kinship, and formalized kin relations through baptism and *mariage à la mode du pays*, they crafted a form of autonomy that allowed them to survive as "heads of households on a patriarchal coast" (p. 62).

Chapter three explores how any autonomy that women could claim on the West African coast was effaced and remade through the Middle Passage and upon arrival in the Americas. The chapter follows the experiences of enslaved and some free women who left Senegambia for the Gulf Coast, tracing their transatlantic crossing (*la traversée*) to colonial Louisiana. In her analysis, Johnson highlights the extraordinary story of Marie Baude, a mixed-race Senegambian woman who voluntarily booked passage aboard the slave ship *La Galathée* to follow her husband (a French gunsmith named Jean Pinet) to New Orleans after he had been exiled there following his

conviction for murdering a *mulâtre* sailor in Saint-Louis. When she arrived in the Gulf Coast, the *Compagnie des Indes*, claiming that Marie Baude owed them duties, seized her slaves, who accompanied her on the voyage. Marie Baude's troubled entry into New Orleans, Johnson asserts, underscores the larger processes through which African women who entered Atlantic slave societies were compelled to reinvent the meaning of autonomy, status, and even their conceptions of womanhood in the face of expropriation and violence. In her analysis of how enslaved women were stripped of their gender and personhood during the Middle Passage, Johnson draws on the work of Hortense Spillers and Sowande' Mustakeem to trace how African captives were dehumanized, commodified, and ungendered.^[2] Slave traders evaluated, measured, and quantified physical markers such as height, strength, reproductive capacity, and fitness to transform African men and women into commodified flesh that could be measured and transacted as *pièces d'Inde*--a metric that reduced human beings to units of fleshed labor. African women were further reduced to "objects of desire and acquisition" as sexualized forms of property (p. 83). However, African captives (especially women), rejected their commodification into standard units of flesh. Enslaved women played crucial roles in shipboard resistance--from sorcery and revolt to suicide--acts of defiance that would continue to shape freedom practices in the Americas.

Once they arrived in Louisiana, enslaved Africans faced further precarity and violence. Compared to the bustling cosmopolitanism of Saint-Louis and Gorée, the early eighteenth-century Gulf Coast was an isolated and difficult frontier where "waterlogged households crowded on the high ground" along the Mississippi River (p. 123). Enslaved persons were engaged in building housing, levees, and infrastructure in the city, clearing swamps, and cultivating indigo, tobacco, and rice on the surrounding plantations. Africans also entered a colonial world where a growing population of settlers sparked conflict with indigenous nations. The Natchez revolt, for example, embroiled enslaved persons in a larger frontier war where they were subjected to further violence and captured, traded, and sold by both French and indigenous forces. Following the revolt, the Crown consolidated its role as the sole governing authority and by the 1730s, a French colonial bureaucracy began to take shape, although Louisiana remained peripheral to metropolitan interests in the sugar-producing colonies of the Caribbean. Throughout these processes, Johnson emphasizes, African women and women of African descent were compelled to recreate the meaning of gender, kinship, and community in response to the violence and expropriation they faced during the slave trade and as enslaved persons in a frontier colony.

The final three chapters are among the strongest and most innovative in the book. Taken together, they examine the ways in which African women and women of African descent created new meanings of intimacy, security, and autonomy in colonial New Orleans. In her analysis, Johnson draws on digital humanities scholarship to expand historians' methods for engaging with slavery's archives. In the fourth chapter, Johnson expands on the concept of null values to grapple with a problem familiar to scholars of slavery--that is, the erasure of enslaved persons in imperial archives. The idea of "null values" reframes archival silences as less of an irretrievable absence and more of a tool for considering and locating evidence of Black life that colonial administrators could not or were not interested in recording.

For example, Johnson's analysis of disparities in census records against parish registrars and other sources from early-eighteenth-century New Orleans employs null values to reconstruct a Black urban geography and society--despite the partial or total erasure of African and African-descended persons in the earliest population counts of the city. The 1726 census, for instance, failed to enumerate free persons of color and it was not until 1737 that colonial census takers

differentiated between enslaved men and women. These partial enumerations of African people in official records, Johnson shows, belies the fact that by the 1720s “New Orleans had already become the center of a black diaspora” (p. 139). Reading against the grain of the census data and incorporating parish records and other sources, Johnson proceeds to reconstruct New Orleans as a nascent French Atlantic city that was built through the labor of and sustained through social ties between Africans and people of African descent. Systematically identifying empty spaces in colonial records as null values thus offers a way of moving beyond archival absence to locate evidence for how enslaved and freed people struggled to secure autonomy, community and security in ways that could not be accounted for in an administrative system designed to create “hierarchical, legible, [and] interrelated subjects in service to the Crown” (p. 134). In pursuing (frequently tenuous) paths to manumission, fostering community ties, and claiming full rights over their own labor, Black women no longer seem absent in the colonial archive, but rather transgressive or even “fugitive” (p. 143).

Chapter five expands on this last point by examining how Black women’s pleasure and intimacy generated practices of freedom that subverted the French colonial order and “refused the use and possession mandated by slaveowners and husbands” or what Johnson refers to as “black femme freedom” (p. 175). Many of these freedom practices were similar to those distinctly feminine spheres of influence that Johnson highlights in West Africa, such as hospitality, sensuality, sociability, and kinship forged through conjugality and baptism. In New Orleans, however, these freedom practices also challenged French colonial law, as enslaved women drew on the *Code Noir* and political appeals to colonial officials to stake manumission claims. Through “black femme freedom,” Johnson thus links cultural and social expressions of womanhood to practices of freedom that pushed the boundaries of colonial laws and ideologies (p. 155).

As chapter six reveals, during Louisiana’s transition from French to Spanish rule new slavery regulations were instituted, such as the ability to purchase one’s manumission (*coartación*). Thus, enslaved women found themselves adapting to Spanish legal and bureaucratic institutions as they developed new freedom strategies. In addition to *coartación*, Johnson emphasizes how freed women in colonial New Orleans carefully drew on Spanish laws to secure property for themselves and their descendants, buy kin out of bondage, record testaments to manage the transfer of property, and acquire slaves for themselves. As a result of their efforts to secure freedom and wealth for their descendants through an array of imperial legal mechanisms, these free and enslaved women laid the foundation for the transfer and acquisition of property by subsequent generations of free people of color in nineteenth-century New Orleans.

The book provides an excellent account of the consolidation of slavery in the eighteenth-century French Atlantic while deepening our understanding of the pivotal role that African women and women of African descent played in challenging the perilous boundaries between slavery and freedom. Among *Wicked Flesh’s* many considerable strengths is the degree to which Johnson reconstructs the lives of Black women from archives designed to erase their existence. Another strength of the project is its rich consideration of the ways in which enslaved and freed women carved out spaces of pleasure and intimacy and forged community and kinship in slave societies that sought to exploit their bodies for pleasure and profit. Through her micro and macro approaches to the individual and collective lives of the African women and their descendants who lived in and traversed the eighteenth-century French Atlantic, Johnson emphasizes how these women were ordinary and everywhere, despite their partial or erased presence in the archive. New Orleans and Saint-Louis were in no small part cities of Black women who supplied the labor,

property, hospitality, domesticity, and legal strategies that secured freedom for themselves and their kin and shaped the cultural and social life of the urban Atlantic.

Wicked Flesh also serves as a model for writing an Atlantic history that firmly integrates Africa into a study of slavery in the Americas. Johnson skillfully fuses interdisciplinary scholarship from the fields of Atlantic, American, Caribbean, and African studies to construct a longer genealogy of Black womanhood that ranges from the Senegal to the Mississippi rivers. Her methodologies reconceptualize strategies for working with slavery's archives to locate small, everyday acts of freedom and evidence of how enslaved people constructed kin, community, and cultural meaning in bondage. For scholars of the French empire, *Wicked Flesh* offers a diasporic perception that looks beyond metropole-colonial dynamics in favor of an African-Atlantic history of Black women's social and cultural practices of freedom--and how they were made and remade through transatlantic bondage.

NOTES

[1] Hilary Jones, *The Métis of Senegal: Urban Life and Politics in French West Africa* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2013); Pernille Ipsen, *Daughters of the Trade: Atlantic Slavers and Interracial Marriage on the Gold Coast* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2015); George E. Brooks, *Eurafricans in Western Africa: Commerce, Social Status, Gender, and Religious Observance from the Sixteenth to the Eighteenth Century* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2003); George E. Brooks, "The Signares of Saint-Louis and Goree: Women Entrepreneurs in Eighteenth-Century Senegal," in *Women and Africa: Studies in Social and Economic Change*, ed. Nancy J. Hafkin and Edna G. Bay (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1976); Aissata Kane Lo, *De la signare à la diriyanké sénégalaise: Trajectoires féminines et visions partagées* (Dakar: L'Harmattan Sénégal, 2014).

[2] Sowande' M. Mustakeem, *Slavery at Sea: Terror, Sex, and Sickness in the Middle Passage* (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2016); Hortense J. Spillers, "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book," *Diacritics* 17, no. 2 (1987): 65-81; Stephanie Smallwood, *Saltwater Slavery: A Middle Passage from Africa to American Diaspora* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2008).

Deirdre T. Lyons
University of Chicago
dtl412@uchicago.edu

Copyright © 2021 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 republication 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.

ISSN 1553-9172