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H-France Review Vol. 22 (August 2022), No. 128

Crystal Marie Fleming, *Resurrecting Slavery: Racial Legacies and White Supremacy in France*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2017. xi + 276 pp. Notes, references, and index. \$99.50 U.S. (hb). ISBN 9781439914083; \$34.95 U.S. (pb). ISBN: 9781439914090; \$34.95 U.S. (eb). ISBN 978143991410.

Review by Sarah C. Dunstan, University of Glasgow.

The guiding question of Crystal Marie Fleming's 2017 monograph, *Resurrecting Slavery*, is "[t]o what extent do the French make connections between the history of slavery and race relations today?" (p. 5). In tackling this topic, Fleming has written a book that is both empirically and theoretically rigorous and, as she puts it, "unapologetically polemical" (p. 11). Race is a thorny question for France, a nation that has long defined itself in terms of a color-blindness grounded in a secular universalism that makes all individuals equal before the law. Such a political posture involves the denial that racial or ethnic categories have relevance to France's contemporary domestic context. Indeed, in 2018, the National Assembly voted to remove the word "race" from the French constitution, on the basis that the term is now outdated.<sup>[1]</sup> This decision is only one of many over the past few decades wherein the French state has rejected or downplayed the realities of race and ethnic identity. A law passed in 1990 banned the use of racial categories in government collected data, making it difficult to understand racial demographics in modern France. The avoidance of the concept of race has not, however, worked to erase racism within France itself. To the contrary, as Tricia Keaton has observed, it has mainly worked to diminish "the significance of the sociohistorical formation of 'race,' its ongoing social potency and its inherence in the objectivity and subjectivity of Blackness (and Whiteness) in the French context."<sup>[2]</sup>

Fleming's aim in *Resurrecting Slavery* is to produce an antidote to those who have "deployed color-blind ideology or revisionist denial (or both)" (p. 11). In so doing, Fleming aspires to "help French people understand and resist systematic racism" (p. 11). A key part of this story is combatting the long-held notion that white supremacy is something that only happens in the United States of America. Fleming instead argues that it is "a global system of political and social domination" with local manifestations (p. 13). Positioned thus, at the interstices of activism and scholarship, *Resurrecting Slavery* is a powerful contribution to the ongoing battle against racism in France and worldwide.

The book's first chapter offers a useful survey of scholarship that explores the role played by transatlantic slavery in linking slavery to Blackness from the eighteenth century onwards. Fleming is clear about the historically contingent nature of racialisation and racial identity. She

underlines that the historical conceptualisation of whiteness “cannot be properly considered analogue for what most people mean by ‘white’ today” (p. 31). Nor, for that matter, can the terms “Black” or “African” be considered to hold the same meaning as they do now. Indeed, the historical contingency of these terms is further emphasised in chapter three, where Fleming draws upon her interviews with French Caribbean peoples involved in commemorative organising. These activists’ own understandings of their racial identities in relation to the legacies of slavery vary hugely. Some privilege an African diasporic identity over their French nationality and are vehement about seeking reparations for transatlantic slavery, whilst others, such as those involved with the 1998 March Committee, delineate the specificity of the Antillean identities from that of other Afro-descended peoples. These perspectives contrast in interesting ways with those of French Caribbean interviewees not directly involved in commemorative organising. Fleming’s analysis of the differences between these two subject groups—organisers and non-organisers—can be found in chapters six and seven, on the legacies of slavery and reparations respectively.

The history of French universalism is a history of tension between the professed values of the Republic, the realities of French colonialism, and use of slave labour. In the eighteenth century, as historian Sue Peabody demonstrated in her study of the subject, the existence of slavery within the French empire was differentiated from the espousal of freedom in mainland France. Slavery in the colonies was understood as a necessity for the benefit of the French people, one that was not permissible in the so-called land of liberty itself.[3] In *Resurrecting Slavery*, Fleming deftly demonstrates how this rhetorical and legal slippage has its legacies in the struggles to commemorate slavery in contemporary France. Key examples of this are the May 2001 Taubira law, which recognised Atlantic slavery as a crime against humanity, and the 1998 commemoration of the 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the French abolition of slavery in 1848. Both the law and the commemorative events offered recognition of the horror of slavery, but detached this horror from the historical narrative of mainland France. Slavery was cast as a past crime, as well as a crime which did not take place in the French metropolitan landscape. As such, it was effectively excised from national narratives of France in the public arena. Focusing on the political context in which slavery is commemorated, and the legacies of slavery respectively, chapters two and six of *Resurrecting Slavery* are important deliberations on the ramifications of this approach. In different ways, they illustrate the extent to which this excision of overseas slavery from the mainland national narrative prevents a collective confrontation of the legacies of slavery in mainland France. Fleming argues that in privileging colonial territories “as the primary *imagined realms* in which the legacies of slavery continue to operate,” it is harder “to explain the relevance of enslavement and colonialism to the national community” (p. 218). This is particularly important when one thinks of the extent to which mainland France saw the material benefits of slavery, and adopted the racialised equation of slavery with Blackness.

Of course, the French were not the only European nation involved in the slave trade, and the United States’ long history with the enslavement of African peoples is ever-present in the scaffolding of *Resurrecting Slavery*. The concluding chapter opens with the lines “when many Americans think of France, they imagine the Eiffel Tower, fancy cuisine, the seductive crooning of Josephine Baker, or more disturbing, the specter of ISIS-inspired terrorism” (p. 211). By choosing to frame her concluding section in this way, Fleming underlines the extent to which the book is as much an intervention into North American discussions about race as it is into those within France. The comparison implicitly and, at times, explicitly, shapes Fleming’s analysis as well as her field research. In chapter three, she describes a conversation with a fifty-year-old

Martinican woman, Denise (a pseudonym) at a French Caribbean Christmas Celebration, Chanté Nwèl. Widely travelled within the United States, and having spent many years working as a civil servant in France, Denise became involved with activist groups after losing her job in circumstances of racial discrimination. Fleming asks whether she thinks “Black people were better off in the United States or France” (p. 68). Denise answers with the United States. In another interview, with one of the organisers of the Africaphonie festival, Yannick Mayo, Mayo is quick to point out that the term he is using—“communitarian”—has different meanings in France and in the United States (p. 75).

Fleming’s awareness of her own positionality as an interviewer is a strength of the book. It reinforces the interconnected nature of experiences of white supremacy across the Black Atlantic, and beautifully illuminates how the differentiated legacies of slavery cannot be confined to national borders. Fleming herself puts this elegantly in her acknowledgements, when writing about her own sense of identity: “I am not, really, an outsider anywhere in the Black Atlantic. But I am not completely at home anywhere either. This liminal status of blackness in modernity is, of course, what undergirds the continuities of white supremacy in France, the United States, and the many haunted spaces in between” (xi). The African American scholar-activist W.E.B. Du Bois put this another way in a 1906 essay, writing that the problem of racism in the United States “is but a local phase of a world problem.”[4]

The difficulty with connecting “local phases” to an overarching “world problem” is that there are inevitably absences. Rather than allowing these absences to be a weakness in her work, Fleming turns them into a strength by including appendices with reflections on her methodological choices and showcasing her awareness of roads not taken. A case in point are “the most radical groups” of African descended activists operating in contemporary France: Tribu Ka and Indigènes de la République (p. 220). Fleming explains that the peripheral nature of their involvement “in organizing commemorations of slavery during my fieldwork” (p. 220) led to their relevant absence from the book, an absence that is not necessarily reflective of the broader landscape of French activism. This spells out for the reader how the framing of “slavery commemoration” simultaneously reveals and obscures much about contemporary racial identities and organising in France.

Fleming also relates her experience of delivering a seminar on her work at the École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales. A young Black woman “passionately objected” to the work’s focus on French Antilleans, a critique that Fleming understood as pushing her “to explicitly include the larger diaspora” (p. 236). Such experiences are, as Fleming says, “par for the course” (p. 237) in fieldwork. But this particular critique does point to an important problem with Fleming’s decision to understand contemporary French attitudes to race through the framework of slavery and the experiences of Antillean communities. Fleming herself alludes to this in the concluding pages of her book writing that “French Caribbeans do not ‘speak for’ all French blacks. It is quite probable that French people from former colonies in sub-Saharan Africa view these issues quite differently” (p. 219). The problem with this position is that it fails to acknowledge how the transatlantic slave trade, and the power relations within the French empire, created this historical dynamic between Antillean and sub-Saharan African subjects of empire. The two groups experienced racialisation, and empire, in very different but interlinked ways. The failure to tackle this in a more substantive way is somewhat of a disappointment in an otherwise brilliant book, especially so because integrating discussion of the legacies of French colonialism in sub-Saharan Africa would further bolster Fleming’s arguments about the structural nature of white

supremacy in present-day France. Nevertheless, Fleming signals the need for further research in this area, research that will be all the better for the existence of Fleming's study.

Anyone working on race, regardless of their temporal or geographical interests, would benefit from reading *Resurrecting Slavery*. The theoretical frame is both rigorous and inviting, gesturing towards further scholarly conversation, and the empirical work is rich and elegantly conveyed. Indeed, the book is accessible to a broad range of audiences—from the university student and researcher, to the informed general reader seeking to engage with the contemporary discussions about race and the legacies of slavery in France.

## NOTES

[1] The relevant line previously read, "It ensures equality before the law for all citizens, without distinction of sex, origin, race or religion." The word "race" has now been removed. France. *The French Constitution, Adopted by the Referendum of September 28, 1958 and Promulgated on October 4, 1958*. French Text and English Translation. New York: French Embassy, Press and Information Division, 1958.

[2] Tricia Keaton, "The Politics of Race Blindness," *Du Bois Review* 7 (2010): 103-131, p. 110.

[3] Sue Peabody, '*There Are No Slaves in France*': *The Political Culture of Race and Slavery in the Ancien Regime* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), pp. 14-15.

[4] W.E.B Du Bois, "The Color Line Belts the World," in David Levering Lewis (Ed.), *W E. B. Du Bois: A Reader* (New York: Macmillan, 1995), p. 42.

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ISSN 1553-9172