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Jennifer PALMER, *Intimate Bonds. Family and Slavery in the French Atlantic*

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REFERENCES

Jennifer PALMER, *Intimate Bonds. Family and Slavery in the French Atlantic*, Philadelphia, University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016, 280 p., ISBN: 978-0-81-224840-1, \$47,5.

- 1 In *Intimate Bonds*, Jennifer Palmer focuses on the French colonial empire, more specifically the port cities of La Rochelle and Port-au-Prince, to analyze how gender and race structured the social order, household and family relationships in the late 18th century. The author addresses the specificity of time-rhythm in the two territorial units from an Atlantic World perspective that integrates the metropolis (France) and the colony (Saint-Domingue) by observing the circulation of people, ideas, goods, and social practices between them. In doing so, Palmer joins a renewed historiography that analyses slavery in the French Colonial Empire through the Atlantic prism.¹
- 2 The book explores the legal, social, political, cultural, and economic differences and similarities between the two locations. La Rochelle, a Protestant city with few enslaved workers had a white majority population. Its port, France's third-largest, received enormous quantities of sugar from the colonies, mainly Saint Domingue, and was the stopping point for slavers sailing on the East Indies route between Africa and the Caribbean. Saint Domingue was the Empire's most productive colony, with the largest number of slaves. A significant part of the investments needed to establish plantations came from bankers in La Rochelle. But there were also poor Frenchmen who migrated to the colony. Some were able to make a fortune from sugar production or the sale of slaves and returned wealthy to the metropolis. Many brought slaves to La Rochelle as a way of flaunting their new social status and challenging traditional principles about

human bondage on a *free soil*.² Palmer argues that the intense influx of people from the colony to La Rochelle, especially during the 18th century, transformed the city's social dynamics and led to changes in legislation regarding the presence of enslaved people in the city.

- 3 Focusing on household relations across racial lines on both sides of the Atlantic, Palmer demonstrates that intimacy shaped the institution of slavery and that family was an important space of resistance against racial categorization. Palmer's sources include admiralty registers, family papers, letters, plantations records, *police des Noirs* documents, wills, and other archival materials kept in four repositories in France. The result is a multilayered book informed by sophisticated analysis, which combines the macro perspective derived from the history of the French Atlantic World with microhistories of families and individuals.
- 4 *Intimate Bonds* has six chapters and an epilogue that interweave detailed case studies with broader social discussions. The reader is invited to reflect on life stories of people such as Aimé-Benjamin Fleuriiau, his eight mixed-race children, and their mother Jeanne—a free woman of color—as well as the white family he created after arriving in la Rochelle; the Regnaud de Beaumont couple who had been married for more than 40 years, but were living and working on different sides of the French Empire; the Africans Neptune and Montréal who safeguarded their freedom in the Court of La Rochelle, among others. Based on this large mosaic of individual and family histories, the author demonstrates how the lives of the residents of the colony and the metropolis could take on different destinies according to their gender and race (with greater emphasis on the former), and how their efforts to negotiate and challenge the social order were instrumental in shaping slavery and freedom in the era of colonialism. To support her claims, Palmer further discusses underlying themes such as intimacy, manumission, heritage, and family inheritance, the legal status of slaves and free people of color, and patriarchy. Her analyses then demonstrate how the political and legal structure of the French Colonial Empire contributed to making the intimate bonds on both sides of the Atlantic more complex.
- 5 Palmer's investigation is rich in detail and very well documented. However, some of the colonial cases analyzed illustrate exceptional situations rather than the conditions of the majority of slaves. That is the case of the Monsieur Beaumont who bequeathed all his wealth to his 'mulatto' children in the colony at the expense of his white family from La Rochelle, or the nine domestic slaves of Madeleine Rossignol, who received manumission from their lady in her will. Although these cases reveal how intimate bonds could produce benefits such as goods and freedom for some enslaved and free people of color, this was not the norm in Saint-Domingue. As Elizabeth Fox-Genovese, Thavolia Glymph, Stephanie Camp and other historians of slavery have demonstrated, intimacy was usually not connected to a master's benevolent action, and plantation households were a working and living space where affection merged with harsh, highly gendered regimes of labor, violence, and hierarchy, including those between white and black women.³
- 6 Palmer contributes fascinating insight into the variety of intimate bonds that crossed racial lines and resulted in surprising forms of social mobility for some enslaved and free people of color on both sides of the French Atlantic. Yet from 1764 on, the French administration began to amend colonial codes, reinforcing racial lines that prevented social mobility and transformed race into a political category.⁴ In Saint Domingue, this

state of affairs created a tension in the fabric of society that led to the subversion of the social order. This paradoxical situation might have been explored further in Palmer's epilogue. It is otherwise difficult to explain such violence and an 'unthinkable revolution' that transformed individual resistance into a mass phenomenon, and culminated in the emergence of a modern Black state, as described by Michel-Rolph Trouillot.⁵ Jennifer Palmer has nonetheless produced a stimulating study on slavery, liberty, gender, and interracial intimacy. It is to be applauded for showing slavery as a complex and far from uniform phenomenon, which is fundamental to understanding the modern world.

NOTES

1. Sue Peabody, *There Are No Slaves in France. The political culture of race and slavery in the Ancien Régime*, New York / Oxford, Oxford University of Press, 1996; Sue Peabody & Keila Grinberg, *Slavery, Freedom, and the Law in the Atlantic World*, Boston, Bedford Books, 2007; Malick W. Ghachem, *The Old Regime, and the Haitian Revolution*, Cambridge / New York, Cambridge University Press, 2012; Rebecca Scott & Jean Hébrard, *Freedom Papers. An Atlantic Odyssey in the Age of Emancipation*, Cambridge, Massachusetts, Harvard University Press, 2012; Dale Tomich, *Slavery in the Circuit of Sugar. Martinique and the World-Economy, 1830-1848*, Revised Edition, Albany, State University of New York, 2016.
2. As Palmer explains, the principle of *free soil* dates back to the 14th century and was based on the idea that slaves brought into the kingdom would be freed. However the French crown allowed slavery on its shores after intense pressure from the slave-owners, as can be noted in the Edict of 1716. (Palmer, p 45-46)
3. Elizabeth Fox-Genovese, *Within the Plantation Household. Black & White Women of the Old South*, Chapel Hill, The University of North Carolina Press, 1988; Thavolia Glymph, *Out of the House of Bondage. The transformation of the plantation household*, Cambridge / New York, Cambridge University Press, 2008; Stephanie Camp, *Closer to freedom: enslaved women & everyday resistance in the Plantation south*, Chapel Hill / London, University of North Carolina Press, 2004.
4. Louis-Élie Moreau de Saint-Méry, *Loix et constitutions des colonies françaises de l'Amérique sous le vent*, Paris, Moutard, 1786, t. 5 (1766-1779), <http://www.manioc.org/patrimoine/MMC16057-5>.
5. Michel-Rolph Trouillot, *Silencing the past. Power and the production of History*, Boston, Beacon Press, 1995.

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