



Esclavages & Post-esclavages

Slaveries & Post-Slaveries

1 | 2019

Citoyenneté & contre-citoyenneté

Lisa Ze WINTERS, *The Mulatta Concubine: Terror, Intimacy, Freedom, and Desire in the Black Transatlantic*

Yvonne Fabella



Electronic version

URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/slaveries/502>

DOI: 10.4000/slaveries.502

ISSN: 2540-6647

Publisher

CIRESC

Electronic reference

Yvonne Fabella, « Lisa Ze WINTERS, *The Mulatta Concubine: Terror, Intimacy, Freedom, and Desire in the Black Transatlantic* », *Esclavages & Post-esclavages* [Online], 1 | 2019, Online since 20 November 2019, connection on 25 November 2020. URL : <http://journals.openedition.org/slaveries/502> ; DOI : <https://doi.org/10.4000/slaveries.502>

This text was automatically generated on 25 November 2020.



Les contenus de la revue *Esclavages & Post-esclavages / Slaveries & Post-Slaveries* sont mis à disposition selon les termes de la licence Creative Commons Attribution - Pas d'Utilisation Commerciale - Pas de Modification 4.0 International.

Lisa Ze WINTERS, *The Mulatta Concubine: Terror, Intimacy, Freedom, and Desire in the Black Transatlantic*

Yvonne Fabella

REFERENCES

Lisa Ze WINTERS, *The Mulatta Concubine: Terror, Intimacy, Freedom, and Desire in the Black Transatlantic*, Athens, University of Georgia Press, 2018, 248 p., ISBN: 978-0-8203-5384-5, \$27,95.

- 1 The stereotype of the “mulatta concubine”—autonomous, beautiful, extravagantly dressed, often free, and economically ascendant owing to her sexual relationships with white men—circulated with remarkable consistency across Atlantic world slave societies. Lisa Ze Winters’ book demonstrates the ubiquity of the image by drawing on print, archival, and visual sources, as well as religious iconography, from Africa, Europe, and the Americas from the eighteenth, nineteenth, and twentieth centuries. Part of a wave of recent scholarship in English addressing the stereotype and the lived experiences of the women it depicts (see work by Emily Clark, Marlene Daut, Jennifer Palmer, and Lorelle Semley, for example), Winters’ book is distinctive owing to its African diasporic framework as well as its theoretical sophistication. Critical of imperial or local approaches that silence the voices of African and African-descended people by obscuring connections between them, Winters reads sources from seemingly disparate times and places against one another to explore “how black subjects, in order to envision the possibility of freedom and agency, must inhabit multiple imaginative and physical landscapes simultaneously” (21). The figure of the “mulatta concubine,” she argues, is central to an exploration of the interiority of African and African-descended people faced with the racialized “terror” generated by trans-Atlantic slavery and the trade.

- 2 Winters' analysis moves between three locales and the "mulatta" women who inhabited them: property-owning *signarés* in eighteenth-century Gorée and Saint Louis; Saint Domingue's notoriously seductive "*mulâtresses*"; and the "quadroons" of antebellum New Orleans. The book is framed by a recurring and representative example of Winters' creative use of sources. Briefly mentioned in the records of the *Compagnie de la Louisiane* was an unnamed *signaré* who boarded a slave ship in 1728 (with her own slaves) on Gorée, bound for New Orleans, following her recently deported French husband. Why, Winters asks, might she have left Gorée, a place where such women allegedly "enjoyed a stability, a security, a possibility for prosperity, and above all else a type of freedom not available to free women of color in the Americas"? (9). We know nothing else about the woman's motivations for leaving, if indeed she chose to go, or what happened to her in Louisiana. Yet her movement from an African slaving port to a nascent American slave colony, as a slaveowning African woman, grounds Winters' larger questions about how African diasporic people understood the relationship between race and freedom in all three places. How might the captives on the ship have read the *signaré's* freedom and imagined the newly bounded possibilities of their own (44-6)? How might she, "*a black female passenger aboard a slave ship,*" have "imagined herself" and the precarious nature of her own safety, agency and liberty (10-11)?
- 3 The dominant archive, Winters argues, cannot easily answer such questions. Whereas historians often place great faith in empirical data to construct an accurate view of the past, Winters—following Michel-Rolph Trouillot and a host of literary scholars—notes that traditional sources depicting the *mulâtresse*, the quadroon, and the *signaré* often read more like fantasy than reality (75, 86). Colonial-era documents silence African diasporic subjects, and archival practices compound those silences. Winters therefore looks to African diasporic religious practices as a "counter-archive" documenting the "intellectual and spiritual labor" of her subjects, as did Barbara Christian, Vèvè Clark, and Colin Dayan before her (18-19). Specifically, Winters draws on the Haitian vodou *lwa* (spirit) Ezili, whose multiple manifestations resemble the "mulatta concubine," to read the figures of the *signaré*, *mulâtresse* and quadroon from an African diasporic perspective, one that is not bounded geographically but rather asserts the "entangled" nature of diasporic identity (20).
- 4 Yet Winters resists the urge to trace a straightforward discursive or intellectual lineage of the image: twentieth-century Ezili is not simply the enactment of the historical memory of the eighteenth-century *signaré*, or even the Saint Dominguan *mulâtresse*, and the twentieth-century Ezili could not have possibly or directly informed depictions of these earlier women. Rather, Winters proposes that we consider the repetition of such images across time and place as "echoes" produced by white male desire as well as diasporic practice. While they are products of particular historical moments and locales, they repeat in sometimes unexplainable, non-linear patterns. Indeed, incorporating a theoretical framework called "spiralism," borrowed from Haitian vodou and a Duvalier-era Haitian literary tradition, Winters proposes that we think of African diasporic intellectual and cultural transmission, and the repetition of imagery within it, as happening in a circuitous process. Such "spiraling" allows for a multiplicity of cultural and discursive outcomes, "refusing a single, coherent, verifiable account" (38). Thus Ezili, a goddess who takes multiple forms, has origins in Saint Dominguan slavery and Haitian freedom, but she is echoed in a broader diasporic pantheon, resembling the Yoruba deity Osun as well as the West African Mami Wata

(36). Winters explains that Mami Wata most resembles one of Ezili's incarnations, Lasirèn. Both are associated with water and foreign travel; both are considered dangerous but also represent economic or commercial success. Lasirèn is said to pull her devotees underwater and take them to Africa, eventually returning them with lighter skin as well as sacred knowledge. Such "spirals" between the American and African contexts prompt another question: might Lasirèn herself serve as an "archive of what captive subjects passing through slave ports like Gorée and Saint-Louis may have understood when they saw free[d] black and mulatta women who profited from their sexual connections with foreign white men" (104)? Could Lasirèn help us arrive at the perspectives of those enslaved Africans aboard the ship bound for New Orleans with the *signaré*?

- 5 The book is rich with interpretive possibilities for scholars of the diaspora. One particularly compelling thread is Winters' suggestion that women's intimate domestic spaces be read as sites for the formation of diasporic subjectivity (84). Rather than associating the private spaces of the "mulatta concubine" primarily with sexual exchange, Winters argues for their centrality to the preservation of families, the creation of local communities, the transfer of diasporic knowledge, and the articulation of black womanhood. In the privacy of New Orleans homes, women of color fashioned headwraps (*tignons*) and performed Voodoo rituals, sharing feminine and spiritual wisdom with their daughters, granddaughters, and other women (81–6). Likewise, Senegalese *signarés* were avid consumers of *gris-gris* talismans and participants in an "indigenously syncretic spiritual economy" increasingly relegated to designated rooms within their homes (41). Winters asks what this knowledge might tell us about their understanding of their own sexual relations with white men. That is, if their homes were not only private but sacred spaces, might they have considered sex and its consequences—becoming a *signaré*—to be sacred as well, "not because of the wealth or status it afforded but because of the possibility of protection from the sexualized violence otherwise ubiquitous in a slave society that it promised" (42)?
- 6 Such questions remain unresolved, and unanswerable. For Winters, however, the point is to ask them, to consider new methods and frameworks that will permit scholars to tell Atlantic world history from the perspective of African-descended people. Her book is a salient reminder of the limits of the "dominant archive" and the need for vigilance when using it. And yet, much remains to be culled from the vast documentation produced by white officials and elites. In spite of their limitations, traditional sources reveal the diverse experiences of African diasporic people and contest the simple narratives suggested by pervasive racist tropes like the "mulatta concubine." As importantly, careful archival research grounds the discourse of race and slavery in everyday practices. It reveals patterns of behavior, including the choices of African-descended people as well as the structures that constrained them. John Garrigus, Stewart King, Dominique Rogers, Sophie White, as well as Emily Clark and Jennifer Palmer, are just some examples of scholars whose archival work on Saint Domingue and Louisiana succeeds in this regard.
- 7 Such research, however, necessitates sustained engagement with the places and moments in which historical subjects lived. In her desire to evade the silences produced by geographically and temporally limited frameworks, Winters has unmoored these diasporic women from the local contexts that shaped their identities. For example, given the elite status of eighteenth-century *signarés* in Gorée, one wonders whether the

slaveowning, intermarried “mulatta” headed for New Orleans would in fact have identified herself as “black,” as Winters does. Furthermore, although Winters’ analysis is broadly diasporic, the “mulatta concubine” she traces inhabits only French (or formerly French) colonies. That colonial context influences the story in significant ways, determining not only the local power structures in which all colonial residents examined their own subjectivity, but also the legal, religious, and cultural institutions through which they sometimes expressed it.

- 8 Still, Winters offers a provocative way to think about the history of race and slavery in the Atlantic world, using a combination of traditional sources, alternative archives, and imagination. The book will embolden historians and literary scholars to take interpretive leaps in order to uncover the elusive voices of African diasporic people, particularly those of women.

AUTHORS

YVONNE FABELLA

University of Pennsylvania (Department of History), États-Unis