

*H-France Forum*  
Volume 12 (2017), Issue 2, #1

Jennifer Palmer, *Intimate Bonds: Family and Slavery in the French Atlantic*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016. ix + 267 pp. Maps, illustrations, notes, bibliography and index. \$45.00 U.S. (cl.). ISBN 0812248406.

Review Essay by Laurent Dubois, Duke University

*Intimate Bonds* begins with a ship arriving in the harbor of La Rochelle, and recounts the scene from the perspective of Lizette and Hardy, both enslaved. For one of them, Hardy, this was a second voyage across the Atlantic: he had been born in Africa. When Hardy's master registered the presence of his slaves in La Rochelle, as he was required to do according to early eighteenth century laws, he declared that he was of the "Banguia nation." (1, n 138).

This, as Palmer notes, is a very rare African ethnic designation from Saint-Domingue. Among the over 10,000 runaway slaves listed in advertisements in the Le Cap newspaper *Affiches Américaines* (which [have been digitized and are searchable](#) thanks to the work of a research group in Canada), the term only appears a few times. In 1784 [a runaway named César](#) was listed as being of the "Bangia" nation. The term also appears, interestingly, as a name: an [eighteen-year-old "Creole" named Joseph Banguia](#) ran away in 1777, and [a man named Jacques Banguia](#) (who also went by the names Tibia and Pierre), ran away in 1778. The term "Banguia" or "Bangia" – according to historian Christina Mobley (personal communication) – likely refers to a small group called the "Bangî" or "Bobangi," who plied the canoe trade along the Congo River Basin in the eighteenth century.

As Palmer notes, Hardy's life experiences in Africa, which may have included some form of enslavement experienced before the Middle Passage, might have shaped the way he interacted with his master's family. It was unusual, she suggests, for African-born slaves – who were the majority in the colony – to work as domestics. So, perhaps he had found a way of "purposely setting himself apart" or "done something to attract attention" that led him to be chosen as a domestic. This, in turn, meant that was brought to La Rochelle, where he was integrated enough in the life of the family that owned him that he was named the godfather of his master's daughter in 1766. ( 2, n. 64).

Such remarkable and rich stories are the core of Palmer's vital contribution. She argues, in line with a number of other studies of gender, family and slavery, that "intimacy shaped the institution of slavery." But she also argues, innovatively, that "family formed a platform to resist racial categorization." Empire, she argues, "transformed gender roles," and in turn within family relations gender "continued to usurp race as the primary category that structured household relations." "Race and enslaved status were not firm, inevitable categories, but fluid constructs open to interpretation and reinvention." In the specific context of "transatlantic and interracial personal connection" that she explores in rich detail, "people could explore alternatives." (3-5). Palmer expertly uses case studies of particular families whose lives stretched across the Atlantic

to richly illuminate and analyze how practices of commerce and law were confronted and reshaped in the pursuit of a wide range of goals.

The question of family and slavery has, of course, been at the center of debate and research for many decades. It is, in a sense, a nodal point, both intellectually but also in terms of sentiment and emotion around representations of slavery. It is not an easy topic to navigate, but as Palmer reminds us, it is perhaps one of the most vital and illuminate ways to get a sense of the history of slavery, and empire: “intimacies simultaneously offered the rationale for slave-owning practices, ways for owners to exercise their dominance, a platform for slaves to resist their enslavement, and a vocabulary for people of color to claim inclusion in their community.” (8). *Intimate Bonds* shows how this was the case in day-to-day life by alternating between the detailed social history focused on particular figures and a broader analysis that seamlessly brings together law, economic and society.

Palmer’s work joins other recent histories that have similarly centered questions and family in the study of slavery. Thavolia Glymph’s pivotal in *Out of the House of Bondage* has transformed the discussion of this question in recent years. [1] And Jean Hébrard and Rebecca Scott in *Freedom Papers* have studied a family over multi-generations through a “microhistory in motion” that follows them from the Caribbean to New Orleans and Europe. [2] Trevor Burnard’s *Mastery, Tyranny and Desire*, meanwhile, also grapples with the complex of sexual violence and long-term relationships that shaped the life of Thomas Thistlewood in Jamaica. [3] Most closely linked to Palmer’s research, however, is the work on Saint-Domingue’s free people of color by Doris Garraway, John Garrigus, Stewart King, and Dominique Roger that has profoundly deepened our sense of the complex intersections of race, sexuality, gender and society in the colonial context. [4] In deep dialogue with this scholarship, Palmer’s work both carefully builds on prior interventions and makes important new innovations.

Each of these works depends on the innovative and rich use of archival sources. In the French Atlantic cases, notarial and *état civil* records have been central to the creation of stories of family relationships. Palmer delves into is an extremely rich source base, largely drawn from departmental archives in France that until now – outside the foundational work of Gabriel Debien – have not sufficiently been used by scholars. By focusing her story on La Rochelle, a port town that has received less attention than either Nantes or Bordeaux, she also expands our understanding of the way in which trans-Atlantic commerce shaped French society. And by examining the links between La Rochelle and Port-au-Prince and the broader Western Province of Saint-Domingue, she usefully shows us how to do work that ties together carefully researched local histories in a way that illuminates the broader patterns of movement between them.

Palmer centers much of her analysis on carefully analyzing the ways in which women’s roles were shaped by broader legal contexts, but also how they often managed to navigate through these contexts to carve out broader spaces of autonomy. Her work complicates our understanding of how these situations unfolded, illuminating diverse and creative legal practices that enabled women to take on economic roles in La Rochelle particularly. The stories she offers in her book are particularly interesting and riveting, offering new and deep insight into the texture of daily lives in the French Atlantic.

The use of Hardy's trans-Atlantic story to begin the book points to one of the ways future scholarship may build on Palmer's insights. New research on the French Atlantic, notably that of Christina Mobley, takes up John Thornton's encouragement that we think much more deeply about the African dimensions of the history of the Atlantic, notably Saint-Domingue/Haiti. [5] One of the most intriguing questions in this regard, one with far-reaching implications for our understanding not just of the Haitian Revolution but of Haitian society more broadly, is to think about how ideas about gender, family, and status from Africa – and notably from Central Africa where the majority of enslaved people in Saint-Domingue came from – shaped practices in the colonial context. As Palmer's book shows eloquently, to write the history of slavery requires centering the intersection of family, law, and social structures in the way she does so well. It would be interesting to think through how the work might shift in some ways if a deeper engagement with the question of African ideas and practices of kinship, notably of the link between family structures and economic activity, were somehow incorporated into the discussion. Could Hardy's story, for instance, be sharpened or expanded with a broader investigation into what his life in Africa might have been like? Given that one of the most fundamental cultural aspects of the Haitian Revolution was the creation of new kinds of kinship structures, family land ownership, and a marketing system dominated by women, there are also intriguing questions about how one might connect the rich analysis offered by Palmer to a larger analysis of the continuities and ruptures between the plantation world and the social and cultural structures of independent Haiti.

Like any important work, Palmer's opens up many new questions. It is interesting to place it in dialogue with another recent work with a strong French Atlantic focus, John Garrigus and Trevor Burnard's *The Plantation Machine*. [6] In this work, though the authors are sensitive to the nuances of social and cultural history and to questions of gender, the emphasis is very much on the broad structures of power and exploitation that made the plantation system work. In Palmer's work, we get a very different portrait of this same system that focuses on the intimacies and intricacies of this world, and gives us a sense of the possibilities of motion and negotiation. This contrast mirrors a long-running debate among scholars studying slavery about whether the emphasis should be on documenting, and in some ways celebrating, successful forms of resistance, or alternatively on emphasizing the brutality and profitability of the system, and the ways that in the larger sense it masterfully closed down and destroyed possibilities for life and freedom. What are the implications of each emphasis for the way we think about the present? And is there a way to somehow bring together these perspectives as we think broadly about the meaning and legacies of the history of plantation slavery for our contemporary world – including contemporary France?

## NOTES

[1] Thavolia Glymph, *Out of the House of Bondage: The Transformation of the Plantation Household* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008).

[2] Rebecca J. Scott, *Freedom Papers: An Atlantic Odyssey in the Age of Emancipation* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 2012).

[3] Trevor G Burnard, *Mastery, Tyranny, and Desire: Thomas Thistlewood and His Slaves in the*

*Anglo-Jamaican World* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004).

[4] Doris Lorraine Garraway, *The Libertine Colony: Creolization in the Early French Caribbean* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005); Garraway John D. Garrigus, *Before Haiti: Race and Citizenship in French Saint-Domingue* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006); Dominique Rogers and Stewart King, “Housekeepers, Merchants, Rentieres: Free Women of Color in the Port Cities of Colonial Saint-Domingue, 1750-1790,” in *Women in Port: Gendering Communities, Economies, and Social Networks in Atlantic Port Cities, 1500-1800*, ed. Douglas Catterall and Jodi Campbell (Leiden: Brill, 2012), 357–97.

[5] John K. Thornton, “I Am the Subject of the King of Congo: African Political Ideology and the Haitian Revolution,” *Journal of World History* 4 (Fall 1993): 181–214; John K. Thornton, “African Soldiers in the Haitian Revolution,” *Journal of Caribbean History* 25, no. 1 and 2 (1991): 58–80; Christina Mobley, “The Kongoles Atlantic: Central African Slavery & Culture from Mayombe to Haiti” (Ph.D. diss, Duke University, 2015).

[6] Trevor Burnard and John Garrigus, *The Plantation Machine: Atlantic Capitalism in French Saint-Domingue and British Jamaica* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2017).

Laurent Dubois  
Duke University  
laurent.dubois@duke.edu

Copyright © 2017 by H-France, all rights reserved. H-France 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. H-France 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 Forum* 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.