

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

Jennifer L. Palmer, *Intimate Bonds: Family and Slavery in the French Atlantic*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016. 267 pp. Maps, notes, and index. \$45 U.S.(cl). ISBN 978-0-812-24840-1

Review by Christine Adams, St. Mary's College of Maryland

Historians of family life are well aware that affection and interest have always been closely entwined; as Hans Medick and David Sabeau wrote in 1984, “both emotions and material interests are socially constituted and . . . they arise from the same matrix.” [1] Families across time and space have had to consider emotional bonds, financial resources, social pressures, and legal ramifications when managing their households and personal relationships. When families encompassed both black and white members at a time when racial ideologies and boundaries were hardening, the juxtaposition of the affective and the practical becomes particularly revealing.

Jennifer L. Palmer's impressive book skillfully examines these competing imperatives through a frame that forces reconsideration of both racial categories and family. It also demonstrates the new directions that family history has taken in recent years. In a 2007 article, Nara Milanich suggested that historians could reinvigorate study of the family, a field experiencing a “certain restless frustration,” by “[m]oving beyond the paths charted by European historiography” to “colonial and post-colonial societies heretofore marginal to family history.” [2] In fact, Palmer blends these two historiographical approaches, the traditional and the new. Her study, which investigates merchant families with ties to both the port city of La Rochelle and the French colony of Saint-Domingue in the eighteenth century, “sheds new light on the history of empire and slavery in the early modern French Atlantic by looking at the relations and institutions that anchored this world: the family and the household.” In particular, she makes the case that race “was a dynamic, fluid, lived category” made more so by the intimate relations of men and women across the color line (5). In short, an analysis of these processes of racial negotiation within families, on the micro level, helps us better understand transformations taking place at the macro level that affected gender roles, slavery, race, and empire.

By comparing Palmer's book with Robert Forster's masterful 1980 study of the Deponts, also from La Rochelle, [3] we can see just how much the field has changed in the past thirty-five years. While Forster concentrated on the Depont family's transformation from a Protestant merchant family involved in colonial trade (including the slave trade) to a powerful family with connections to Versailles and Paris, Palmer focuses on her families' connections across the Atlantic. Forster's Deponts (later, DePonts) redirected the commercial profits of paterfamilias Paul Depont toward lands and *rentes*, the traditional investments of the socially mobile eighteenth-century notable. Palmer's families maintained their connections with Saint-Domingue and the riskier attractions of plantation society and transatlantic trade. While Forster acknowledges the importance of the slave trade to the creation of the Depont family fortune, we

get only a hint of family ties to black household members; Paul-François, in his will, left “to Mercure, their black, if he remains in the service of their family, a gift of one hundred livres lifetime pension to help him subsist.” [4] We hear no more about him. In contrast, for Palmer, the complicated relations between white and black members of the households she examines are central to her analysis of family structures, and individuals of color are active agents, not just passive recipients. While women play a role in Forster’s account as daughters, marriage partners, and heirs, it is gender analysis, in particular the competing hierarchies of race and gender, which shape Palmer’s account in ways that force rethinking familiar narratives of family and class.

While Forster used the story of several generations of one family to trace changes that were taking place within France during the pre-Revolutionary years, Palmer examines relationships within several families to shed new light on the history of the French empire, concentrating on two families in particular; she argues that “By closely considering individual families and the personal connections that entangled the lives of whites and people of color in La Rochelle and the western province of Saint-Domingue, this work shows how intimate choices defined and transformed the French transatlantic empire and trade” (5). Her account nuances the narrative that racial categories hardened over the course of the eighteenth century, limiting some of the fluidity that had existed in earlier years. Palmer’s careful analysis of particular cases indicates that boundaries remained unstable in the interpersonal relations of blacks and whites, even as the law tried to limit that fluidity with the Edict of 1716, the Declaration of 1738, and the Admiralty Ordinance of 1762. Specifically, she argues that “studying day-to-day life within the household complicates narratives of race as a solidifying category by demonstrating that individuals habitually crossed racial lines throughout the ancien régime” (16).

Against the backdrop of this broader story line—changing attitudes towards race, miscegenation, slavery, and freedom in the century leading up to the French Revolution—Palmer uses the lens of family to understand better the interactions between private life and the wider world. Terms familiar to Euro-centric family historians—family strategies, patriarchy and authority relations, marriage strategies, concubinage, property, inheritance patterns, godparentage, family economies—acquire new valence when race is added to the mix. The marriage of Jean-Severin Regnaud de Beaumont and Marie-Magdelaine Royer in 1735 at first followed the pattern of most Old Regime alliances, as both families, with deep roots in La Rochelle’s transatlantic community, sought to maximize the joint assets of the couple in their marriage contract. In this case, that meant managing the transatlantic holdings of the couple, and ensuring financial protection and flexibility for a wife who would be left vulnerable by her ship captain (and eventual colonial plantation owner) husband’s long absences. Such marriages often went awry, threatening the security of women and their children, even when the marriage contract gave careful attention to the legal protection of a wife’s assets. However, distance and interracial relationships especially complicated the position of Marie-Magdelaine Royer Regnaud de Beaumont. Her husband’s long absences in Saint-Domingue—he finally left La Rochelle in 1743, and stayed there until his death in 1775—as well as white male privilege, meant that, despite her legal power of attorney, Jean-Severin could make financial arrangements without Marie-Magdelaine’s approval or even knowledge, frittering away her property in ways that remain mysterious. Likewise, he could hide his money difficulties from her almost until the moment of his death laid bare the extent of his penury. Distance also meant that he could

establish and favor a new family fathered with a woman of color in Léogane; despite legal obligations to his legitimate family in La Rochelle, his greater affection for his second family in Saint-Domingue created financial havoc as he assigned legacies to his mixed-race children that ate into the already diminished resources of his wife and their children. In another case, Jean-Aimé Fleuriau's relationship with a woman of color in the colonies, before returning to La Rochelle and marrying Marie-Anne-Suzanne Liège, also made for a complicated family tree. He brought five children fathered with Jeanne Guimbelot back to La Rochelle and maintained close ties with them even after his marriage and the subsequent birth of legitimate children. However, despite his efforts to care for his natural children, he carefully distinguished between his legitimate and illegitimate family in his will, and never openly acknowledged his paternity—even while his mix-raced daughters sought to claim his name. Race and legitimacy created a hierarchy of claims that, in this case, even affection could not entirely overcome.

As another seemingly “natural” hierarchy, gender was also particularly complicated by the introduction of racial categories. While family historians have long integrated gender into their analysis of family dynamics, the elements of race and distance that Palmer foregrounds force us to think about this category in new and fruitful ways. Once again, because of their combined assets (carefully delineated in a marriage contract that drew on the customary laws of both La Rochelle and Paris), Marie-Magdelaine Royer Regnaud de Beaumont expected and was expected to participate actively in the family business, “arranging for shipment and dispersal of the indigo and other products sent from her husband’s plantation, signing contracts and making business arrangements, and filing lawsuits to recover profits from sunken ships or crooked deals” (81), both in her own name, and through power of attorney on her husband’s behalf. And yet, custom and social prejudices worked to circumscribe the power that women could, in reality, wield. Merchants did not accord them the same respect as their male spouses, and their husbands, far across the ocean, could and did undercut the authority of their wives, even when the law supported the wife’s financial claims. In addition, while white women in Saint-Domingue itself were able to wield patriarchal authority over their slaves in a social and economic setting infused with issues of race, white women in France sometimes found it more difficult to exercise control over slaves absent that context. They also had to pay close attention to sexual propriety, given the sexual fantasies that shaped contemporary understanding of relations across the color line. Palmer forcefully emphasizes the fact that not all—in fact not even most—intimate relationships between whites and people of color were sexual. Still, she notes that “even the incorporation of male slaves into their households could raise questions about white feminine purity, questions already being asked about white women who had lived in the Antilles” (128).

Palmer’s research for this book was prodigious and she deftly reads against the grain and teases out hidden meanings in the documents available: correspondence, business accounts, marriage contracts, testaments, records of apprenticeship, legal ordinances and declarations, parish registers, and the like, documents very familiar to historians of France. However, in a book about intimate bonds, it is frustrating at times that so few documents exist to give voice to those intimate relations. This is the perennial lament of family historians: the most intimate moments of individuals’ lives do not leave a record. While for my own history of a family, the Lamothés of Bordeaux, I was lucky enough to have a cache of over 300 personal family letters, even those left much unspoken. [4] Palmer does indeed examine correspondence between family members separated by the Atlantic, for example, between Royer Regnaud de Beaumont and her son, Jean-

Marie-Olive. But given the often fraught family relations, complicated by extramarital and interracial relationships, legitimate and illegitimate children, as well as financial sleight of hand, much was left unsaid in those letters. Instead, Palmer draws most heavily on legacies to speculate about the affective relations among family members, black and white. These testaments can indeed be revealing, and Palmer analyzes them with nuance. We can assume that, even against the backdrop of exploitation and racial prejudice, genuine love could exist in these households, as well as tensions and resentments. But we are only able to access those ties of affection and bitterness indirectly through the documents that exist.

Palmer's book is an exciting one, for it is a remarkable study that breathes new life into the field of family history. While we have long been aware of the intersection of emotional and material concerns, her work gives us new ways to think about it. Love and exploitation have always played a role in the dynamics of family life; but when race and gender take center stage, those dynamics certainly become more complicated. However, I would have liked to see more reflection on whether the hierarchy of race is unique in the complications it introduces to familial relations. The evidence she presents suggests that perhaps it was simply one more hierarchy among many. In the case of Marie-Magdelaine Royer Regnaud de Beaumont, gender imposed legal barriers for her that were nearly as difficult to navigate as the barriers of race were for the children of Aimé-Benjamin Fleuriau. Race was reinforced by class separation in that case as well, as Fleuriau provided substantially smaller legacies for his mix-raced children than he did for his legitimate white children--but surely he would have discriminated in a similar fashion against natural children from a relationship with a white woman of lower social class. In the end, the lesson we learn is one that family historians have always known—that the hierarchies imposed by race, class, and gender are real and often painful, but the negotiations that take place in the privacy of the family can mitigate or reinforce them. Patriarchy was a force sufficiently strong to maintain public hierarchies even when intimate relations might serve to undercut them in the household.

NOTES

[1] Hans Medick and David Warren Sabean, eds., *Interest and Emotion: Essays on the Study of Family and Kinship* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), 3.

[2] Nara Milanich, "Whither Family History? A Road Map from Latin America," *American Historical Review* 112:2 (April 2007): 440.

[3] Robert Forster, *Merchants, Landlords, Magistrates: The Depont Family in Eighteenth-Century France* (Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1980).

[4] Forster, *Merchants, Landlords, Magistrates*, 45.

[5] *A Taste for Comfort and Status: A Bourgeois Family in Eighteenth-Century France* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2000).

Christine Adams
St. Mary's College of Maryland
cmadams@smcm.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.