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Jennifer Palmer, *Intimate Bonds: Family and Slavery in the French Atlantic*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016. 267 pp. \$45.00 U.S. (c) ISBN 978-0812248401.

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Intimate Bonds provides a compelling and original study of race and gender relations in the eighteenth century. Concentrating on the connections between the French port city of La Rochelle and the western province of Saint Domingue, Jennifer Palmer uses deeply researched accounts of individual lives, especially those of people of color within metropolitan France, to suggest new lenses onto the dynamics of family and slavery in the transatlantic world.

Palmer alternates chapters between case studies focused on specific individuals or households and those providing a broader analysis. Chapter one, “Proximity and Distance in Plantation Society,” looks at one planter, Paul Belin, and his relationship with his slave driver Alexis. Exploring how Belin’s familial and plantation networks affected his business, she argues that his story shows a shift between the 1720s and the 1760s, with an increasing emphasis on rational productivity and more rigid social categories of race. Chapter two, “Legitimizing Authority,” focuses on people of color in La Rochelle, and especially the ways that slave owners used, or circumvented, laws to maintain authority over slaves in the city. The chapter concentrates on the Edict of 1716 and the Declaration of 1738, both of which required owners bringing slaves to France to register them and limited the reasons why slaves could be brought to metropolitan soil and how long they could remain. She also investigates the different ways owners evaded these requirements. While her account builds on earlier research into the impact of these decrees elsewhere in France, Palmer emphasizes the importance of the unusual legal status of La Rochelle.

Turning the focus to white women, chapter three considers how families—particularly one family, that of Jean-Severin Regnaud de Beaumont and Marie-Magdelaine Royer—planned for transatlantic separations. Palmer evaluates legal instruments, including marriage contracts, testaments, and the power of attorney, to explore the roles French women could play in business when their male partners or relatives were away. Careful not to overestimate these tools as necessarily empowering women, she reveals how unexpected circumstances could limit their value. Even equipped with the power of attorney, Royer lacked the clout and connections of a man involved in transatlantic trade, encountering difficulties her husband would have been unlikely to confront.

The next chapter looks more generally at white women as economic actors. While there were far more white men than women in the colony—usually a ratio of about two to one—Palmer shows that they were integrated into the local economy. Against an eighteenth-century view of such women as jealous of their husbands’ Creole mistresses and particularly cruel to their slaves, she posits more complex relationships. Here her account seems somewhat rushed, but the cases of

manumission she examines are intriguing. The chapter also briefly considers white women's efforts to assert authority over people of color in metropolitan France.

Two final chapters focus on people of color, especially within France. Chapter five introduces us to the planter Aimé Benjamin Fleuriau, who brought five of his illegitimate mixed-race children to France in 1755. Emphasizing the liminal status of these children and the ways that Fleuriau simultaneously provided for yet separated himself from them, Palmer looks at the Admiralty Ordinance of 1763, which required the registration of all people of color in France, regardless of nationality, sex, or legal status. While Fleuriau sought to describe his children with details setting them apart from other people of color, the very act of registering them emphasized their racial identity. Similarly, his will provided generously for his illegitimate children, but presented them as the descendants of Jeanne Guimbelot, a *négresse libre*, without acknowledging his paternity; such rhetoric associated them definitively with their black mother rather than his role as a white father. His illegitimate daughter was nonetheless able to use her inheritance to establish herself and to become prominent enough to avoid being encompassed in a subsequent census of people of color.

Concluding with a chapter entitled "Negotiating Patriarchy," the author describes how people of color in France identified themselves, especially those who registered according to the 1763 Ordinance and the 1777 survey associated with the Police des Noirs. When possible, men emphasized their identities as heads of household, even if doing so required creative presentation. Women of color faced other limits in asserting their identity, but a few such women succeeded in highlighting their relative economic self-sufficiency.

Palmer reminds us of the importance of looking at practice, as well as law, to understand how slavery, race, and power actually functioned. Other historians have called attention both to the complexities of Old Regime law—in which different legal principles or jurisdictions could, and did, clash—and the ways that people circumvented specific measures with regard to race.[1] Palmer similarly emphasizes how people used legal instruments and evaded legal obligations. Her work is especially valuable in also showing how historians can scrutinize the language of different legal measures—like censuses or wills—to locate hidden traces of individual identity.

Indeed, one of the important aspects of the book is its attention to the possibilities and constraints of individual agency in different contexts. By definition, slaves had severely limited control over their own lives, but Palmer finds clues to how they—or people who were former slaves, or whose status was ambiguous or contested—might have asserted themselves. The fragmentary nature of her sources often requires Palmer to speculate about possible motives or experiences. She has done an impressive job of tracking down individuals, uncovering the traces of their lives in scattered legal documents, letters, parish registers, and other archival records.[2] She also reads the evidence creatively. Musing about what Augustin, a slave and wigmaker in France whose owner accused him of "blackest ingratitude," might have done, she indicates what his skills and experiences might have led him to expect from a voyage to Saint Domingue. Similarly, she speculates on why another slave, Tranchemontange, signed his (adult) baptismal record with a cross, at a time when few slaves signed at all, and contends that his choice to do so may have indicated his awareness of the importance of literacy or insistence on his own involvement. Palmer pays more general attention to how people identified themselves when they could do so,

in terms of their familial, economic, and racial positions. She uses those clues to make well-informed guesses about what an individual might have known or tried to control. Her interpretations are persuasive, but they often remain tantalizing hypotheses, impossible to verify definitively.

Gender and family dynamics are also treated creatively. Here Palmer adds to a growing interest in households in the transatlantic world as well as a substantial body of work on gender and slavery.[3] Placing households at the center of her analysis, she teases out subtle social relations. She also seeks to identify what models of masculinity and femininity were available to different individuals, and the extent to which men and women were able to appropriate or adapt these models.

Palmer's title, "Intimate Bonds," suggests both intimacy and bondage, closeness and constraint. Further, the book presents new ways to think about intimacy and transatlantic history. Palmer uses "intimate" not only to refer to interracial sexual relations—the most common use of the term among scholars of gender and colonialism—but also to a wide variety of interactions based on day-to-day proximity and familial relationships. This approach has decided virtues, as it helps uncover both the possibilities of personal agency and the range of mechanisms of power. It especially allows us to see gendered aspects of those mechanisms.

At the same time, a focus on intimate relations and personal stories does have costs. Palmer's notion of "intimacy" can be amorphous or slippery at times. It can also downplay the violence of slavery. This is clearly not Palmer's intention; she is well aware of brutality. Yet focusing on a limited set of individuals and interactions can still turn our attention away from the scale of slavery and the systematic nature of oppression. Relatively few individuals of color crossed the ocean from the Caribbean to metropolitan France. Masters lived or worked closely with certain slaves—particularly those who traveled with them, or were entrusted with aspects of their business—but not with the mass of enslaved people. The experiences of the huge number of men and women who labored in the fields and plantations of Saint Domingue thus appear only distantly in this account.

Concentrating on individual stories and on the particular connections between La Rochelle and the western province of Saint Domingue also brings up the issue of how representative these stories are of larger dynamics or trends. To some extent this is a misplaced question. Given the complexity of the eighteenth-century world, no case study can be representative. Palmer acknowledges distinctive aspects of her examples, and is thus able to uncover fascinating singularities. Her discussion of godparents in chapter two is especially interesting in this light. Palmer observes that religious instruction was one of the few grounds for allowing slaves to travel to metropolitan France. While many in La Rochelle were Protestants, they saw Catholic baptism as providing critical civil benefits. Instead of looking up the social scale to find godparents, as many of their Catholic counterparts did, Protestant merchants instead chose social inferiors. This ritual served not to recognize godparents' authority but to secure their loyalty. In some cases, slaves could even be appointed as godparents to their masters' children. Palmer's work thus suggests how a social ritual could serve repeatedly to reinforce power relations, but do so quite differently depending on local contexts. By looking closely at such specificities, she is able to uncover aspects of how race and power worked in practice that we might otherwise miss.

Palmer's work nonetheless raises questions about dynamics elsewhere in France, particularly in Paris and the larger slave trading ports Nantes and Bordeaux.[4] Although she draws on existing studies, she could bring out comparisons more. Her work also suggests avenues for further research, both within the French empire and with other transatlantic contexts. The field is reaching a point of richness where it is becoming easier to compare gender and race relations in different Atlantic empires; well-chosen examples promise to illuminate both local and global developments.

Intimate Bonds also reminds us of the unevenness of historical change. Historians of the early modern Atlantic are well aware of delays caused by the distance between Caribbean colonies and metropolitan France, so that news of an uprising, law, or political shift could arrive long after the events in question. Palmer reminds us that distance could cause other disjunctures. For example, the planter Belin, who moved to France in the 1740s, continued to think in the 1760s about colonial plantations in terms of personal relations while those in Saint Domingue increasingly emphasized rational land management. Similarly, Belin understood manumission as an individual act; for those planters based in the colony, it had become both increasingly rare and increasingly subject to state control.

Migrants often retain an outdated understanding of the places they have left as they settle into new lives. Belin's story suggests that in the particular world of the eighteenth century, they could hold such views while actively maintaining transatlantic familial and business connections. Although Palmer does not address the broader implications of this combination of older expectations with continued contact and movement, it is useful for thinking about larger debates over whether hardening racial attitudes or policies originated more in the colonies or in the metropole. Her story implies that change happened most in the Caribbean. But it also suggests that such change did not happen uniformly. Men and women could contribute to shaping or challenging racial policies based not only on current events in France or Saint Domingue, but also on frameworks they retained from much earlier experiences.

Palmer's own view of how and when racial distinctions became more rigid is somewhat murky. She describes the hardening of racial hierarchies in Saint Domingue beginning in the 1760s, but also argues that it was not until the French and Haitian revolutions that racial categories solidified. The two claims are not necessarily contradictory. There is substantial evidence for changing laws after the 1760s, as well as evidence that such measures could be evaded or were experienced differently depending on particular circumstances.[5] It is also clear that both the Haitian and French Revolutions instituted profound transformations. They made mass emancipation imaginable, inspired both new possibilities and new fears of slave rebellion, and reshaped scientific discourses positing racial difference.

Yet these narratives are not fully integrated in Palmer's account. The book has a loose chronological structure—earlier chapters are anchored in the 1716 and 1738 edicts, and later in ones in the 1763 and 1777 surveys—but the book remains more thematic than chronological. Relatively few of Palmer's sources come from the 1780s, so it is harder to trace exactly what she thinks changed, or did not change, in the immediate prerevolutionary years. Palmer also treats the Revolutions in an epilogue; this makes sense as a closing note to a book focused on the

eighteenth century, but it also raises questions about whether the stories of agency and negotiation she uncovers have counterparts, perhaps in somewhat different forms, in the nineteenth century. Looking at such stories may lead us to reconsider whether racial categories were actually as fixed as they appeared to have become.

Overall, *Intimate Bonds* is a deeply researched, well written, and thought-provoking work. It deserves a wide readership not only among scholars of eighteenth-century France, but also those interested in how personal stories connect to transatlantic histories.

NOTES

[1] Among others, see Sue Peabody's pioneering *There are no slaves in France: the political culture of race and slavery in the Old Regime* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), Dwain Pruitt, "'The Opposition of the Law to the Law': Race, Slavery, and the Law in Nantes, 1715-1778," *French Historical Studies* 30, no. 2 (2007): 147-174, Matthew Gerber, "Bastardy, Race, and Law in the Eighteenth-Century French Atlantic: The Evidence of Litigation," *French Historical Studies* 36, no. 4 (2013): 571-600, and Malick W. Ghachem, *The Old Regime and the Haitian Revolution* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012). Work specifically on the complexities of gender, race, and law in Saint Domingue, includes Dominique Rogers, "On the Road to Citizenship: The Complex Route to Integration of the Free People of Colors in the Two Capitals of Saint Domingue," in *The World of the Haitian Revolution*, eds. David Geggus and Norman Fiering (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2009), 65-78, Stewart King, *Blue Coat or Powdered Wig: Free People of Color in Pre-Revolutionary Saint Domingue* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2001), and John D. Garrigus, *Before Haiti: Race and Citizenship in French Saint-Domingue* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006).

[2] Here her work is similar to Rebecca Scott's *Freedom Papers: An Atlantic Odyssey in the Age of Emancipation* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2012).

[3] On households, see especially Julie Hardwick et al., "Introduction: Centering Families in Atlantic History," *William and Mary Quarterly* 70 no. 2 (2013): 205-224. Research on gender and slavery in the French Caribbean is less developed than for some other contexts, but relevant work includes Arlette Gautier, *Les sœurs de solitude: la condition féminine dans l'esclave aux Antilles du XVIIe au XIXe siècle* (Paris: Éditions Caribéennes, 1985); David Barry Gaspar and Darlene Clark Hine, eds. *More Than Chattel: Black Women and Slavery in the Americas* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1996), and Bernard Moitt, *Women and Slavery in the French Antilles, 1635-1848* (Bloomington, IN; Indiana University Press, 2001). See also Laurent Dubois, "Gendered Freedom: Citoyennes and War in the Revolutionary French Caribbean," and Elizabeth Colwill, "Freedwomen's Familial Politics: Marriage, War and Rites of Registry in Post-Emancipation Saint-Domingue," in *Gender, War and Politics: Transatlantic Perspectives 1775-1830*, eds. Karen Hagemann et al. (Basingstoke: Palgrave MacMillan, 2010).

[4] Miranda Spieler's forthcoming essay is especially interesting in this light: "The Vanishing Slaves of Paris: The *Lettre de Cachet* and the Emergence of an Imperial Legal Order in Eighteenth-Century France," in *The Scaffolding of Sovereignty: Global and Aesthetic*

Perspectives on the History of a Concept, eds. Zvi Ben-Dor Benite et al. (New York: Columbia University Press, 2017).

[5] See especially Garrigus, *Before Haiti*, and Dominique Rogers, “De l’origine du préjugé de couleur en Haïti,” *Outre-Mers: Revue d’Histoire* 90, no. 2 (2001): 83-101.

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