

*H-France Forum*  
Volume 12 (2017), Issue 2, #4

Jennifer L. Palmer, *Intimate Bonds: Family and Slavery in the French Atlantic*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016. 267 pp. \$45.00 U.S. (c1). ISBN 978-0812248401.

Author's Response by Jennifer Palmer, University of Georgia

The reviewers point to two major sets of broad historiographic tensions that emerge in my work: between case studies and big picture approaches to the Atlantic world and slavery, and between structure and agency in writings on the Atlantic world, slavery, and history more generally. Heuer and Dubois both point to the possible pitfalls of focusing primarily on agency, potentially at the cost of obscuring the structural brutality of slavery. Dubois calls for deeper consideration of how African practices—also a set of structures—shaped individual experiences of slavery and resistance. Adams and Heuer both ask for further precision in considering race as a structural category, including when it emerged and how it operated in relation to other hierarchies. I am grateful for their astute and thought-provoking intellectual framing of the larger historiographic and methodological issues in my book.

One of the main goals of my research is to demonstrate “how personal stories connect to transatlantic histories,” as Jennifer Heuer notes. Dubois indicates that a tension between small-scale experiences and large-scale processes undergirds scholarship on slavery in particular, which has considered individual experiences of slavery, race, and gender, on the one hand, and the plantation system and structures of patriarchy on the other. The virtually simultaneous recent biographical turn in Atlantic history and a new focus on the history of capitalism has done nothing to dispel this tension.[1] At its best, the methodological decision to focus on particular stories expands our understanding of the realms of possibility and disrupts well-worn teleologies; at its least productive, it risks turning into a celebration of the exceptional.

Highlighting family stories both provides a method for bridging this tension between agency and structures, and demonstrates that existing scholarship has privileged some structures over others. Christine Adams emphasizes, with a nod to gender analysis, that family historians have long employed personal stories as a way to illuminate hierarchies, negotiations, and the relationship between the public and the private, the political and the personal—that is, structures of power and domination that shaped the lives of people in eighteenth-century France and its empire.[2] Yet Dubois points out that consideration of African cultural systems and structures remains elusive in scholarship on the French Atlantic, in spite of the nearly quarter century that has passed since John Thornton's initial critique.[3] Centering intimate relationships might provide a method for future scholarship to shed light on how African structures of family, intimacy, and gender roles shaped life in both Saint-Domingue and France. Yet there are other lacunae as well. Gender analysis continues to be difficult to come by in Atlantic history, with Atlantic historians seeming to accept (in a very pre-Joan Scottian way) that as men were the preponderance of Atlantic migrants, gender is an irrelevant category.[4] Closely analyzing the expectations and experiences of Marie-Magdelaine Royer Regnaud de Beaumont enables me to demonstrate the

significance of both women and gender to Atlantic history, and also situates France firmly within an Atlantic framework. Similarly, French historians have been very slow to integrate race as a category into their scholarship, again seemingly because of the low numbers of people of color in France.[5] Yet race shaped French policy, notions of sovereignty, and economic life, having an effect well beyond the people of color who lived there and those who interacted with them: merchants, royal officials, Protestants, Catholics, men, and women were all invested in what race meant and how it was enacted.

The stakes in choosing to focus on individual stories or broader systems are therefore multiple and high. For me, my methodological approach is intertwined with the reasons I was drawn to history in the first place. Getting to know people who lived in the past makes me passionate about history. Trying to piece together their landscapes and their choices inspires me to challenge the boundaries of what we think we know about the past. On one level, then, I focus on the stories of families and people because that's what I like doing. Yet this choice is also a political one that seems particularly vital at our own historical moment, when support for history departments and historical scholarship is in decline, and public discourse is characterized by a complete lack of, and even disdain for, historical perspective. In such a climate, emphasizing agency accepts the possibility for an individual to effect change, both on a personal and a systemic level. It also underscores that structures of control (slavery, patriarchy, family) are not all-encompassing or powerful, and that individual actions and choices sometimes fall outside the reach of those systems, allowing them to be challenged. A focus on agency need not be celebratory: it can take into account the limits of individual action, the ways that options and choices are circumscribed, and the circumstances in which historical actors might choose to reinforce systems of power. In short, focusing on families allows illumination of the contingent nature of structures and how agency operates within them, sometimes to resist and sometimes to uphold. To me, emphasizing multiple choices and individuals' awareness of their ramifications is important for understanding the past and the present, particularly at a time when systematic controls and oppressions and their incursions into daily life in American and Western society are becoming more evident.

Much recent historiography on race in France and its empire has focused on the question of when race became a category—or, in other words, a structuring “metalanguage.”[6] Pinpointing a date has seemed pressing because of the exceptional case of Saint-Domingue, the Caribbean colony with both the largest free colored population and the only successful large-scale slave revolt. Heuer calls for further precision in answering this question. Yet I wonder instead what would happen if we changed the terms of the debate? Focusing on precisely when race became a category leaves unchallenged an underlying teleology that race *did* become a category, and risks accepting that category as obvious and evident. In fact, while race certainly structured actions and behavior in the world, it was always changing, not least because of the ways individuals were constantly revising, resisting, and contesting it. Race, like other structuring categories, was fluid, not static, on both individual and systemic levels. For individuals, what race meant and exactly who possessed a racialized body depended on multiple factors, including slave or free status, social position, geographic location, family situation, occupation, and success at conforming with other social expectations including gender roles.[7] Broader geopolitical factors also shaped race, including labor systems, which crops were being grown, nature of colonial administration, intellectual climate, demographics and population of the colony, whether

or not the empire was at war, and the ruling elite or state's need to integrate those who might under different circumstances be segregated and oppressed.

Race was not the only fluid structure: family, a category guided by legal classifications and assumptions about gender, also was in flux. Yet they did not change independently of each other. Considering how race intersected with family structures makes clear that they transformed alongside of and in conjunction with each other. For the Fleuriiau family, for example, the inextricability of race and family provided a platform to create new understandings of both. What emerges from this is not that one hierarchy was unique or distinctive, but that the interaction between the two had a far-reaching impact that extended well beyond individuals who were directly involved in the Atlantic system. Unevenly and in fits and starts, race and family changed together.

No scholarly work stands on its own. My research has been built on the scholarship of Jennifer Heuer, Laurent Dubois, Christine Adams and others. I offer my sincere thanks to all three reviewers for their thoughtful and thought-provoking comments, and for situating *Intimate Bonds* as part of a long, vibrant conversation about race, gender, slavery, and the family in France and its empire. I look forward to ongoing scholarly engagement.

## NOTES

[1] On the biographical turn, Heuer and Dubois both point to Rebecca Scott and Jean Hébrard, *Freedom Papers: An Atlantic Odyssey in the Age of Emancipation* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2012). Other works include Linda Colley, *The Ordeal of Elizabeth Marsh: A Woman in World History* (New York: Pantheon Books, 2007); Alyssa Sepinwall, *The Abbé Grégoire and the French Revolution: The Making of Modern Universalism* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005); Randy Sparks, *The Two Princes of Calabar: An Eighteenth-Century Atlantic Odyssey* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2004); James Sweet, *Domingos Álvares, African Healing, and the Intellectual History of the Atlantic World* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2011). Also see Lara Putnam, "To Study the Fragments/Whole: Microhistory and the Atlantic World," *Journal of Social History* 39 no. 3 (Spring, 2006): 615-630.

Works that focus on capitalist systems and structures include Trevor Burnard and John Garrigus, *The Plantation Machine: Atlantic Capitalism in French Saint-Domingue and British Jamaica* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016); Paul Cheney, *Cul de Sac: Patrimony, Capitalism, and Slavery in French Saint-Domingue* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2017) and *Revolutionary Commerce: Globalization and the French Monarchy* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2010); and Sven Beckert and Seth Rockman, eds., *Slavery's Capitalism: A New History of American Economic Development* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016).

[2] Julie Hardwick, *The Practice of Patriarchy: Gender and the Politics of Household Authority in Early Modern France* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1998); Julie Hardwick, *Family Business: Litigation and the Political Economies of Daily Life in Early Modern France* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009); Sarah Pearsall, *Atlantic Families:*

*Lives and Letters in the Later Eighteenth Century* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008); Julie Hardwick, Sarah Pearsall, and Karin Wulf, eds., “Centering Families in Atlantic History,” special issue of the *William and Mary Quarterly* 70 no. 2, 2013.

[3] The work of Gwendolyn Midlo Hall is an exception: *Africans in Colonial Louisiana: The Development of Afro-Creole Culture in the Eighteenth Century* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1992); and *Slavery and African Ethnicities in the Americas: Restoring the Links* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2003).

Scholarship on eighteenth-century France also has not adequately taken Africa into account, although recent work brings a new and increasing focus on France’s global empire and interests. Danna Agmon, *A Colonial Affair: Commerce, Conversion, and Scandal in French India* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, Forthcoming); Mélanie Lamotte, “Before Race Mattered: Ethnic Prejudice in the French Empire., c. 1635-1767” (unpublished manuscript); Sue Peabody, *Madeleine’s Children: Family, Freedom, Secrets and Lies in France’s Indian Ocean Colonies, 1750-1850* (New York: Oxford University Press, Forthcoming 2017); Laurie Wood, “Archipelago of Justice: Law in France’s Early Modern Empire” (unpublished manuscript).

[4] Some scholars of the British Atlantic have begun to use gender as a primary analytic frame. See Jennifer L. Morgan, *Laboring Women: Reproduction and Gender in New World Slavery* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004) and other works; Kit Candlin and Cassandra Pybus, eds., *Enterprising Women: Gender, Race, and Power in the Revolutionary Atlantic* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2015). On the analytic potential for gender in Atlantic history, see Susan Dwyer and Allyson Poska, “Restoring Miranda: Gender and the Limits of European Patriarchy in the Early Modern Atlantic World,” *Journal of Global History* 7 no. 3 (2012): 342-363; Susan Dwyer and Allyson Poska, “Shifting the Frame: Trans-Imperial Approaches to Gender and the Atlantic World,” *Early Modern Women: An Interdisciplinary Journal* 9, no. 1 (2014): 3-23. Scholars of the French Atlantic have been slower to use incorporate gender analysis.

[5] Scholars who do consider race in France include Andrew Curran, *The Anatomy of Blackness: Science and Slavery in an Age of Enlightenment* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2011); Elizabeth Heath, *Wine, Sugar, and the Making of Modern France: Global Economic Crisis and the Racialization of French Citizenship, 1870-1910* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014); Jennifer Heuer, “The One-Drop Rule in Reverse? Interracial Marriages in Napoleonic and Restoration France,” *Law and History Review* 27, no. 3 (2009): 515-548; Jeremy Popkin, *You Are All Free: The Haitian Revolution and the Abolition of Slavery* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010); Sue Peabody, “‘There Are No Slaves in France’: The Political Culture of Race and Slavery in the Ancien Régime” (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996).

[6] For example, see Sue Peabody, “‘A Nation Born to Slavery’: Missionaries and Racial Discourse in Seventeenth-Century French Antilles.” *Journal of Social History* 38, no. 1 (2004): 113-126, esp. 113-114. Pierre Boule, “François Bernier and the Origins of the Modern Concept of Race,” in Sue Peabody and Tyler Stovall, eds., *The Color of Liberty: Histories of Race in France* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003, 11-27, 12; Guillaume Aubert, “‘The Blood of France’: Race and Purity of Blood in the French Atlantic World,” *The William and Mary*

*Quarterly* 61, no. 3 (2004), 439-478, esp. 441-442; John Garrigus, *Before Haiti: Race and Citizenship in French Saint-Domingue* (New York: Palgrave, 2006). Evelyn Brooks Higgenbotham has recently revisited the paradigm of the metalanguage of race in ““The Metalanguage of Race,” Then and Now,” *Signs* 42 no. 3 (2017): 628-642.

[7] See, for example, Sophie White, *Wild Frenchmen and Frenchified Indians: Material Culture and Race in Colonial Louisiana* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2012).

Jennifer Palmer  
University of Georgia  
[palmerjl@uga.edu](mailto:palmerjl@uga.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.