


BOOK REVIEW

Women, Kinship, and Intimacy in the Atlantic World

Wicked Flesh: Black Women, Intimacy, and Freedom in the Atlantic World

Jessica Marie Johnson. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2020. Pp. 328. \$34.95, hardcover (ISBN:9780812252385); \$24.95, paperback (ISBN: 9781512823707); \$24.95, ebook (ISBN: 9780812297249).

Mélanie Lamotte 

University of Texas at Austin

(Received 29 September 2023; accepted 14 April 2024)

Keywords: Atlantic World; Senegal; Gambia; Caribbean; New Orleans; women; slavery; violence; marriage; sexuality; kinship

Wicked Flesh is a powerful book written from a rare and sensitive perspective.¹ It explores the complicated intimate relationships between unfree and free women of African ancestry, and European and Black men across the eighteenth-century French and Spanish Atlantic worlds. More specifically, it explores the ways in which women of African ancestry used these intimate relations to construct their freedom.

Johnson's main argument has the potential to reshape our understanding of the experiences of life in both slavery and freedom. She suggests that the intimate kinship strategies used by women of African ancestry in the eighteenth century reshaped the meanings of freedom, laying the groundwork for Black resistance and abolitionism in the nineteenth century. The story of legal emancipation began in intimate actions, as Black women made choices to secure control over their bodies and selves, their loved ones, and their futures. Therefore, in this book, Black women's freedom (or what Johnson calls "Black *femme* freedom") is defined as these women's capacity to belong to themselves and to each other, even as slave owners, colonial officials, husbands, white women, and others used their bodies to exploit and violate them. Black women, Johnson argues, challenged these abuses with their own understandings of what, where, and how their bodies should be used.

Johnson draws on archival documents scattered across three continents and written in multiple languages. Because she focuses on the eighteenth century, the sources are challenging to work with: filled with gaps and written, for the most part, from the biased perspectives of white colonizers and

¹Johnson's work is exceptional in that it embraces a Black feminist perspective to discuss the French Atlantic world. Black feminist perspectives usually focus on other contexts, and especially on the English-speaking world. For examples of groundbreaking publications on race, gender, and slavery in other contexts written from a Black feminist perspective, see: Angela Davis, "Reflections on the Black Woman's Role in the Community of Slaves," *The Massachusetts Review* 13, no. 1/2 (1972): 81–100; Marisa J. Fuentes, *Dispossessed Lives: Enslaved Women, Violence, and the Archive* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016); Darlene Clark Hine, "Female Slave Resistance: The Economics of Sex," *Western Journal of Black Studies* 3 (1979): 123–27; Rhoda E. Reddock, "Women and Slavery in the Caribbean: A Feminist Perspective," *Latin American Perspective* 12, no. 1 (1985): 63–80; Hortense J. Spillers, "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book," *Diacritics* 17, no. 2 (1987): 65–81; and Omise'oke Natasha Tinsley, "Black Atlantic, Queer Atlantic: Queer Imaginings of the Middle Passage," *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 14, no. 2 (2008): 191–215.

slave owners. To try to tell this story through the eyes of the women themselves, she uses Black feminist theory and Black women's literature to inform her reading of the archives.²

Because she is attuned to the importance of centering the African continent in studies of the African diaspora, Johnson begins her study in Senegambia (more specifically, in the French *comptoirs* on the islands of Saint-Louis and Gorée). She then proceeds to follow African women through the Caribbean, and on to French and Spanish New Orleans, Louisiana. The book contains six chapters, which together focus on the experiences of African women of widely different socio-economic backgrounds, ranging from wealthy merchants in Senegambia to slaves in Senegambia and Louisiana. The meanings of freedom could change dramatically depending on these women's status. For example, for slave women aboard Atlantic slave ships, freedom meant confronting the traders, middlemen, ship captains, and officials who attempted to commodify them (Chapter Three). By contrast, according to Johnson, freedom for a group of wealthy slaveholding female merchants established in Senegambia (often called "*signares*") could mean "exploiting enslaved labor, particularly the labor of enslaved women, with all of its attendant violence" (3).³ The first two chapters of her book, which focus on Senegambia, will be of particular interest to the readers of this journal.

According to Chapter One, in Saint-Louis and Gorée, the group of affluent free African women in the French *comptoirs* exercised freedom by defining standards of taste and hospitality, and thereby forming intimate ties across Wolof, Lebu, Pulaar, and European lines. This development is illustrated with the story of Signora Catti, a wealthy merchant from Rufisque, and the African widow of a Portuguese trader who invited Wolof dignitaries and Frenchmen to her home for lavish West African-style dinners. These African women offered comfort, care, and even their own homes to European men, gaining access to trading opportunities, intimate exchanges with European husbands, and slaves in return. By the mid-eighteenth century, some of these women had gained significant wealth through their labor and commercial exchanges with Europeans. However, Johnson challenges the romanticized image painted by scholars like Pierre Biondi, which presents the *signares* as seductive women for whom relationships with white men were a source of opulence.⁴ Johnson argues that, on the contrary, most African women in the *comptoirs* did not have access to wealth, and all of them were exposed to sexual violence and coercion. Until now, scholars have paid very little attention to the slave residents of Saint-Louis and Gorée in the eighteenth century. Johnson thus makes an important contribution to the historiography by focusing on slave women and the sexual violence that they faced. She also highlights how African women contributed to the making of the Atlantic world, by facilitating trade and doing work that ranged from providing food and water to company employees, to securing enslaved people bound for the Americas.

As shown in Chapter Two, although some of these activities allowed a few African women to accumulate wealth and prestige, "retaining one's position required creativity, determination, and persistence" (66). Some African women formed bonds of kinship with other African people and European men, as wives, godmothers, and witnesses in Catholic ceremonies, to obtain some degree of security for themselves by building commercial networks. Others protected their own interests when the French trading company attempted to prevent them from inheriting from their European husbands, or unlawfully tried to seize their property (especially their slaves).

²For example, she draws on the work of African feminist scholars Fatou Sow, Ayesha Imam, Aminata Diaw-Ciss, and Awa Thiam. Moreover, her notion of "black *femme*" is inspired by the theorists Kara Keeling, Kaila Adia Story, and Omise'eke Natasha Tinsley.

³Though Johnson does not say it, these women were "Atlantic Creoles," defined by Ira Berlin as Africans involved in the history of the Atlantic world, who were characterized by their "linguistic dexterity, cultural plasticity, and social agility." Berlin, "From Creoles to Africans: Atlantic Creoles and the Origins of African-American Society in mainland North America," *The William and Mary Quarterly* 53, no. 22 (1996): 251–88, here 263.

⁴See Pierre Biondi, *Saint-Louis du Sénégal. Mémoires d'un métissage* (Paris: Denoël, 1987).

As is always the case in studies dealing with fragmented archives, this book involves a degree of speculative labor. Given the underrepresentation of Black female scholars' perspectives in academia, Johnson's gift for filling archival silences with astute theoretical insights is precisely what makes her work special and precious. For example, she speculates that enslaved and free Black women used sex as a protection "strategy" — this is one of the most interesting claims in the volume.

While some full-length studies centering the Black female experience in the French colonial context do exist, they limit themselves to local approaches rather than embracing the wider focus on the diaspora that we see in *Wicked Flesh*.⁵ In bringing Black women to the fore, Johnson makes an important contribution to the scholarly literature on intimacy, gender, and freedom in the Atlantic world. *Wicked Flesh* will open new avenues for research in the fields of French and Spanish colonial history, Atlantic History, Gender Studies, and Black Studies.

⁵For examples of studies centering the Black female experience in the French Caribbean, see Arlette Gautier, *Les sœurs de Solitude. Femmes et esclavage aux Antilles du XVIIe au XIXe siècle* (Rennes, Presses Universitaires de Rennes, 2010); and Bernard Moitt, *Women and Slavery in the French Antilles, 1635–1848* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2001). For examples of studies centering African women's experience in the French outposts of Senegambia, see: Hilary Jones, "Women, Family, and Daily Life in Senegal's Nineteenth-Century Atlantic Towns," in *African Women in the Atlantic World: Property, Vulnerability, and Mobility 1680–1880*, eds. Mariana Candido and Adam Jones (London: James Currey, 2019), 233–47; Aissata Ken Lo, *De La Signare à la Diriyanké sénégalaise. Trajectoires féminines et visions partagées* (Dakar: L'Harmattan, 2020); Guillaume Vial, *Femmes d'influence: Les signares de Saint-Louis du Sénégal et de Gorée, XVIIIe–XIXe siècle* (Paris: Hemispheres, 2018).