

**Jutta Wimmmler.** *The Sun King's Atlantic: Drugs, Demons and Dyestuffs in the Atlantic World, 1640-1730.* Leiden: Brill, 2017. xiv + 230 pp. Ill. \$93.00, cloth, ISBN 978-90-04-33607-0.

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**Published on** H-Atlantic (August, 2017)

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## The Omnipresent Atlantic in the Early Modern French Metropole

Jutta Wimmmler's *The Sun King's Atlantic* is a much-needed study of the French Atlantic, centered primarily on the Caribbean region, before the Enlightenment and dominance of sugar and slaves in the late eighteenth century. Her focus is on the impact, economic and cultural, of commodities, such as drugs, food, and dyestuffs, from the Atlantic world on France. She recognizes the potency of things for culture and worldview, and she argues that exchanges of products and ideas within the Atlantic world shaped the development of France's imperial project in the Atlantic. In particular, these commodities played a central role in shaping the emerging consumer culture in France, as printed cloth, made possible by new sources of dyestuffs, wood and leather from the Americas and Africa, and beaver skins and furs, foods, and medicines from the New World became less expensive and thus within reach of a growing segment of the French population. These products influenced fashions, cuisine, and even the evolution of scientific thought, in particular favoring iatrochemistry over traditional Galenic chemistry. Trade preceded and helped determine the course of France's empire-building project, not simply because the French were seeking to enrich themselves through empire but also because the impact of exchanges with the Atlantic world shaped

French culture itself, and how the French conceptualized their empire. This reconceptualization was fundamental to France's construction of empire, rather than a consequence of building that empire. Wimmmler's insight here is important and alone makes this book worth reading for scholars of early modern France and the Atlantic world alike.

Wimmmler argues that, despite the dominance of sugar in French importations from the New World, other Atlantic products imported in smaller quantities, such as dyestuffs and medicinals, had a significant impact on French culture and consumption. She also cogently points out that by decentering sugar and slaves as the focal point of France's trade with the Atlantic world, the impact of direct trade between Africa and France becomes much clearer. In the seventeenth century, the slave trade was not as important for France, economically or culturally, as it became in the eighteenth century. Most French plantation owners obtained their slaves from non-French suppliers. Sugar was the dominant import from the Atlantic world in terms of cargo weight. Lighter-weight, higher-value products, such as dyestuffs, though, played at least as important a role in transforming the French economy and bringing

the Atlantic world into the lives of ordinary French people who consumed dyed cloths and medicinal products from Africa and the Americas. Even so, Wimmmler contends, in cultural terms the Atlantic world was still marginalized in a sense, although not because of the moral conundrum slavery raised for French people. Rather, France used the tropics of Africa and the New World to produce Asian products that they could not obtain directly from Asia and focused on the Asian pedigree in the marketing of such products. The actual New World sourcing of these commodities was elided in favor of an emphasis on their Asian origin. In terms of prestige and empire, Asia remained the cultural focus of the alluring exotic in France long after products from the New World had spread into the daily lives of many French people from all but the poorest classes. The New World thus was oddly absent from French cultural discourse despite its ubiquitous presence in French trade and material culture.

Wimmmler's most interesting chapter is her last, "Devils and Martyrs: Religious Concepts Travel the Globe." Here she contends that French texts related to religion in the New World featured a peculiarly French discourse of demonic violence, of a slave-holding Satan who beat slaves. This discourse, Wimmmler shows, predated the establishment of the plantation complex in the New World. It can be found in the earliest French texts describing both North and South America as the realm of an abusive devil whom the Native peoples feared and who was determined to prevent their conversion to Christianity. Moreover, the French applied the concept to Africa, where the French did not control large plantations worked by slaves. In both Africa and the New World, the discourse of Satan as an abusive slaveholder served both to explain the difficulties of converting Africans and Native Americans to Christianity, and to magnify the successful achievement of conversions when they took place. It also helped to explain the failure of the French to establish a colony in Brazil—the missionaries were unable to overcome the implac-

able resistance of Satan, who considered the New World his own. The discourse served a similar function in Africa, where missionaries made little headway in turning Africans away from their traditional beliefs.

As Wimmmler shows, the so-called long seventeenth century of the reign of Louis XIV was in many ways an era of experiment during which the French developed a conceptualization of the Atlantic world, its role in France's economy and culture, and the best means to render France's trade and colonies in the Atlantic profitable for France. Most scholars of the French Atlantic, including Wimmmler, concur that this period predates the development of a French Atlantic Empire, although to some extent that judgment depends on how one defines empire. There is no doubt that the French Atlantic prior to the eighteenth century was less populated, less integrated into the French economy and political structures, and less cohesive than the Spanish imperial possessions in the Atlantic, for example. The French struggled not just to build an empire but also to conceptualize what kind of empire they should build, how they should develop and expand their colonial possessions, how they should integrate them into the French economy, and what weight the colonies should have vis-à-vis European concerns. In the seventeenth century, France still focused on Europe, precisely because in the view of the Sun King and traditional French royal discourse, France already was an empire, in Europe, and had been since the Middle Ages. The role of the colonies in the French Empire expanded in the eighteenth century, but for the French in the seventeenth century, France's empire and its colonies were not necessarily the same thing. By the eighteenth century, the French crown had largely adopted the new Europe-wide conception of empire as located overseas, founded on a strong navy and composed of territorial colonies. In the seventeenth century, by contrast, this was by no means the only or the dominant understanding in France, or Europe, of what empire meant or what an empire should look like. To im-

pose, as many nineteenth-century scholars did, this later concept of empire on the early modern period and then lament that France was supposedly behind in its imperial project is thus anachronistic, which Wimmmler's work underscores.

Her book comprises an invaluable contribution to the important process of rethinking the early French Atlantic, precisely because she looks not just at the economics or politics of the Atlantic colonies but also at how the French themselves struggled to conceptualize their colonies within the context of France's cultural and political priorities. She also adopts an approach increasingly favored by scholars of the Atlantic world that emphasizes not just how Europeans influenced the other parts of the world with which they traded or in which they planted colonies but also how material and cultural exchanges with the New World, Africa, or Asia influenced Europe and, in Wimmmler's study, "transformed France" (p. 3). Wimmmler's approach opens a rich area of potential research that has not received sufficient scholarly attention. The influx of material and non-material culture from the New World preceded rather than followed the creation of France's colonial empire and shaped the French conceptualization of their empire. This is the important point that Wimmmler grasps in this book and the theme that holds the book together. This fluid process of conceptualization and reconceptualization came at least as much from the exposure of the French population in France to products and cultural artifacts from the colonies as it did from the accounts of the much smaller number of French people who actually traveled to the New World or Asia.

*The Sun King's Atlantic* was originally Wimmmler's dissertation, and although it has clearly been much revised, there are still a few lacunae in the research and some residual awkwardness in the writing. For an example of the former, Bernard Allaire's study of the Canadian fur trade, the best work to date on the topic, is notably absent from the bibliography. The first three chapters

focus on products from the Atlantic world, but chapters 5 to 7 shift the focus to non-material cultural conceptions. Although Wimmmler informs her readers in her introduction that the chapters do not necessarily need to be read in order, and that they are designed to stand alone, a better transition between these chapters and those that precede them, perhaps by dividing the book into two parts with a brief introduction to each section, would have been helpful. These comments are minor cavils, however. For the most part, *The Sun King's Atlantic* is a well-researched study that makes a significant contribution to the literature of the French Atlantic.

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**Citation:** Gayle K. Brunelle. Review of Wimmmler, Jutta. *The Sun King's Atlantic: Drugs, Demons and Dyestuffs in the Atlantic World, 1640-1730*. H-Atlantic, H-Net Reviews. August, 2017.

**URL:** <https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=49800>



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