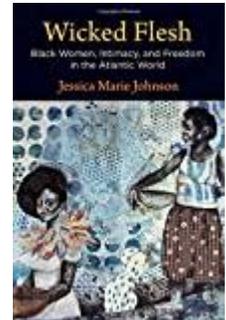


Jessica Marie Johnson. *Wicked Flesh: Black Women, Intimacy, and Freedom in the Atlantic World.* Early American Studies. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2020. 360 pp. \$34.95, cloth, ISBN 978-0-8122-5238-5.



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Published on H-Early-America (January, 2022)

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To fully appreciate the innovativeness and depth of Jessica Marie Johnson's premier monograph, *Wicked Flesh: Black Women, Intimacy, and Freedom in the Atlantic World* (2020), we should first recognize the article that inspired its title. Over thirty years ago, Hortense Spillers published the critical article, "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book," wherein Spillers theorizes the enslavement of African women caught within the Atlantic slave trade. Spillers theorizes that African women's bodies had once held cultural and political memories but once enslaved, were violently transformed into pieces of "flesh." As flesh, they were subjected to ideologies of race and gender that Europeans scripted onto them. However, in addition to these violent processes, Spillers suggests that enslaved women's bodies and intimate lives also offer "a theory, a text for living." [1] Since the publication of this article, an ingenious cohort of historians, including Jennifer L. Morgan and Stephanie M. H. Camp, has unearthed vital histories of the ways various Atlantic slave regimes exploited Black women's bodies and

kinships to develop social and economic systems. [2] However, what has been less present in this scholarship are histories that reflect how Black women also authored these theories and texts for living. *Wicked Flesh* resoundingly disrupts this gap.

Wicked Flesh transverses multiple geographic and linguistic archives beginning in Senegambia, briefly moving through the French Antilles, and finally ending in colonial New Orleans under both French and Spanish rule during the eighteenth century. Through innovative and interdisciplinary methodologies, Johnson unearths and beautifully recounts a history of freedom that foregrounds the intimate lives of African women and women of African descent. By foregrounding their intimacies, Johnson argues that African women and women of African descent endowed their free status and freedom with their own meanings via their various kinship practices. While these meanings were volatile and contingent, at their core these meanings conveyed their desires for safety,

security, pleasure, and the ability to forge kinships and protect them.

Johnson begins by analyzing the perspective of African women in Senegambia. In chapter 1, she focuses on African women's hospitality and hosting practices in the *comptoirs* (French administrative outposts). Here, she counters European travel narratives that often hypersexualized European men's interactions with African women. Instead, Johnson contends that these encounters reveal "rituals of diplomacy" (p. 21). These rituals of diplomacy set the terms of engagement that helped facilitate the trafficking of enslaved people while also securing these elite African women's freedom.

Chapter 2 continues to focus on the *comptoirs* and how free African women strategically used marriage and baptismal practices to secure wealth while also protecting their lineage. Compellingly, Johnson departs from dominant frameworks that position kinship practices and intimate acts as simply cultural activities. Instead, she establishes an early pattern in which African women strategically leveraged their kinships and knowledge of African polities to secure their freedom. However, despite these free African women's ability to define and assert their freedom, Johnson emphasizes that the Atlantic slave trade rendered their security and status always precarious. This reality becomes even more apparent in the third chapter.

Chapter 3 follows the intimate lives of free African women, such as Marie Baude, who journeyed from Africa to New Orleans on the same slave ships that held and transported captured African women, men, and children. By centering their intimate lives during this passage, Johnson reveals that complex imperial networks shaped free and enslaved African women's journeys across the Middle Passage. European merchants and settlers, imperial wars between the French and Native American polities such as the Natchez Revolt, and captured Africans' acts of refusal and worldviews informed these networks. Thus, John-

son challenges portrayals of a Middle Passage that simply moves from an African coast and ends in the Americas. Importantly, this remapping of the Middle Passage joins a burgeoning literature of the early Americas that is beginning to challenge histories that too easily separate chattel slavery from processes of settler colonialism.[3]

To unearth this history of the Middle Passage, Johnson must rely upon ship logbooks, ledgers, company correspondence, and the more recent *Voyages* database—sources that problematically render enslaved and free Africans as simply numbers upon the page. Johnson returns to Spillers's theorizations and more recent queer of color critique to build a nuanced analytical framework to address this problem. This framework uncovers how this long Middle Passage violently scripted gendered and racialized ideologies upon captive African women and girls to transform them into commodities while undermining the rights that free African women once possessed in Senegambia. Thus, their kinship practices and their subsequent meanings of freedom would be contingent upon this violent transformation. However, these freedom practices are not apparent within colonial archives.

Chapter 4 more explicitly grapples with the limits of the archive when searching for Black women's articulations of freedom. For instance, census data transformed African women and women of African descent into quantifiable and hierarchical racialized datasets, or what Johnson calls "null values or empty spaces" (p. 134). However, Johnson challenges these null values. She uses these records to ingeniously illustrate how African people and people of African descent remapped New Orleans into a diasporic space that connected them to other French colonies, like Saint Domingue, to foster a Black social and political life. For scholars of the African diaspora, this chapter serves as a helpful reminder that while colonial archives may quantify and spatially silo Black life, the diasporic routes remained important to how

enslaved and free Black people understood and responded to their circumstances.

Chapter 5 continues to challenge these null values by naming important characteristics of Black women's freedom in French New Orleans. Here, Johnson locates intimate and kinship practices in which they asserted their desire for security, mobility, protection of lineages, and pleasure. These practices included enslaved mothers' use of free-by-baptism manumission laws to secure their children's freedom, Black women's collective refusal of intimate violence from both slave masters and intimate partners, and their forming spaces of pleasures through such acts as Sunday dances or feeding their companions during a late-night dinner. Johnson names these ephemeral but life-sustaining practices as "Black femme freedom" (p. 175).

These Black femme freedom practices showed that Black women were intimately aware and possessed a unique knowledge of the systems that dictated their lives, ranging from *partus sequitur ventrem* to the French Crown's Code Noir. Furthermore, their knowledge of these systems shifted and expanded when colonial regimes changed from French to Spanish rule. Thus, in chapter 6, Johnson documents how Black femme freedom changed under the Spanish. She finds that free women of color quickly learned new ways to protect and secure their property and inheritance rights under Spanish colonial rule.

Wicked Flesh brilliantly illuminates a long tradition of African women and women of African descent articulating a politics of freedom. These ranged from the rituals of diplomacy within the *comptoirs* of Africa to the Black femme freedom practiced within French and Spanish New Orleans. She importantly situates these various kinships and intimate practices as a lens into how these women and girls thought, articulated, and acted out their visions of freedom rather than simply experiencing a status or a manumission process. Although *Wicked Flesh* primarily focuses

on the French Atlantic, it challenges scholars of the Black Atlantic to rethink and rename enslaved people's politics when liberal definitions and theories of freedom are not capacious enough to fully capture their experiences or visions. Put simply, *Wicked Flesh* is essential reading for those interested in the intimate lives of enslaved and free Black women and invested in understanding these women's theories and texts for living.

Notes

[1]. Hortense Spillers, "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book," *Diacritics* 17 (1987): 65-81, quote on 68.

[2]. Jennifer Morgan, *Laboring Women: Reproduction and Gender in the New World Slavery* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004); Stephanie Camp, *Closer to Freedom: Enslaved Women and Everyday Resistance in the Plantation South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004).

[3]. Stephanie E. Smallwood, "Reflections on Settler Colonialism, the Hemispheric Americas, and Slavery," *Williams and Mary Quarterly* 76, no. 3 (2019): 407-16.

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Citation: Erica N. Duncan. Review of Johnson, Jessica Marie. *Wicked Flesh: Black Women, Intimacy, and Freedom in the Atlantic World*. H-Early-America, H-Net Reviews. January, 2022.

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