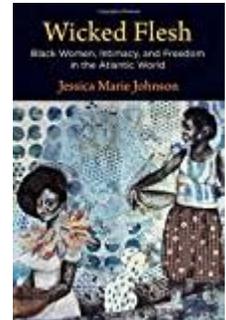


Jessica Marie Johnson. *Wicked Flesh: Black Women, Intimacy, and Freedom in the Atlantic World.* Early American Studies. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2020. 360 pp. \$34.95, cloth, ISBN 978-0-8122-5238-5.



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Commissioned by Katherine E. Rohrer (University of North Georgia)

In her book *Wicked Flesh*, historian Jessica Marie Johnson pushes readers to expand their thinking surrounding the lived experiences of free women of African descent in the French Atlantic during the long eighteenth century. Johnson uses Black women's intimacy as a lens through which to view freedom. Specifically, the book investigates the ways these women "used intimacy and kinship to construct and enact freedom in the Atlantic world" (p. 1). Thus the everyday expressions of liberty, often beyond the gaze of traditional historical scholarship, are at the heart of the study. Johnson employs these personal moments and interactions to argue that "African women and women of African descent endowed free status with meaning through an active, aggressive, and sometimes unsuccessful intimate and kinship practice" (p. 1). She is acutely attuned to the complexities within free status in the day-to-day lives of historical actors, reminding us that that freedom "was murky, messy, and contingent. It also adapted as times and circumstances changed" (p. 3). To this end,

Johnson admirably and impactfully uses the individual stories of women to advance her thesis.

The city of New Orleans serves as the primary setting for the study. The urban center is ideal for the kinds of questions Johnson seeks to answer as a dynamic entrepôt of the Atlantic world. While the study's central focus is New Orleans, Johnson begins her narrative in West Africa. In particular, she pays close attention to Senegal, a fitting decision given that Senegambia supplied more captives to French Louisiana than any other region in West Africa. In chapters 1 and 2, the author unravels the complex social realities of African women as they employed significant savvy to wield power and survive on the Senegalese coast. To do so, women employed and adapted lessons learned from their forebears in traditional communities. Johnson's discussion of kinship ties and baptism as tools to provide a measure of security and legitimacy for themselves and their children is particularly thoughtful. However, the portrait of negotiation is rightly nuanced. The author, for instance, explains how African women at administrative

outposts were willing to enter marital unions with European men while refusing Catholic marriage in favor of traditional marriage practices.

The book then turns to forced migration, particularly the slave trade between Senegal and Louisiana beginning in the 1690s. Johnson traces the struggles of enslaved women and girls forced to traverse the Atlantic and plunged into a foreign colony and unfamiliar culture. Here the author does an impressive job of walking the reader through the process of commodification along the Middle Passage—also referred to as *la traversée*—in order to fully demonstrate its violence: cultural, material, and, of course, physical. As the author powerfully notes, “Womanhood took on a new meaning as the experience of bondage and commodification extended into intimate, kinship, and property relations in the New World” (p. 119). It is this process of forced adaptation that is the central concern of the book’s second half.

In chapters 4 and 5, the author investigates how women of African descent worked to secure as much freedom permitted by their circumstances in an emerging colony defined by forced labor, oppression, and exploitation. The book is exceptionally well attuned to the ways the gendered realities of these women differed from their male counterparts. For those women able to obtain legal liberty, the study reminds us that that freedom was never fully secure and required constant negotiation, evolution, and savvy. Johnson next examines how this struggle continued and changed when the French ceded Louisiana to the Spanish in the late eighteenth century.

Agency and resistance are significant overarching themes in Johnson’s examination. She encourages the reader to view the intimacies of women as a lens to envision how free women worked to shape their lives and resist subjugation. Perhaps Johnson’s most impressive contribution is her source work and efforts to piece together and reimagine Black life histories. She uses archival sources from throughout the Atlantic world, in-

cluding Senegal, the Caribbean, France, and the United States. She uses material from these numerous archives to reconstitute and reimagine the world, circumstances, and challenges historical actors confronted.

Notably, the author leaves her readers hungry for more beyond the scope of the study. As mentioned in the book’s conclusion, the end of the Haitian Revolution, the Louisiana Purchase, and the resulting American acquisition of New Orleans provides a fruitful and fascinating backdrop to better understand how Black women—legally free but subjected to constant oppression limiting and threatening that very freedom—continued to negotiate their circumstances by combining cultural knowledge acquired over generations with shrewdness, both individually and collectively. Indeed, this hunger for further historical analysis is a testament to the author’s impressive work. *Wicked Flesh* is a welcome and much-needed addition to numerous fields of scholarship, including the French Atlantic, the African diaspora, Black women’s history, and comparative history. The study is as revelatory as it is impressive in its scope, analysis, and historical detective work.

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