While slavery everywhere in the Americas was African based, the ways and degree to which race and slavery were connected varied over time and under different imperial powers. In *Complexion of Empire in Natchez: Race and Slavery in the Mississippi Borderlands*, Christian Pinnen examines a place and time uniquely situated to illustrate these variations, Natchez in the eighteenth century. After the French forcefully took the site from its native inhabitants and claimed it by establishing Fort Rosalie in 1716, Natchez was governed by four different empires during the eighteenth century: France, Spain, Britain, and the United States. All of these empires enslaved Africans and people of African descent. Pinnen's argument focuses on both the different ways these imperial powers used complexion “to define a person's status on a nonwhite spectrum” and the ways “people of African descent helped to create and shape legal cultures by manipulating European legal systems” (pp. 5, 3). Ultimately, he shows that, in Natchez at least, enslaved and free people of African descent had much greater success in manipulating the legal system of the Spanish than of any of the other three governing powers.

Indeed, while the book covers French, English, Spanish, and early American rule in Natchez, it privileges the Spanish period, which began in 1779, when Spain captured Natchez from the British during the American Revolution, and ended in 1797, when the American military finally took control of the city a year and a half after the Treaty of San Lorenzo formally transferred it to the United States. Of the book’s seven body chapters, four of them, chapters 3-6, deal primarily with Spanish rule. Much of this has to do with the abundance and accessibility of Spanish sources. Spain, being a notarial and bureaucratic society in the eighteenth century, produced a lot of official documents, including court records, which have survived. Yet some of this imbalance appears to be influenced by Frank Tannenbaum’s classic 1946 study, *Slave and Citizen: The Negro in the Americas*, which argues that Spanish institutions created a milder form of slavery in the New World than did English institutions. Despite his claim that his study is “not designed to encourage a legitimization of the Tannenbaum thesis,” Pinnen, throughout the book, emphasizes the way Spanish legal systems provided greater maneuverability...
for enslaved and free people of African descent than the legal systems of other empires (p. 11).

Complexion of Empire is an excellent localized study of the ever-mutating concept of “race,” which, in Pinnen’s words, “historically has been, and continues to be, reimagined for different circumstances and social situations” (p. 8). Yet the term itself appears infrequently in the book; there is not even an index entry for “race.” Instead, as the title suggests, Pinnen uses the term “complexion,” which he identifies as one of, and increasingly the most important, signifiers of racial identity and all that comes with it. The book explores the different conceptions of complexion of Native Americans, people of African descent, the French, the Spanish, and the Anglo-Americans. Using this comparative and inter-connective approach, Pinnen demonstrates that in Spanish America, unlike French or Anglo-America, “blackness was not automatically equated with being enslaved.” Other factors, such as “speech, behavior, and dress,” carried as much weight in creating presumptions of status (p. 123). Pinnen also claims that people of African descent “performed whiteness” in the courtroom, which “had the possibility to supplant other factors such as skin color” (p. 143). Notably, however, such performance of whiteness seems to have successfully supplanted complexion as a marker of status only in Spanish-run courts.

Pinnen deftly brings together an impressive array of secondary sources on the history of colonial North America, Spanish America, French America, and the borderlands. He also provides some insightful analysis of legal proceedings involving people of African descent. On the whole, Complexion of Empire is more of a sociocultural history that relies heavily, in parts, on court records than a cultural-legal history that examines how subordinated peoples interact with the dominant society’s legal systems, especially its courts. The latter approach is evident, however, in chapter 5, “Gendered Complexions: Freedom and Interracial Relationships in Spanish Natchez,” most of which is dedicated to the case of Amy Lewis, an enslaved woman of African descent seeking freedom in the courts for herself and her son Henry. Lewis’s enslaver, Asahel Lewis, was also Henry’s father. Amy and Henry’s legal claim to freedom was that Asahel had freed them in his will. But the authenticity of the will was contested by Asahel Lewis’s relatives, leading to a protracted series of court proceedings that began in July 1796 during the Spanish period of Natchez and lasted until 1798, after the Americans had gained control of the city. Ultimately, Amy Lewis was unsuccessful in her bid for freedom due, at least in part, to the American legal system’s more limiting access to the courts and its greater reliance on complexion as a marker of status. Pinnen argues that Lewis and her legal counsel changed their strategies to better fit the different understandings of complexion. Nevertheless, the case speaks more to the greater inclusiveness of the Spanish courts than it does to the manipulation of legal systems by subalterns. In the end, Complexion of Empire asks big questions in the study of a small geographical area to expand the reader’s understanding of racially based slavery in the Americas.
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