Slavery's Metropolis: Unfree Labor in New Orleans During the Age of Revolutions

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Author: Rashauna Johnson

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Although ostensibly a book focused on New Orleans, in *Slavery's Metropolis* Rashauna Johnson uses the experiences of individuals and groups of African heritage who resided in the city, as well as those who left from, arrived in, and passed through from local and transnational locations to outline a theory of 'confined cosmopolitanism'. Sophisticated cultural, linguistic, and geographic knowledge was demanded from enslaved persons and often enabled the creation of spaces of personal freedom and expression and personal networks of information sharing, but at the heart of this theory are the contentions between the needs of slaveholders to benefit from the mobility of enslaved persons, both across borders and seas and within localised trading networks, whilst simultaneously limiting their freedom, agency, and self-determination.

In this volume Johnson adeptly combines themes from African diaspora studies, current thinking on mobilities, slave-centric criticism of Foucault's theories on discipline and punishment, and historical scholarship on the constraints and contradictions of urban and maritime enslavement and black 'freedom' during the Age of Revolutions (the monograph covering the period 1791 to 1825) with a 'history from below' approach, rooted in extensive archival research, and the identification and utilisation of valuable and previously overlooked primary evidence and examples.

Chapter one focuses on the experiences of migrants from Saint Domingue of African heritage, both upon their arrival in the city and in subsequent decades, as they were assimilated into the slave society of New Orleans and surrounding areas. A major theoretical innovation made by Johnson is to reframe our conception of the migration, particularly the mass arrival of over 10,000 refugees in 1809, as a mass project of re-enslavement, as legal statuses were enforced at arrival on American soil contingent with the legal and cultural assumptions of the arriving and receiving elites. Indeed, Johnson shows how the mutual interests of both sets of slaveholders were met by the waiving of the 1807 ban on the importation of enslaved people into the United States to ensure that 'race became its own passport' and, rather than an 'asylum from affliction', for thousands of refugees Louisiana became a 'sanctuary for slavery'.

With the 1794 abolition of slavery across the French Empire, all persons of African descent in Saint Domingue were made legally free. Johnson argues that the continued enslavement of thousands of individuals, whether on the island or when transferred to other jurisdictions, was a product of wider

structures of racial constraint and confinement. Previous scholarship has taken the tripartite composition of the 1809 arrivals between white, free persons of colour, and enslaved described in contemporary accounts and statistics for granted as static and uncontroversial, therefore Johnson's reconceptualising prompts us to dwell upon the way the institution of slavery was perpetuated and enforced on an international scale by a phenotypic assumption of bondage unless legal proof – the testimony of a white person or legal documents – was apparent.

The spatial differentials of the structures of confinement are also explored – in that arrival in a slave society could, and usually did, lead to enslavement or re-enslavement, whilst arrival in a non-slave state would not automatically mean this. Indeed, this conceptualisation resonates with scholarship on kidnapping into slavery and smuggling of enslaved people and examines how race and the space one arrived in could combine to render a 'legal' status on persons of visible African ancestry that may have been newly acquired or reacquired with little legal or practical recourse to protest.

Johnson uses the examples of a number of Saint Domingue refugees enslaved in New Orleans who claimed that they were free before arrival in the city to demonstrate the contingency of freedom of those of African heritage on the opinion of white observers. Whilst Marie Justine and Louis Vallon were able to find a number of white individuals willing to swear before a judge that they were free, many other individuals had no such patrons and were compelled to remain in bondage. As acknowledged by Johnson, we have no way of knowing if runaways and claimants of false enslavement without white backers were asserting the truth, but this is besides the point, of course. More important is the way in which these cases demonstrate the terrifying prospect that what we have often tended to conceive as a 'static' legal status was dependent upon chance and caprice and always rested on fragile foundations. Runaway advertisements are used to demonstrate the psychological constructions which allowed this system of constraint to operate, with the case of Figaro, a fugitive who was accused of 'looking false' in order to convince onlookers of his freedom by not behaving with the deference and demeanour expected of the enslaved.

The motivations which may have spurred the migration of refugees of African heritage to the growing centre of a slavery empire are explored, with an acknowledgement of the difficulty of discerning exactly how individuals perceived themselves and their status. As well as physical compulsion, many of the migrants were described as 'loyal' and a complex web of emotional ties to slave masters and coercion as well as the uncertain results of flight drove the migration of enslaved people with their enslavers, in many cases between numerous locations and on numerous voyages. Johnson speculates plausibly upon the types of promises that may have been made by migrating slaveholders and the interpersonal and sexual relationships that may have influenced all sides in these negotiations. Whatever arrangements had been made, or motivations were behind migration, the reality of the position enslaved migrants found themselves in once in Louisiana was harsh – many of these 'loyal' servants were sold to ameliorate their owner's financial situations, on the death of an owner, or for any number of other reasons.

All students of 'history from below' know that the dearth of first hand, first person accounts and even passing reference to non-elite members of historical populations means that a certain amount of educated conjecture is required to build a holistic picture of the lives of people whose stories have been neglected. The nature of re-enslavement and kidnapping was such that it is nigh-on impossible for us to gauge its true prevalence, with claims likely to go unrecorded without some sort of written or (white) testimonial proof. It would be interesting to know if the number of claims of false enslavement grew following the Saint Domingue migration, or whether they were more common among Saint Dominguan as opposed to other groups of enslaved persons. A number of scholars have attested to the strength of ties amongst the refugee community as a whole, but particularly among the free people of colour, perhaps suggesting that it might have been difficult to enslave a person known or accepted as free by other members of this community, who may well have protested against flagrant abuses.

Colourism among the free population of African descent may perhaps have played a part in the often phenotypically lighter free people of colour, many slaveholders themselves, limiting their interference in

liberty claims amongst those of darker phenotype. The fact that some whites were willing to testify in favour of enslaved individuals against the people who claimed to own them also raises some interesting nuances of personal loyalties and what was considered (or not) to be egregious enslavement. Whilst the silences in the written sources at our disposal may raise numerous conjectural points, the logic followed throughout is sound and builds a compelling case for Johnson's conceptual framing of space, race, and slavery, making the most of detailed archival research.

Chapter two of *Slavery's Metropolis* uses the concept of confined cosmopolitanism to contextualise the mobility and opportunity to forge extensive and diverse personal networks experienced by many enslaved persons in New Orleans. From the work of Richard Wade onwards, scholarship on urban slavery has described the relative freedom from supervision and opportunities to cultivate spaces of independent association and living in cities when compared to the archetypal model of plantation slavery. Where this increased control and cultural opportunity can in some previous scholarship be framed in a positive comparative light, Johnson's treatment of the subject demonstrates how much of the linguistic and cultural sophistication and independent activity and movement of the enslaved was an advantage for their enslavers. Confined cosmopolitanism meant the constant re-evaluation of systems of oversight and control to balance the financial advantages to the master class of mobile and cosmopolitan slaves with their desire to maintain a racially-based society.

Johnson uses primary examples such as itinerant peddlers, particularly women, and the enslaved and free black river boatmen who often transported them, to demonstrate the importance to the capitalistic economy of the geographic and cultural knowledge of the enslaved. Skills in selling and networking cultivated across the Atlantic world were used in networks that were cosmopolitan in construction, the result of engaging with blacks and whites from various linguistic and geographic backgrounds, and this ability to build relationships and networks across wide areas and diverse groups helped to increase the efficiency of the movement of goods and the profits of the master class. Johnson acknowledges the importance of these connections in maintaining simultaneity of knowledge and news across extensive areas and between enslaved communities and the potential use of these channels to aid escape and crime, but is clear to stress that their continuance was the result of constant contestation amongst the master class.

The elite balanced the prevalence of 'unchained and circulating slaves', doing jobs which earned their enslavers valuable capital, with laws that ensured the total submission of mobile black persons, who could be stopped or detained by any white person and have their papers demanded of them and be subjected to violent or sexual assault with little recourse to defence or objection. The intensification of the slave economy over the period led to greater scrutiny and segregation of the black population of all statuses over time, whilst an institutionalised culture that commodified and sexualised the bodies of the enslaved led to the behaviour of slave patrollers who had little scruple around maiming or killing if they could locate a runaway.

The importance of space in defining the level of confinement faced by individuals of African heritage in the Atlantic world is further demonstrated in the examples of the treatment of black sailors of any status on arrival in New Orleans. Laws were put in place to confine black sailors on ship whilst in port, on pain of confiscation or (re)enslavement and the cosmopolitan, yet confined, itineraries and experiences of sailors are used effectively to outline the overarching structure described. The choice of seamen is interesting as maritime crews remained the only part of the wider economy where both blacks and whites faced corporal punishment, physical coercion to unwilling labour (through impressment), and where individuals of both races could be the subject of runaway advertisements. As Johnson outlines, however, the classification of someone on phenotypic grounds as 'black' entailed an even greater level of scrutiny and discrimination, particularly when docking in a port where slavery operated.

Chapter three continues the exploration of the dichotomy of cosmopolitanism and confinement with a focus on the regulation of communal spaces of interaction and leisure. The management of a diverse city where free and enslaved black people fraternized widely with an itinerant population of working class and migrant whites was necessarily different in New Orleans compared to northern cities and Johnson describes the

policing of the black population by officials as well as by cultural convention. There were clear economic advantages to the owners of retail and alcohol-serving businesses in allowing enslaved residents to patronise establishments yet this tolerance was capricious and one example clearly demonstrates how free blacks might self-police gatherings to limit their exposure to censure for consorting with enslaved persons.

The dearth of primary source material discussing the lives of the enslaved and lower classes is again acknowledged by Johnson but the conjectural assertions made are rational and in keeping with the range of existing scholarship on interracial fraternization amongst the lower orders of society from across the United States, urban and rural, South and North, in the period. In the context of gambling activities, Johnson states that it is 'unclear the extent to which slaves patronized those establishments' and one expects that there must have been some interaction but this specific example does bring up questions of what customary rules may have been in place as one wonders what recourse enslaved persons might have had to ensure that they could keep winnings taken from white or free black competitors.

The value of the concept of confined cosmopolitanism is very much apparent in the discussion of the organised games of racquette which occurred in antebellum New Orleans, hitherto neglected evidence of which Johnson has brought into prominent academic discourse. Both black and white spectators crowded to watch set piece games participated in by black competitors. There were clear reasons for the participants to want to take part, with the ability to gain social status and prestige and define themselves in a way other than by enslavement or subjugation, and the game provided opportunities for the wider black community to gather and socialise and also commercial openings for peddlers and marketers. The extant accounts of the practice are filtered through the white gaze and these are used effectively to outline the 'indescribable' 'psychic costs of engaging in brutal sport for others' pleasure'. This unique practice, however empowering the participants felt it to be, was allowed by the white authorities as it served to confirm their conceptions of black masculinity and its taking place under white supervision and with official permission confirmed the ability of the white authorities to contain the bodies on show.

This reframing is extended to the spectacles of the famed Congo Square, which has been the subject of far greater previous scholarly attention, much of which has focused upon its importance for preserving African traditions and syncretising a strong African-American culture. Through the prism of confined cosmopolitanism this is also interpreted as a supervised activity through which whites were able to project and confirm their conceptions of racial and cultural superiority whilst also limiting black expression to a defined place and time, with the performances viewed condescendingly by white 'tourists'. This aspect of Johnson's work acts as a challenging correction to the more positivistic approaches to African American cultural expression under slavery in which a generation or more of scholars worked to demonstrate personal and collective agency under the social death of slavery and should elicit some lively debates in this area.

Following on from revisionary scholarship on slavery and the work of Foucault from the likes of Marcus Wood and others, the fourth chapter uses New Orleans as an effective case study to demonstrate how the development of modern practices of correction and the penitentiary developed in conjunction with the operation of chattel slavery in locales across the Atlantic world, and how the impact of this continues to resonate in the contemporary prison-industrial complex. At the beginning of the period in question, black and white prisoners were held together and until 1830 were required to complete public labour on behalf of the city as part of their punishment. Johnson conjectures plausibly with the available material on the 'infrapolitics' within the jail and the possibilities for cosmopolitan and interracial bonds of resistance, particularly with reference to the full scale prison revolt of 1823. In response to the growth of an increasingly racist and segregationist 'herrenvolk' democracy, however, lawmakers ended the forced labour of white prisoners, maintained corporal punishment for black inmates, and, when a new hygienic and modern prison was built, white and black prisoners were separated to foreclose the possible growth of radical multiracial communities.

Having previously dealt with the constrained local, regional, and international mobilities of a wide range of individuals, the final chapter solidifies the transnational and trans-Caribbean scope of Johnson's vision by

focusing on a group of people whose story, although well known in Trinidad, has not featured prominently in the academic historical discourse of American slavery. In early 1815, around 200 slaves from the city's hinterland took up an offer to aid the invading British army in exchange for their freedom, and followed the defeated forces out of Louisiana following the Battle of New Orleans. The experiences of these escapees illuminate both the possibilities and limits of migration and the global scale of racial confinement.

The British finally established the group in Trinidad with land grants to allow the former slaves to become self-sufficient farmers. The structures of confinement that had kept the escapees in bondage in Louisiana continued to impact upon their lives extensively under the British flag – whilst at sea they were denied full food rations and once they were finally settled in Trinidad they were subjected to close supervision and extortionate labour and provisioning demands by officials. The British used their imperial reach to manipulate the confining system to procure wives seized from foreign slave trading vessels for the predominantly male settlers. Privileged compared to their former lives and in comparison to the enslaved inhabitants of the island, nevertheless, 'freedom' for the settlers remained constrained and confined within a racially-based structure.

Throughout this volume, New Orleans proves itself to be an excellent focal point for a transnational study of this nature and Johnson expresses a clear will to move hemispheric studies of slavery away from Tannenbaum-influenced tendencies to view racial structures from an imperial cultural viewpoint. More important in the development of cultures and practices of confinement was the shift in the Mississippi Valley during the period towards an increasingly capitalistic empire of slavery.

In conclusion, Johnson's theory of confined cosmopolitanism offers scholars of the African diaspora, urban studies, capitalism, colonialism, the Revolutionary Atlantic, and many other areas a fruitful conceptualisation with which to frame future projects and develop our understanding of racial structures whose legacies continue to haunt society, culture, and popular and political discourse across the globe.

The author is happy to accept this review and does not wish to comment further.

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