

*Consent in the Presence of Force: Sexual Violence and Black Women's Survival in Antebellum New Orleans.* By Emily A. Owens (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2023. #xvi intro pp. plus #225 pp.).

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The history of light-skinned black women in New Orleans who endured abusive relationships with white enslavers has, throughout the last two centuries, been mythologised, dramatized, romanticised, and misrepresented. Drawing on the significant methodological advances of the last few years, this engaging work by Emily Owens makes a significant contribution to Louisiana, U.S. and French Atlantic history.

Much of the analysis hinges on the notion of “consent,” a concept that is rarely obvious within archival sources. Owens fills those gaps through, firstly, the method of critical fabulation set out by Saidiya Hartman, then the reading with the grain of mutilated historicity set out by Marisa Fuentes. Owens combines these approaches with cultural, legal, and intellectual history as well as consideration of the ways enslaved women moved through and shaped the real and imagined landscapes of power constructed by white men. This allows Owens to provide evidence of the multifarious ways that black women sought to, and did, control their own lives.

The work fits into long a historiographical context of fictional and non-fictional writings on the lives of light skinned enslaved women—the most well-known of the early work being *The Quadroons* by Lydia Maria Child—though there has certainly been a recent upturn in interest. In the introduction, Owens writes that this work is a “[h]istory of women

whose experiences of violence don't neatly coalesce under the rubric of race"(17). Like Jennifer Spear and Emily Clark, Owens understands the importance of understanding the experiences of light-skinned women as a barometer of racialised attitudes and how race was constructed through the lived experiences of those that did not fit comfortably into racial categories, as well as those who did. Additionally, Owens uses the term "Antebellum Atlantic" to express how—rather than quarantining New Orleans as a place of exceptional fluidity of racial boundaries and frequency of inter-racial sex—the city was representative of black women's experiences in both the United States and Caribbean.

Over five chapters, Owens carefully builds her argument against polemical conceptions of consent and linear geographical narratives of movements from slavery to freedom. Chapter one, "Ordinary Violence," defines the conditions that enslaved women in New Orleans lived and laboured under. The violence in this case is broadly defined to mean that which impacts the enslaved person physically, emotionally, spiritually—and then, eventually, archivally. In chapter two Owens then states that "consent was the vector of violence" (60). This intriguing provocation urges the reader to reconsider the usefulness of the concept of consent under slavery. For enslaved women, Owens argues, the seeking of consent is inseparable from the expectation that a woman submit to sex. The seeking of consent did not need to consist of threats, as the institution of slavery had within implicit understandings of what might happen in the case of refusal. It is because of this that the concept of consent works not in favour of the person whose consent is sought, but in favour of her would-be abuser. In Owen's words: "consent is not the boundary of a woman's agency, but the tool through which the law imagines her as a co-conspirator with her rapist" (83).

Through the book we see enslaved women take centre stage. Carmelite, for example, worked as a merchant woman, business manager, sex worker and “concubine” whilst enslaved for a set term in the city, after which she was forced to resort to the courts to demand her freedom. This story builds from previous chapters to consider how sex may have served as a contract—allowing freedom to be performed and then gained through a system resembling *coartación* in the Cuban context. Owens finds that enslaved people participated in contract making on behalf of their owners and took this forward into their personal lives.

The final two chapters of the book encourage readers to reconsider the geography of slavery and race that existed in the South, which has been constructed as much by the historiography as through popular culture and memory. The cases that Owens considered demonstrate that enslaved people did not always move in ways that were predictable based on what we currently know about freedom-seeking. Barclay, who was freed and moved to Ohio, then moved back to New Orleans to live with her former owner “as his wife” (as stated in legal papers). Owens compares this to Hemings’ return to Virginia with Jefferson from Paris and argues that those like Barclay demonstrate that black women understood that freedom hinged on continued links to white men, that autonomous freedom was a fantasy (117-118).

This work adds complexity to what we know about the lives of light-skinned women in New Orleans. The experiences of the women discussed—Delphine, Carmelite, Anne Marie and Alexina—are complicated when we consider their physical movements and the responsibilities handed to them by the men that held them in sexual slavery. Many historians have argued about the ways that understandings of race and sex were projected onto the bodies of light-skinned women, but this work does something new in disrupting

polarised understandings of consent. AQ2It is of vital importance for those interested in this history and historical methodology.