Slavery’s Metropolis

New Orleans is an iconic city, which was once located at the crossroads of early America and the Atlantic World. New Orleans became a major American metropolis as its slave population exploded; in the early nineteenth century, slaves made up one-third of the urban population.

In contrast to our typical understanding of rural, localized, isolated bondage in the emergent Deep South, daily experiences of slavery in New Orleans were global, interconnected, and transient. *Slavery’s Metropolis* uses slave circulations through New Orleans between 1791 and 1825 to map the social and cultural history of enslaved men and women and the rapidly shifting city, nation, and world in which they lived. Investigating emigration from the Caribbean to Louisiana during the Haitian Revolution, commodity flows across urban–rural divides, multiracial amusement places, the local jail, and freedom-seeking migrations to Trinidad following the War of 1812, it remaps the history of slavery in modern urban society.

Rashauna Johnson is an associate professor in the Department of History at Dartmouth College.
Cambridge Studies on the African Diaspora

Editor
Michael Gomez
New York University

Cambridge Studies on the African Diaspora places the experiences of African-descended communities within contexts of transnational, transregional, and transcultural exchange, united by the concept of the migration of peoples and their cultures, politics, ideas, and other systems from or within Africa to other nations or regions.
Slavery’s Metropolis

Unfree Labor in New Orleans during the Age of Revolutions

RASHAUNA JOHNSON
Dartmouth College
For my mother,
Clo Dunn Johnson
(1957–2015)
Contents

List of Figures  page x
List of Maps  xi
Preface: “Drowned in the blood of its citizens”  xiii
Acknowledgments  xvii
List of Abbreviations  xxi

Introduction: Slave Spaces  1
  1 Revolutionary Spaces  24
  2 Market Spaces  55
  3 Neighborhood Spaces  85
  4 Penal Spaces  125
  5 Atlantic Spaces  162

Conclusion: Modern Spaces  203

Selected Bibliography  209
Index  231
Figures

1.1 Act of Sale, Marie-Ursule Marin to Bernard Marigny, 1810. page 40
2.1 Act of Sale, Agnes Mathieu to De La Rodres, 1806. 69
3.1 J. L. Boqueta de Woieseri, View of New Orleans taken from the Plantation of Marigny, 1803. 92
3.2 Historical marker for Faubourg Marigny, New Orleans. 100
3.3 Lafitte’s Blacksmith Shop, ca. 1960. 103
3.4 African Americans dancing and singing the Bamboula, New Orleans, 1800s. 120
4.1 Orleans Police Jail and Parish Prison, ca. 1864. 159
5.1 Peter Brooke, “Sketch of the Position of the British and American forces during the Operations against New Orleans from 23rd December 1814 to January 18, 1815”. 177
Maps

1 New Orleans and its Atlantic World, ca. 1803 xxii
1.1 *Plan de la Nouvelle Orleans* by Jacques Nicolas Bellin, 1764 and Complementary Map 32
2.1 *Plan of the City and Suburbs of New Orleans* by Jacques Tanesse, 1815 66
3.1 Faubourg Marigny 90
4.1 New Orleans and the US empire 131
5.1 New Orleans and the Caribbean 183
Preface

“Drowned in the blood of its citizens”

In August 2005, New Orleans officials decided that a mandatory evacuation order applied to people, not prisoners. As the Orleans Parish Prison filled with floodwaters, armed deputies escorted incarcerated citizens from locked jail cells to an interstate highway that, days before, conveyed relatively more privileged residents to safer places. In time I recognized what I call their “confined cosmopolitanism” – bound prisoners detained on a highway that connects Florida to California – but that insight came later. At the time my concerns were more prosaic: Are there my loved ones among the floating corpses? Which cousins are in jail right now? What did eight feet of water do to my home? Will class end early so I can piece together my shattered world from this bench in Washington Square Park?

New Orleans is my home place. I love that city, and I am proud to call it home. I missed Hurricane Katrina by about a week, as I had moved back to New York to prepare for the start of my second year of graduate coursework. As others worried the city would not come back, I worried it would. The poverty and inequality that others “discovered” during Katrina has defined black life in New Orleans and places like it for a very long time. By the mid-1960s, New Orleans “was one of the most impoverished, most unequal, most violent, and least educated places in the United States.” Three-fourths of the city’s black residents lived below the poverty line, while nearly half of the city’s income went to the top 20 percent of the population. Public health and education were abysmal, and the murder rate was double the national average. The 1970s saw shifts thanks to the work of local organizers and War on Poverty programs, but in the 1980s the retrenchment of public will and funding under the Reagan administration and the bust of two major industries – oil and
the port – left the local economy dependent on tourism and the service economy. White flight to the suburbs deprived the city of its tax base, and substance abuse, street violence, and mass incarceration ripped families apart. For most poor and black residents, things were far from easy in “The City that Care Forgot.”

As in the paradigmatic post-industrial US cities – Detroit, Chicago, Newark – urban communities in New Orleans have been devastated by wealth inequality, the War on Drugs, the prison industrial complex, and substance abuse. The illicit economy offers what legal capitalism does not, so men and women become trapped in cycles of violence, incarceration, poverty, and recidivism. As of 2012, Louisiana imprisoned 1619 inmates per 100,000 residents, a rate higher than that of any other state in the United States and “nearly five times Iran’s, 13 times China’s and 20 times Germany’s.” Louisiana’s for-profit prisons enrich local law enforcement officials even as its two major cities – New Orleans and Baton Rouge – lead national murder statistics every year. And imprisonment disproportionately limits black men’s lives: “About 5,000 black men from New Orleans are doing state prison time, compared with 400 white men from the city.” The murder rates are equally grim. In 2012, the city registered 193 murders in a population just shy of 363,000 residents. Each death is a devastation, one that leaves traumatized partners, parents, children, and communities to shoulder a desperate grief.

Hurricane Katrina and the levee failures exposed the poverty that neoliberalism holds in store for many more in the years to come. But it also exposed the grit that persons of color and poor people across the

---


Global South have long marshaled to survive. Even the guns of private security forces and the market pressures of predatory lending and gentrification did not stop the city’s dispossessed citizens from claiming their right to return. The Free Agents Brass Band spoke for me and many others when they declared, “I’m so glad we’re back home/I’m so glad we’re back home/We made it through that water/That muddy, muddy, water.” And in January 2007, the late antiviolence activist and my beloved pastor Rev. John C. Raphael, Jr. proclaimed before protestors of many races and faiths gathered on the steps of City Hall that “A city that could not be drowned in the waters of a storm will not be drowned in the blood of its citizens.”

During the Age of Revolution, which witnessed the establishment of racialized citizenship, the emergence of capitalism, and the expansion of chattel slavery, people of African descent harnessed the power of streets and streams to survive a deadly epoch. Generations later, people of all backgrounds are working to transform bloody streets into places of justice and peace. In the present, as in the past, the place of black people in New Orleans remains contested. Their stories remind us that this nation’s prosperity rested on the bedrock of exploitation and violence, but they also remind us that pretensions to unbounded power have been – and must be – checked by the determination of the defiant.

---

4 Stacey Plaisance, “New Orleans Residents March on City Hall,” Washington Post, January 11, 2007. Though Raphael was the son of New Orleans’ first black police officer post-desegregation, was himself a police officer, and was a member of a family of police officers, “antiviolence” for him was not synonymous with “anti-criminal.”
Acknowledgments

This book exists, which is testament to, among other things, the generosity and encouragement of many. First, I owe so much to my teachers and advisors. As an undergraduate at Howard University, Greg Carr and Edna Greene Medford mentored me and encouraged me to pursue graduate study. I also enjoyed the warm and generous support of Crystal Evans, Dr. Forrestine Barnes, and the Ronald E. McNair Program. The authors of the first two books that I read toward my undergraduate honors thesis – Michael Gomez and Walter Johnson – became members of my dissertation committee at New York University. There is no way for me to sufficiently thank Dr. Gomez, my dissertation advisor and now series editor. Dr. Gomez trusted me with the freedom to pursue my vision while offering timely feedback and encouragement along the way. And all of the members of that committee – Ada Ferrer, Walter Johnson, Barbara Krauthamer, and Michele Mitchell – have been supportive throughout this process.

I owe a great deal of gratitude to many scholars whose feedback shaped this book. I thank those who participated in the manuscript review at the John Sloan Dickey Center for International Understanding at Dartmouth College: Jennifer Morgan, Adam Rothman, Aimee Bahng, Bob Bonner, Leslie Butler, Reena Goldthree, Udi Greenberg, Sharlene Mollett, and George Trumbull IV. I also thank Chris Hardy Wohlforth for coordinating the seminar. Rosanne Adderley, Daina Ramey Berry, Raymond Gavins, Lara Putnam, Rebecca Scott, and Nayan Shah have all been supportive, and I thank them for their kindness and encouragement. In my time at Dartmouth I have enjoyed the camaraderie of many mentors, colleagues, and friends. I thank the members of the Department
Acknowledgments

of History and the Programs in African and African American Studies (AAAS) and Women, Gender, and Sexuality Studies (WGSS) at Dartmouth. Bob Bonner has given feedback on an infinite number of drafts. Reena Goldthree and Aihmee Bahng helped me to carve out time to write and to reflect. Claudia Anguillano Lisa Baldez, Donnie Brooks, Adrienne Clay, Jay Davis, Laura Edmondson, Udi Greenberg, Jim Igoe, Deborah King, Bruch Lehman, Eng-Beng Lim, Stefan Link, Vincent Mack, Jennifer Miller, Paul Musselwhite, Annelise Orleck, Fran Oscadal, Tanalis Padilla, Gail Patten, Russell Rickford, Naaborko Sackeyfio-Lenoch, Leslie Schnyder, Soyoung Suh, Antonio Tillis, Zeynep Turkyilmaz, Derrick White, and many others have also been so kind and supportive. For his work on the maps, I thank Jonathan Chipman of Dartmouth’s Geography Department and Citrin Family GIS/Applied Spatial Analysis Lab. I thank Charles “C.J.” Katz for assistance with images and permissions. I thank independent researchers John McNish Weiss and Patrick Davis for their valuable insights. Finally, I thank the anonymous readers at Cambridge for their incisive comments.

I could not have written this book without many knowledgeable and patient archivists. Siva Blake at the Williams Research Center guided me through its collections. I also thank the archivists at the Archdiocese of New Orleans Office of Archives, the Louisiana State Archives, the Notarial Archives of New Orleans, Special Collections at Hill Memorial Library at Louisiana State University, the City Archives and Special Collections of the New Orleans Public Library, the New York Historical Society, the Manuscripts and Archives Division of the New York Public Library, the UK National Archives at Kew, the Louisiana Research Collection at Tulane University, and the West Indiana and Special Collections at the University of the West Indies at St. Augustine in Trinidad and Tobago.

For the funding that made this project possible, I am grateful to the Walter and Constance Burke Research Initiation Awards for Junior Faculty and the Junior Faculty Fellowship at Dartmouth; Jim Basker, Sidney Lapidus, and the Gilder-Lehrman Institute of American History; the Andrew W. Mellon Predoctoral Fellowship in the Humanistic Studies; and the Henry M. MacCracken Fellowship at New York University.

I owe such a debt to Debbie Gershenowitz, who has been a responsive and supportive editor. I also thank David Morris and Amanda George at Cambridge University Press as well as Velmurugan Inbasigamoni for shepherding this project to completion.

Somehow I have assembled the world’s most amazing and supportive friends. Taciana Hardmon has generously provided encouragement,
Acknowledgments

feedback, and a listening ear, and Khadija Adams, Charlyn Anderson, Peter Davis, Ashley Spears, Ashley Steele, and Tiffany Watson have all been kind to me for many years. My dear friends from my grad school cohort—Abena Asare, Anne Eller, Kendra Field, Kiron Johnson, Priya Lal, and Franny Sullivan—have made the past decade as fun as it has been intellectually stimulating. Justin Steil offered critical feedback and consistent encouragement, and Brandon Hogan challenged many of my assumptions in our notoriously lengthy and generative conversations.

The love, encouragement, and support of my family have sustained me during a period of major transitions. I thank my brother, Ventress Johnson III, and his children Breanna, Kirklen, and Ventress R. Johnson. I also thank my godmother, Ruth McKession, and cousins, Veronica Henry and Chantell Douglass, as well as Kathie Clark, Debbie Lindsey, Jacqueline Smith, Pamela White, and the members of the New Hope Baptist Church in New Orleans. My mother, Clo Johnson, and grandmother, Ruth Dunn, did not get to see this book in print, but their love, labor, sacrifices, and support made each word possible.
Abbreviations

AANO Archdiocese of New Orleans Office of Archives, New Orleans, LA
AHR American Historical Review
GRO Gloucestershire Record Office, Gloucester Archives, Gloucestershire, UK
HNOC Williams Research Center, Historic New Orleans Collection, New Orleans, LA
LSA Louisiana State Archives, Baton Rouge, LA
LSU Special Collections, Hill Memorial Library, Louisiana State University, Baton Rouge, LA
NANO Notarial Archives, New Orleans, LA
NOC New Orleans Collection at New-York Historical Society, New York, NY
NOPL Louisiana Division, City Archives & Special Collections, New Orleans Public Library, New Orleans, LA
NYHS New-York Historical Society, New York, NY
NYPL Manuscripts and Archives Division, New York Public Library, New York, NY
THC The Heartman Collection, 1794–1897, Xavier University, New Orleans, LA.
TNA The National Archives, Kew, UK
TU Special Collections, Tulane University, New Orleans, LA
UWI West Indiana & Special Collections, University of the West Indies at St. Augustine, Trinidad and Tobago
MAP 1  Map of New Orleans and its Atlantic World, ca. 1803.