Lisa Ze Winters

The Mulatta Concubine: Terror, Intimacy, Freedom, and Desire in the Black Transatlantic. Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2016. xiii + 222 pp. (Cloth US\$59.95)

A modest, dignified, “unambiguously brown” figure serves as the cover image of this provocative book. The incongruence between the titillating expectations suggested by the title and the modesty conveyed by the visual image precisely mirrors the narrative tension the study inhabits and in fact cultivates. Lisa Ze Winters’s focus is on the persistent iconicity of the *signares*, wives of French entrepreneurs in the coastal communities established for the warehousing and embarkation of captives, and the significant roles they played in the socio-economic system of Atlantic slavery. The distinction between the expectations provoked by the stereotype/trope/iconography of the free(d) mulatta and its use as a gateway to more subtle, indeterminate, and intimate explorations of diaspora as an “uncollective experience” (p. 151) is central to her concerns.

Ze Winters defers an in-depth reading of this image until her last chapter, which situates the image as a “point of entry” into l’Abbé Boilat’s *Atlas*, a visual and textual amalgam that positions the “signare’s location,” and the multiple signs of her cultural identity. She thus underscores “the opposition between two vastly different worlds and worldviews, and the signare’s unique ability to inhabit the space between the two worlds and serve as conduit between them” (p. 154). In addition to this cover image, another elusive archival figure provides a narrative thread for the study: a free woman of mixed European and West African heritage who takes passage on a slave ship with her own slaves to meet her partner (lover? husband?) working as a gunsmith in New Orleans. The book charts this journey of the free(d) mulatta concubine through the circum-Atlantic world. Ze Winters’s analysis of eighteenth-century print, material, and visual culture is central to the excavation of the diasporic trace of the mulatta concubine. Four chapters ricochet back and forth across the Atlantic, drawing on colonial records, travel guides, paintings, and periodicals.

Rather than attempting to resolve or correct the many contradictory features of the mulatta trope and/or the lacunae in her archive, Ze Winters takes her cues from scholars Saidiya Hartman and Brent Edwards, who use “critical fabulation”—a method that speculates inventively while simultaneously putting pressure on the tension between “brutal, real, lived history” and the metaphoric—to read against the grain of mainstream archives of Atlantic slavery and colonialism (pp. 180–81). Favoring ethnography, art history, and religion over fiction to interrogate the iconography of the mulatta in the Atlantic cross-roads, she demonstrates that far from being invisible, the free(d) mulatta is

actually *hypervisible* in the colonial record. Reading against the archive can also be generative: Ze Winters is most intrigued by the liminal spaces between the “historical subjectivity and imaginative objection” that flourished within the complex community of the *entrepôts* (p. 109).

To probe the liminal spheres of racial production, Ze Winters taps anthropological studies on syncretic African religion. She provocatively claims that the characteristics and iconography of the New World *loa/orisha* Ezili/Erzulie is an embodiment or a retention or a fragment of the strange positionality of the signares that the enslaved may have encountered as they passed through slave castles and ports on their way to the Middle Passage. Following Joan Dayan’s analysis of Ezili in Haiti (*Haiti, History, and the Gods* [1995]), Ze Winters analyzes the triangular relationship, which she conceives as an echo, between the goddess Ezili, her tripartite iterations, and the free(d) mulatta concubine “across a black diasporic time and space” (p. 31). She adopts the foundational Haitian concept of the spiral as a way of exploring the contours of the free(d) mulatta concubine as she moves back and forth across the Atlantic from the elaborately coiffed signares of Goree island to the Vodou queens and *placées* of New Orleans.

The Mulatta Concubine joins other interdisciplinary studies of the Atlantic world that recover the submerged history of the interracial, bicultural community of the *entrepôts*; Ze Winters’s study could be considered a francophone counterpart to Pernille Ipsen’s *Daughters of the Trade* (2015) and works that focus on the fraught position of the mulatta such as Emily Clark’s *The Strange History of the American Quadroon* (2013). Literary studies has become a vastly interdisciplinary field comprised of history, art criticism, cultural studies and print culture, and *The Mulatta Concubine* will be of great interest to readers in all of these areas. Notably, the only conventionally literary text that she includes is a portion of Eliza Potter’s *A Hairdresser’s Experience in High Life* (1859). This is less a criticism than an observation. She has clearly relied on literary scholars to create her methodology, which she adeptly applies to a fascinating archive, successfully wielding it to “widen the concern from the mechanics and material consequences of white heteropatriarchal desire and also consider how black Atlantic subjects, encountered, processed, and theorized the event of the free(d) mulatta concubine *in diaspora*” (p. 11).

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