



NATIONAL ENDOWMENT FOR THE HUMANITIES

DIVISION OF RESEARCH PROGRAMS

Narrative Section of a Successful Application

The attached document contains the grant narrative and selected portions of a previously funded grant application. It is not intended to serve as a model, but to give you a sense of how a successful application may be crafted. Every successful application is different, and each applicant is urged to prepare a proposal that reflects its unique project and aspirations. Prospective applicants should consult the Research Programs application guidelines at <https://www.neh.gov/grants/research/fellowships> for instructions.

Note: The attachment only contains the grant narrative and selected portions, not the entire funded application. In addition, certain portions may have been redacted to protect the privacy interests of an individual and/or to protect confidential commercial and financial information and/or to protect copyrighted materials.

Project Title: Voices of the Enslaved: Love, Labor, and Longing in French Louisiana

Institution: University of Notre Dame

Project Director: Sophie White

Grant Program: Fellowships

Project Description: *Voices of the African Diaspora*

In a recent article about *Twelve Years a Slave*, the film based on Solomon Northrup's 1853 narrative, the historian Annette Gordon-Reed posed this familiar question: "Which historical voices should be deemed legitimate? These questions are particularly fraught when one is dealing with past atrocities, like America's racially based system of chattel slavery. (...) Then there is history's cruel irony: the individuals who bore the brunt of the system—the enslaved—lived under a shroud of enforced anonymity. The vast majority could neither read nor write, and they therefore left behind no documents, which are the lifeblood of the historian's craft. The voices that we would most like to hear—the voices that we most need to hear—are silent." In seeking to find out "who Africans became in diaspora" we are indeed faced with shortcomings in the evidence of "captives' own representations of self and community" (Smallwood). This problem is especially acute in the colonial period, before the rise of the autobiographical slave narrative genre associated with Anglo-American abolition movements. But in French colonies, I argue, the evidence from slave testimony mitigated this lacuna.

In contrast to English law, French law hinged on testimony as central to judicial procedure and privileged confession as the "queen of proofs" (Andrews, Wenzel). Colonial and metropolitan officials consistently upheld this premise even as they grappled with ways to subjugate enslaved Africans. So slaves were called to testify in court as defendants when they were accused of crimes, but also as witnesses, and as victims. This study focuses on one of the richest repositories of extant trial records, those from French colonial Louisiana, and I make two major interventions. First, I situate the evidence not just within the French Atlantic, but also within a global French empire that increasingly sought to centralize and standardize judicial laws including slave testimony. Second, I argue that, far from seeing testimony as exclusively antagonistic and coercive, the enslaved seized the opportunity to testify in order to voice their experiences of slavery and diaspora, producing an extraordinary corpus of autobiographical narratives. Constantly redirecting the court's focus, individual slaves spoke out about their oral and aural cultures, about their interpretations of labor practices and reactions to violence or sexual depredation, about their criteria for initiating or rejecting family/kinship ties or their means for sustaining and conceptualizing spiritual beliefs. In telling how they maneuvered between originary West African (primarily Senegambian) and colonial/creole cultures, languages, and religions, they volunteered something about who they "became in diaspora." And more often than not, their words indicated that tangible things were integral to their experiences, inviting us to consider the interplay of verbal and non-verbal autobiographical expressions and reminding us that material culture can be especially valuable in illuminating the lives of the non-literate.

The interpretation of courtroom testimony is necessarily problematic and extensively debated. But it is also rich with potential if approached sensitively since the opportunity to testify gave the enslaved a rare forum in which to be heard. A chief critique of court cases as biographical evidence for the life of slaves is that it provides only fragmentary snapshots of moments in time, an impediment emphasized in a recent volume on *Biography and the Black Atlantic*. I suggest instead that the value of testimony, as found in French colonial trials, lies precisely in its immediacy in channeling the subjectivity of individual slaves at a given point in time. Furthermore, experiential testimony has one incomparable advantage over other sources pertaining to 18th century slaves, in that it allows us to showcase a multiplicity of fragmented voices, rather than the few individual slaves whose extraordinary life experiences, and just as extraordinary archival survivals, can anchor books (Sweet, Scott/Hébrard). The records from Louisiana prior to France's 1769 cession of that colony are especially exhaustive compared to surviving slave trials from other French colonies. They number over 80 trials, most near-complete, from initial investigation to the prescribed sequence of interrogations, confrontations, rendering judgment—by judges not jury, and sentencing, containing close to 150 distinct voices of Africans/African descendants who testified, primarily male (in addition to a handful of free blacks and a very few Indian slaves).

Reading their courtroom testimony against the grain shows how these individuals, when interrogated, made use of the circumstance to speak about themselves and their actions. Testimony was of course performative: shaped by court procedure and ritual, the words of slaves elicited through questions elaborated by court officials (lawyers were banned from Louisiana), then transcribed using the third

person, occasionally translated. Indeed, some slaves may have been struck by the parallels between the emphasis on seeking out the guilt of the defendant through questioning rituals, and the divining methods that shaped judicial inquiry across West Africa (Zemon Davis). The use of judicial torture—which was part of sentencing, not interrogation—was anomalous, used in less than 5% of cases, most of those concentrated in 1764 under a new Attorney General. Notwithstanding these important considerations, testimony was not always compelled, as we tend to expect. Instead, even when a court appearance was coerced or coached, there was scope for redirecting the narrative—the clerk explicitly acknowledged as much when recording reported dialogue, or what a slave witness “*said, on her own initiative*” or “*said, again without his being asked.*” Methodologically, reading testimony against the grain does not dispense with contextualizing the testimony in terms of the court record, or with cross-checking it against a broad array of external primary sources including slave inventories, probate and manumission records, official and ecclesiastical correspondence, sacramental registers, as well as information about political, religious, architectural, spatial, and material culture factors. It is in fact when methodically contextualized that the close reading of the snatches of creole, of the random colloquialisms and the metaphors that seep through testimony can best reveal glimpses of the inner world of enslaved *individuals*.

So, in 1764 New Orleans, twenty-five year-old Marguerite complained that she had run away three weeks earlier because “*her master and mistress always beat her, that when she fell sick her mistress came to see her after four days and said ‘Mademoiselle is playing at being ill, is she’ and right then beat her with a stick, made her work in the courtyard and told her that if she didn’t work she would have the slaves take her to the public square to have her whipped.*” Marguerite concluded her narrative of her grievances by stating that “*every night, they locked her up like in a convent.*” Here was evidence that this African-born slave, who self identified as “*of the Congo nation*” (and as such was likely familiar with Christianity as practiced in the Kingdom of Kongo), knew about the New Orleans Ursuline convent. Most striking, Marguerite had grasped the notion of the cloister, and of a Catholic model of sexuality mediated by architecture, through segregating and locking up women without men. Marguerite’s testimony was not strategic and did nothing to help her. But in her testimony, we see her insistence on articulating her outrage to the court, allowing us to glean the dual ways she chose to respond to the abuse. First, by physically running away, but just as significantly, by verbally articulating to the court her disapproval of her treatment, through her mimicry of her mistress and through a metaphor about cloister.

This kind of detail, at first glance extraneous but deeply illuminating about the ways in which individuals chose to narrate their experiences of slavery as they made sense of their world, is one of the boons of working with judicial testimony. Marguerite seized the opportunity to voice her moral outrage. So did the visibly disgusted François, who emphatically—and repeatedly—assumed the moral high ground after witnessing a colonist engaging in bestiality and describing his powerlessness to act merely because he was a slave (“*that if [the accused] had been a slave, he would have stopped him*”). As for Louison, owned by the Ursuline nuns, she was attacked in 1752 by a drunken soldier and testified that, while threatening her with his bayonet, he had said to her: “*‘Go on, kneel and ask my forgiveness.’ She replied: ‘One only asks God for forgiveness.’ That in spite of this, she got on her knees and said to him: ‘Sorry, Sir.’*” The soldier had made his demand in a non-specific way that he did not frame as religious. But her words signaled that Catholicism, her knowledge of kneeling in prayer and confession, mediated her interpretation. Yet she did not let language alone to express her response. For she added (unsolicited) a seemingly superfluous and superficial detail: that at the time of the attack she was wearing a hat and corset. In so doing, she drew on material culture to visually evoke her religious moral authority. As she knew well from her immersion in the world of the Ursulines (and their role in educating and their success in catechizing French and African girls), these garments were key markers of feminine propriety and respectability, of the kind of woman who could upbraid a young male for acting like God. There were convents in New France, Martinique and Pondicherry, but none matched the success of the New Orleans nuns in converting and catechizing enslaved African women (Clark, 2007). Marguerite’s, and especially, Louison’s words, anchored them squarely within that specific colonial place and none other.

These statements contain astounding detail and nuances, pertaining in these examples to the theme of moral authority that anchors the in-depth analysis of Louison’s narrative (Ch. 2). But this speech must be

read through the prism of the laws and court procedures that mediated testimony. It has seemed especially logical to compare French Atlantic laws: to consider the impact of New France's legacy of Indian slavery on Louisiana, or to analyze the role of Caribbean slave codes, notably Martinique's 1685 *code noir*, in providing a foundation for slave codes in Louisiana—an *Atlantic* colony. But it is too often forgotten that within the French empire, laws were increasingly centralized, namely the application of France's 1670 criminal ordinance reifying the supremacy of testimony, and mandating interrogation and sentencing rules (Vaughan). Nor have historians sought to compare Louisiana's 1724 *code noir* to the 1723 *code noir* for France's Indian Ocean island colonies, yet they are identical, bound by a global vision of empire predicated on institutional, religious (since they mandated Catholic instruction for slaves), and legal standardization. As such, though the records from Louisiana form the conceptual core of the project, they are also refracted through the lens of slave laws and trials from France's other colonies. (I am planning a long-term digital humanities project centered on these trials, though they are patchy: those from Mauritius are especially rich; those from the Caribbean have not survived as well). Even as colonists attempted to define the racial, cultural and spiritual horizons of slaves, Africans were invested in the power of words and of objects to convey aesthetic expression; to assert or contest status; to construct community and foster economic agency; and even to engineer social control within spaces reserved for slaves. My study investigates histories, relationships and connections such as these in order to shed light on the viewpoint of individual Africans seeking to narrate their identity in a global diaspora circumscribed by French legal frameworks. And it is remarkable that it is their own words that give us access to these insights.

Organization. This project benefits from my linguistic skills as a native speaker of French (and of Mauritian creole) and a scholar of early American and French colonial history working across multiple disciplines spanning critical race theory, African diaspora studies, material culture studies. I received a NEH fellowship for my first book, *Wild Frenchmen and Frenchified Indians: Material Culture and Race in Colonial Louisiana* (Penn Press 2012, re-issued 2014); and have published 3 articles on slavery. This project builds on these intellectual foundations while engaging more systematically with legal history (as signaled by invitations to collaborate on 2 major projects, on French colonial law/jurisprudence, and on free and enslaved women in French law). I am also jointly organizing a conference and edited volume on testimony in 16th-18th century French and Spanish colonial records and their shared origins in Roman law.

The book is organized in 2 parts, preceded by an Introduction that quantifies the trial data and grounds the discussion of judicial practice and slave regulations in Louisiana and within the larger global French empire. Each part has 3 thematic chapters: the first two are anchored by the in-depth analysis of one individual's testimony, with a third foregrounding themes that are best analyzed through the prism of multiple rather than single trials. In Part I, "Of Words & Wounds," Ch. 1 and 2 analyze testimony about physical and sexual abuse in order to foreground the elliptical meanings that slaves *could* insist on conveying about their reactions to violence. Ch. 3 cedes the floor to slaves' own words about love, sexuality, marriage, parenthood, friendship and kinship. In Part II, "Things to Say," the methodological focus shifts to the interplay between verbal and non-verbal stories centered on gender and male honor. Ch. 6 concludes with an analysis of the ways that the enslaved established autonomous social and judicial structures within slave communities by deploying French (and French-sourced) objects to construct generic diasporan identities *and* by co-opting French colonial laws for the purposes of self-policing.

Work plan: I will be on sabbatical in Spring and Fall 2015. My extensive archival research is complete. I have published an article from the book (White 2003) and reworked this as Ch. 4, and I have now drafted Ch. 2 and mapped out Ch. 1. A fellowship would allow me to draft Ch. 3, 5 and 6, thus ready to work on the overall unity of the book through the Introduction and Conclusion. My book is aimed at an audience of scholars and students. Editors at prominent academic presses have already solicited my manuscript (one has raised the possibility of edited readers containing select testimony from French colonies). Since it expands the canon of African slave narratives, I also anticipate that the book will appeal to a general audience in the U.S. and in translation into French. *Voices of the African Diaspora* offers a conceptually ambitious and innovative approach to the study of slaves within a global French empire. But its ultimate significance lies in giving fresh voice to the verbal and non-verbal stories which enslaved individuals, forced into a global African diaspora, sought somehow to narrate.

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