

Lisa Ze Winters, *The Mulatta Concubine: Terror, Intimacy, Freedom, and Desire in the Black Transatlantic* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2016), 222 pp.

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Lisa Ze Winters's groundbreaking book, *The Mulatta Concubine*, challenges nationally and regionally centered studies of black women's sexuality during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries through her juxtaposition of African *signares* and "free(d) mulatta concubines" in the US and the Caribbean. By bringing diasporic dimensions to the study of black women's sexuality during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, Ze Winters argues that the figure of the free(d) mulatta concubine sits at a difficult location for histories of the Black Atlantic and the theories of captivity and freedom that emerge from this archive. "Her body," Ze Winters argues, "serves as a sort of doubling of the vulnerability and culpability of the black subject" (181). Culturally represented as both race traitor and agentic subject, the free(d) mulatta concubine provides Ze Winters not with an exceptional history of blackness and the black diaspora, but with a recovered continuity and repetition of this figure that "resist[s] coherence. . . disrupt[s] or even distort[s] the very frame through which we read the evidence" of the meaning of black subjectivity in transatlantic modernity (181).

I quote here from Ze Winters's Epilogue, where she most forcefully lays out what I think are this book's pressing methodological transformations. These center on the experiences of black women in "liminal" positions of enslaved and free, colonizer and colonized, not to draw their distinction from the "real" subjects of enslaved life but to imagine what their own continuous historical and cultural presences might tell us about the complex and highly variable black diaspora experience. Her work then reframes our very conception of what that diaspora is when not centered on a "collective" definition and what meanings concerning race and freedom can be drawn from its complex routes. Ze Winters's work on this front is necessarily cautious—she lays out the "echoing" presence of the African *signare*, the black or mixed race woman "wed" or matched with white colonial officials in West African port cities. The *signare* is both a critical archival presence in the wider Atlantic world (one compelling line she draws has the *signare* as a genealogical influence on the formation of the Haitian Vodou lwa Ezili) and one whose absence from historical and literary conceptions of the diaspora follows a well-worn route of ignoring the African continent in diaspora studies. Her lack of visibility in the mainstream archive of diaspora studies denies the fundamental significance of women's experience of colonization and enslavement to the field.

The *signare*, like her Americas' counterpart, challenges our geographic terrain of the black transatlantic as well as our conceptual exceptionalism concerning the racial-sexual

historiography of this period. Ze Winters's painstakingly shows the popular presence of *signares* in the literature, visual culture, and legal/bureaucratic archives of the period. Plus, she compellingly explores how their presence is evidence that black agencies and freedoms were perhaps more complex, if no less devastating, than historical studies of enslavement assume. To focus on those women in positions of relative freedom, of course, is dangerous. Ze Winters is careful not to overstate her arguments for affiliation between black women subjects of varying status or to assign sheer power, authority, or resistant political agency to these actors in the early Atlantic. But in pressing her archive, she uncovers more than a buried link between black women in Africa and the Americas; she undoes the latent masculinist assumptions of patriarchal property in women of one's race that haunt the discourse of rape and victimhood that are left unexamined in many studies of enslavement. She also articulates a genealogy in which the sexual economies of race are central to our definitions of gendered freedom.

If the terror and freedom of Ze Winters's subtitle are usually opposed, the intimacy and desire she invokes disrupt the assumed boundaries of those organizing concepts and material set of experiences. The fictions of freedom that often append to the official archive of her central figure are disrupted here to imagine the continuities and connections with a broader group of black populations of the era. Concerned with how black subjects saw each other, not just how black women are constructed by the white patriarchal gaze, in the era, the book argues that the *signares'* "presence at once epitomizes what it is to be in diaspora and lays bare the fragility of any notion of kinship shaped and haunted by slavery and its 'afterlife'" (14). Ze Winters's provocatively pushes the "incoherence of diaspora" (18) in the face of definitions that emphasize collective identity and experience as normative, and thus create normative constructions of the experience of blackness in the early transatlantic world.

In doing so, she participates and extends the conversations of several subfields: in addition to joining the scholars worrying the race and routes of early American transatlanticism, she joins a group of literary and historical scholars who have been challenging the gender and geography of the black diaspora, including Elizabeth DeLoughrey, Yogita Goyal, Omise'eke Tinsley, and Jayna Brown. Overlapping with their scholarship, Ze Winters's book joins the set of works that is also explicitly challenging the limits and possibilities of what one might call "the black political sphere" or the black political imagination through literary, historical, and political theoretical inquiry. Here, *The Mulatta Concubine* joins scholars such as Emily Owens, Aisha Finch, Danielle McGuire, Sarah Haley, Shatema Threadcraft, Alys Eve Weinbaum, and Michelle Stephens, just to name several who have helped to contest masculinist paradigms and histories of black political movement and thought.

Ze Winters, via the work of Hortense Spillers, Saidiya Hartman, and Jenny Sharpe (among others, many mentioned above), reconsiders the free(d) mulatta concubine as a literary-historical-political figure who, when positioned as the organizing figure of black studies and black history, brings political economies and sexual economies into conversation with each other in ways that resist subsuming the latter into a normative conception of the former. Black literary historical investigation, then, includes social and material death but also the particular, private violences and pleasures of kinship, capital, power, and embodiment that run as threads through the variety of black experiences, including those on continental Africa, during this era. In particular, Ze Winters picks up on and expands the threads of those that focus on sexuality and sexual economies as key nodes of understanding what she calls “the inextricable link between sexual subjugation and material agency for free black women” (178). Exposing and exploring that “freedom and security depend on one’s ability to transform sex into wealth and power” (159) in the early Black Atlantic world and beyond, she refuses to turn black women’s sexuality into what Evelyn Hammonds referred to as a “black hole” of investigation that relegates all experiences to either the category of agency/autonomy or that of violence/submission. Instead, Ze Winters imagines black women as political subjects, and in doing so expands enslavement history from exclusively Afro-Pessimistic and history-from-below formulations of pre-determined “collective” identities that rely on recognizable public performances of both politics and embodiment.

The intimacies and desires that Ze Winters foregrounds are both material and methodological challenges. *The Mulatta Concubine* repeatedly evinces “the problem of privacy” that “underscores the centrality of intimate sexual relations in the production of African diasporic subjects” (72). This book marks how we value the public ways that Afro-identified men negotiated for autonomy amid racialized law and enslavement, but deny the political centrality of the “more private set of negotiations” that women were necessarily engaged in for freedom (93). Perhaps her most provocative claim is that “it is precisely the [free(d) mulatta concubine and her kin’s] resistance to incorporation into existing social structures that makes them . . . less recognizable as black diasporic subjects” (118). Such exclusions, the book convinces us, are a challenge to the very questions we bring to the archive of the era of enslavement and an extension of Vèvè Clark’s concept of “diaspora literacy”—they change, quite simply what we look for in our readings of official archival documents as well as in literary and cultural representations. Ze Winters then pushes literary historical work on this era not just to include black women, but to shift our central reading practices and critical questions around the limits and possibilities of freedom, race, agency, and embodiment in the Black Transatlantic.