

*Encyclopédie Noire: The Making of Moreau de Saint-Méry's Intellectual World.* By SARA E. JOHNSON. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press for the Omohundro Institute of Early American History and Culture, 2023. 376 pages. LCCN 2023020762. \$45.00 hardback, \$29.99 e-book.

I first encountered M.L.E. Moreau de Saint-Méry in my college library, ca. 1982, when I stumbled upon a reprint of the curious 61-page booklet he had published in 1796, *Danse*, which spoke in an authoritative, exoticizing voice about Afro-Haitian dances he called *Don Pédre* and *Kalenda*. Later I puzzled over his obsessively rigorous (bordering on fictive) nomenclature for racial intermixture in the *Description topographique, physique, civile, politique et historique de la partie française de l'isle Saint-Domingue*, wondering why many of the terms he catalogued did not appear in French archives documenting the presence of people of color in France. Finally, I have returned to his monumental (there is that word!) *Loix et constitutions des colonies françaises de l'Amérique sous le vent* (6 volumes of upwards of 500 pages each, with detailed indices) trying to understand changing French ideas about race and slavery during the Old Regime.<sup>1</sup> Moreau's obsession with race and seductive women of color is a relentless and disturbing presence in all of these works.

When I picked up Sara E. Johnson's *Encyclopédie Noire*, I was expecting a cradle-to-grave biography, but what I found was something far more imaginative and engaging. Johnson offers an extended riff on the visible and invisible people of color, enslaved and free, who made the French lawyer, writer, enslaver, traveler, and Enlightenment intellectual's wide-ranging life possible, taking creative risks with her book's structure and interpretive methods. Chapters 1, 4, and 8 emulate Moreau's draft manuscript for a comprehensive colonial encyclopedia, *Répertoire des notions coloniales*, which was, in turn, modeled on Diderot and D'Alembert's *Encyclopédie*. Each of these chapters is organized as alphabetized entries on "the people whom Moreau bought, sold, and manumitted" (18), as well as his other family members, certain African ethnic/political groups (e.g. Arada, Ibo), and specific topics, such as "*Nourrices*: women employed by Moreau as wet nurses for his children" (127). The final chapter reflects upon the "poisonous legacy" (21) of Moreau's published corpus.

Interspersed with these pillars are stand-alone chapters interrogating visual and textual iconography associated with Moreau's collected works, including Johnson's original collaborative illustrations prepared with artist Luz Sandoval. Chapter 2 interprets the engravings that accompanied Moreau's *Loix et constitutions* and incorporates two original "portrait collages of Moreau and a re-creation of his household" (19), while Chapter 3 illuminates how Moreau's typography and vast textual production was only made possible by forced labor. Chapter 5 focuses on

<sup>1</sup> M.L.E. Moreau, *Danse. Article extrait d'un ouvrage de M. L. E. Moreau de St-Méry. Ayant pour titre: Répertoire des Notions Coloniales* (Philadelphia: Imprimé par l'auteur, 1796) (reprinted as *De la danse* by Bodoni in Parma, 1801); *Description topographique...* (Philadelphia: Chez l'auteur, 1797); *Loix et constitutions...* (Paris: Chez l'auteur, 1784–1790), 6 vols.

Moreau's neglected natural history writings, and his translations of Spanish-language works into French. Chapter 6 interrogates how physical abuse, psychic terror, and sexual assault are implicated in print culture through Moreau's professional partner Baudry des Lozière's Kikongo-French dictionary. Chapter 7 deploys imagination and graphics to consider the perspectives of the Kikongo subjected to branding and who resisted through escape. Readers are encouraged to choose their own adventure via non-sequential passage "through pairings of source chapters and an intertext" (21). The book is a courageous venture into innovative historical interpretation. Extensive endnotes (comprising more than one-third of the book) bring the reader to a vast network of transatlantic authors from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, as well as modern critical and historical expertise.

Although the chapters are organized to allude to Moreau's trajectory in roughly chronological order, the interpretive model is more *bricolage*, an assemblage and interpretation of juxtaposed images and text. I am sure that some historians will raise an eyebrow at this approach. It is not so much an argument with evidence as a series of meditations on Moreau and the enslaved and free people of color surrounding him who made his privileged life and work possible. The primary sources that Johnson draws upon include runaway slave advertisements, notarial records, parish records, portraits (painted and engraved). Through the juxtaposition of texts and historical and contemporary images, Johnson carefully layers evocations of the people of color who inhabited the same world as Moreau, emphasizing the quotidian violence, humiliation, and degradation that lurks silently below the surface of his self-congratulatory paternalist expertise.

In contrast to Miranda Spieler's decision "not [to] speculate about my subjects' thoughts and feelings,"<sup>2</sup> Johnson offers occasional hypotheses and questions to open up the possible feelings of the enslaved. For example, regarding the enslaved wet nurse's first child, who was replaced as suckler by Moreau's daughter, Aménaïde, Johnson writes: "Had this child died?...or perhaps [Aménaïde succeeded the wet nurse's oldest child, now eight, who]...had been nursed by her mother at least three years...[or] any number of children in the interim" (31). Or, when discussing an unnamed domestic servant who had accompanied Moreau for most of his adult life in the colonies, Johnson asks, "What gossip might he have heard...What details could he share about the life of a man whom he served at such close quarters? Perhaps ... maybe ...," followed by imagined scenarios of the servant's care for Moreau's body and belongings (48). A similar sequence of questions invites readers to imagine the conditions of Asian laborers isolated at the home of Moreau's Dutch collaborator, Van Braam, outside Philadelphia in the 1790s, and Moreau's thoughts on encountering them (117–18). Meanwhile, Johnson also judiciously critiques Moreau's own ventriloquism of the enslaved, for example, when he self-servingly

<sup>2</sup> Miranda Spieler, *Slaves in Paris: Hidden Lives and Fugitive Histories* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2025), 12.

implied that another servant's devotion was based on free will, rather than coerced by the totalitarian system of slavery (49). Johnson addresses her use of informed speculation and imagination head on (232), as well as her positionality as a woman of color whom—she feels confident—Moreau would have been surprised to find in the role of his scholarly critic (247). *Encyclopédie Noire* is not a neutral assay at objectivity; Johnson leaves no ambiguity in her appraisal of the brutal system that stripped workers of their humanity to serve European interests.

Johnson's many years of labor and original approaches to interpreting Moreau's work make the book a must-read for researchers working with Moreau's publications. Yet, I have a few quibbles. I found the decision to include the full French quotations in parentheses after each translated passage distracting; this breaks up the flow of reading Johnson's analysis as the reader skips ahead, trying to find the end of the quoted passage. Unless the English translation is questionable (for example, glossing a particular multivalent or ambiguous word), it would have been better to place the French quotation in the notes, or set them in italics for easy skipping, or simply omit them altogether. Secondly, while Johnson made ample use of the Collection Moreau de Saint-Méry and the notarial records of Saint-Domingue, I was disappointed that she did not investigate censuses and cadasters of Cap Français (ANOM 5DPPC/49, 63 or 10DPPC/188–194) passenger lists (ANOM COL/F5/B/5 & 34), or other archives, such as the Archives Nationales Pierrefitte (Ministère de l'Intérieur, Ministère de la Police Générale), which might have allowed for cross-checking individuals discussed in the text. Finally, as a historian, I would have liked the inclusion of a timeline to track the comings and goings of Moreau and the people around him.

Yet these criticisms are minor. The overwhelming sense that a reader takes away is respect for the author's exhaustive research and expertise, admiration for her imaginative interpretive moves, and affirmation of her moral assessment of Moreau's exploitation and self-promotion. It will not be possible to read his voluminous texts the same way again.

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