

codified and rendered as a French legal construct. The law around which these debates swirled was the 1919 Jonnart Law, which expanded the franchise to elite *évolué* Algerians, but continued to exclude Muslims and was widely seen as a major concession and a disappointment. If there is any hope to be gained in all of this, it is the way feminist and Algerian intellectuals pushed back against the fantasy of a progressive French civilizing mission on the occasion of the centenary in 1930, as Surkis shows at the end of the book. Here, she suggests we look to these critiques as a lens onto the limitations of exclusionary fantasies upon which French sovereignty in Algeria was built.

While the book is evenly strong and consistent in its presentation and argumentation, Chapter Three might be considered a load-bearing wall, at least in terms of the implications of Surkis' argument for historians of Algeria and the Maghreb. Here, she effectively contextualizes the watershed Warnier Law within her argument for sexual politics as the elaboration of land law. Historians of Algeria have previously documented the environmental arguments for the Warnier Law; that is, the way Third Republic administrators argued that Algerians depleted and misused agricultural land as a justification for expropriation. Surkis shows how the architects of the law used this as an opportunity to fashion a category understood to be 'Muslim family law' set apart from property law; land became separated from the intimate and the domestic in this formulation.

*Sex, Law, and Sovereignty* is a standard bearer for scholars of gender and law in colonial societies. Based on an array of sources, ranging from court documents and political correspondence to novels, the book is tightly researched and highly sophisticated in its analysis. Surkis brilliantly illustrates how the French project of colonial legal plurality — ostensibly rooted in an effort to protect and codify local patriarchal norms through personal status and family law — was ultimately about stripping Algerians of their land and establishing French sovereignty. Her most direct and forceful intervention is that land expropriation, a central and violent element of French colonization in Algeria, was directly tied to the legal project of organizing gender and sexuality. In short, Surkis succeeds in showing readers how a gendered legal regime ordered both personality and territoriality in colonial Algeria.

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## AQUATIC CULTURES IN THE ATLANTIC DIASPORA

*Undercurrents of Power: Aquatic Culture in the African Diaspora.*

By Kevin Dawson.

Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2018. Pp. 360. \$45.00, hardcover (ISBN: 978-0-8122-4989-7).

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**KEY WORDS:** West Africa, Central Africa, diaspora, Atlantic world, material culture, intellectual, slavery.

Much of the scholarship on 'the Atlantic world' ignores water and the ways people lived with aquatic environments. Kevin Dawson seeks to reveal this unmapped realm and correct assumptions about the roles of African descendants as expert swimmers and watercraft

innovators. In doing so, he models how we can perceive Atlantic African waterscapes as spaces in which Africans at home and abroad embodied much of their most important cultural work through their relationships with rivers and seas. He provides an intriguing set of concepts and words to assist in this effort, most notably his timely references to 'muscle memory' to suggest one way of explaining how Atlantic Africans instantiated the material and intellectual aspects of their aquatic cultures throughout the Black Atlantic. While Dawson does not develop this notion into a full-fledged theoretical intervention for African Diaspora studies, he offers it among many other contributions to inform and inspire new lines of understanding and research.

Dawson presents his exploration of African Diaspora aquatic cultures in two parts focused on swimming and canoeing, respectively. The five chapters on swimming culture provide insights into the actual motions of African muscle memory, as well as the gender and power dimensions surrounding the experiences of African swimmers in captivity. Following a comparative survey of Atlantic African swimming cultures, Dawson documents the importance of swimming for coastal and interior societies in West and Central Africa, with special emphasis given to swimming as part of the upbringing of children. Africa-born children thus likely played an overlooked role in transmitting and transforming African-based aquatic cultures in the Americas. Among enslaved adults, aquatic blood sports, most notably gator hunts, were often surveilled by whites for entertainment, though these activities along with celebratory communal competitions more genuinely 'expressed African valuations' (48) of honor for both male and female participants. While Black swimmers drew on knowledge and skills shared by African men and women alike, white enslavers imposed their gendered expectations to restrict the exercise of these talents in diving to captive men, who proved exceptionally capable in a variety of dangerous pursuits, especially pearl diving. The first part of the book closes with Dawson's assertion that enslaved aquanauts could gain exceptional privileges, as they often circulated throughout the Caribbean as essential specialists for lucrative salvage missions. Above all, enslavers could not fully appropriate or control this expertise; they needed to entice, not solely coerce, enslaved divers to extract greater profit.

The second part occupies a larger portion of the book with its seven chapters on canoeing culture. Dawson presents the first comprehensive attempt to assign an African identity to dugout canoes and the cultures attached to them in the Atlantic world through a detailed consideration of West and Central African building techniques. After detailing the predominant uses of these vessels in coastal and riverine trade, as well as the warfare that often produced and facilitated the flow of captives into the Atlantic, he forcefully corrects prevailing assumptions that Africans in the Americas contributed little to dugout boat design. This is not solely a matter of tracing sources of technical knowledge. Dawson wants the reader to imagine bigger possibilities. For one, the widespread familiarity of the dugout canoe allowed it to serve as a shared vessel in which diverse Africans could load their varied cultures as they made these canoes together. Further, while Atlantic African canoeing cultures facilitated the expansion of both European colonization and the enslavement that fed it, these cultures also enabled African-descended communities to create trading and social ties that 'disregarded white authority' (181). Dawson devotes the closing three chapters of the second part to exploring how African-derived canoeing shaped and reflected the

larger cultural realms of spirituality, community formation, freedom seeking, and the paddling songs that resonated in the racial imaginaries of enslavers, especially in the US South.

The brief Epilogue provides a necessary (especially now) reminder of how historical narratives like Dawson's can be marshalled as powerful counters to racist claims about the supposedly inherent abilities and inabilities of African-descended people.

Points of concern in *Undercurrents of Power* will be familiar to students of African Diaspora history. The selection of African examples takes a little of this and a little of that from here and there while frequently jumping between centuries, occasionally within a single paragraph. This rapid sampling can at times feel frantic and superficial, leaving the reader winded and wanting pauses for more depth in specific cultural contexts that may have been more formative than others. Additionally, Dawson can be too complacent with the concept of 'retentions' when explaining cultural processes, often, though not always, treating them as stand-alone features disconnected from the workings of internal and external innovations. And when making key claims, such as 'Atlantic Africans maintained similar swimming techniques and valuations, while sharing similar spiritual beliefs concerning water' (17), he cruises perilously close to pronouncements of African cultural homogeneity that have marred more than a few histories of African diasporas in the Atlantic world. Dawson does not quite succumb to these miscues, however. His astute recognition of aquatic culture as an authentic and productive substance for the comparative analysis of continuities and changes permits him to plumb the complexities of Atlantic African cultures with rigor while also pushing disciplinary conventions. Dawson appears to relish this, as he eagerly swims out into open swirling waters in each chapter ready to challenge complacent 'continental' histories. It gets rough at times, but he usually finds the right stroke at the right moment to justify the risk and encourage others to jump in.

*Undercurrents of Power* charts a genuinely novel course that reveals how expansive the physical and conceptual waterscapes of the Atlantic African world can be for those willing to reimagine the contours and dynamics of its pasts.

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## COLONIAL TRANSACTIONS AND HISTORIES IN GABON

*Colonial Transactions: Imaginaries, Bodies, and Histories in Gabon.*

By Florence Bernault.

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**KEY WORDS:** Gabon, colonialism, witchcraft, modernity, religion, political culture.

In this book, Florence Bernault offers an original and refreshing history of European-African colonial encounters in Gabon, Equatorial Africa. She does so by using a wealth of sources, including Gabonese narratives, vivid imageries derived from oral