***Dawn of Detroit*, by Tiya Miles – A Review**

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One might wonder how anyone could write a negative review of Tiya Miles, *Dawn of Detroit A Chronicle of Slavery and Freedom and the City of the Straits* (New York: The New Press, 2017). At first glance, one might think that *Dawn of Detroit* provides an accurate history of slavery in Detroit. After all, the back of the book jacket is filled with praise and Tiya Miles' endnotes fill 57 pages. However, when I looked at the biographies of those who praised the book, I could immediately see that none of the authors, all of whom are professors, were experts in the history of slavery in New France. The endnotes and sources will be discussed below.

My critique is based on what I consider critical errors; my comments are for the most part limited to Miles' discussion of slavery under the French and British Regimes:

While one or more of Miles' students compiled charts based on their translation of Ste. Anne de Détroit's parish records during the British Regime, Miles does not appear to have referred to the same records for the French Period (1701 – 1760 / 1763). This is truly unfortunate because other than notary records or parish records from the St. Lawrence settlements for slave owners who later moved to Detroit, the records from Ste. Anne's, the original 1750 census and the original 1762 census of the Detroit River Region are the only primary records that refer to slaves or to their owners.

Since Miles did not rely on the primary records for the French Regime and only one of the best secondary sources for this time period, much of her commentary regarding slave owners, slaves, and their living conditions are based or sources from another time period or location and her "intuitive descriptions." Slavery, however, is not a subject matter that would justify extrapolation. For example, if an author used a narrative about of a cotton planation in the Deep South with primitive slave quarters and a vicious slave owner who beat and raped his slaves and then applied that description to a discussion of a small farm in Massachusetts, the author would be severely criticized. Yet Miles has relied on sources from St. Louis, the Mississippi Valley, New Orleans, and even New England as underlying sources to justify her often vivid descriptions of living conditions in Detroit. All too often, the descriptions from the secondary sources focus on sexual issues and the repeated references to slaves as sexual partners or to the accusation that slave-owners raped their slaves. Miles then extrapolates from these sources to accuse French Canadians in Detroit of raping their slaves. In other words, Miles narrative reads more like a story in the National Enquirer than it does like a scholarly treatment of the history of slavery in Detroit.

How likely is it that the French Canadians raped their slaves and / or were the fathers of their slave's children? It is certainly possible that some French Canadians raped their slaves or fathered their children; however the fact that a French Canadian raped a slave is not a reason to place every other slave owner in the same category. In fact, stating or implying that all people of a certain race committed specific crimes is despicable and cast serious doubts about her other proclamations about slavery. If we examine the facts, look at some photographs, and two maps, we will see that it is unlikely that many French Canadians raped their slaves in the Detroit River Region during the French Regime.

French-Canadian homes were extremely small and there are no primary records which indicate that separate slave quarters existed during the French Regime in the Detroit River Region. Therefore, slaves lived in homes with their owners, the children of the owners, and the children of the slaves. Considering the cramped living conditions, it is unlikely that a French-Canadian would have an opportunity to rape his slave if he so desired. It is also highly unlikely that a French-Canadian wife would allow her husband to rape his slaves.

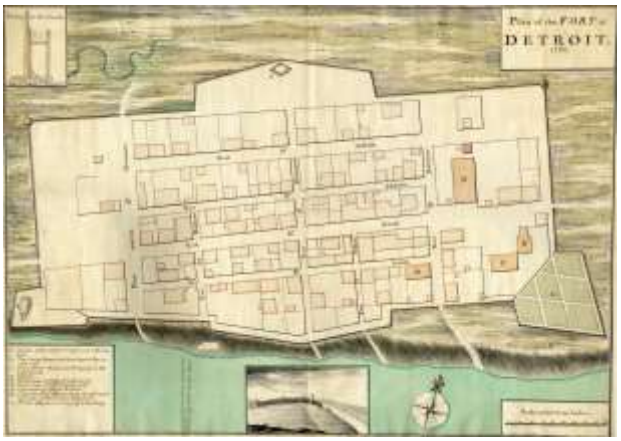
French-Canadian properties outside the fort fronted on the Detroit River and were fairly close to their neighbors. While the size of the property was larger than in the Fort, the homes were most likely the same size, and the size of the family the same as those in the fort. In other words, although the property was larger, the opportunities for rape were minimal, as they were in the fort.

Finally, we have to think of the power of peer-pressure and morality. While slavery is deplorable and judged by the standards of the 19th century through today, most would consider it immoral. However, during the 18th century, slavery was practiced in New France, the American Colonies, and by Native Americans and had been practiced by various societies for thousands of years. Rape, however, was not only a crime; it was a sin. Therefore, considering the close living conditions in the properties outside the fort and the even closer conditions in the fort, I consider it highly unlikely that a French Canadian could deceive his family, his neighbors, the *commandant*, and his priest, by repeatedly raping his slaves. They would have been tried by the authorities, and probably excommunicated by the priest.[1]

Loraine DiCerbo's photos of the Chevalier Home and a British Trader's Home at Michilimackinac – French Canadians in Detroit would have lived in the same size homes

[1] Wikipedia, *Criminal Justice in New France* (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Criminal_Justice_in_New_France), accessed 15 May 2018. In their summary of the prevalence of crime, the authors note the following regarding crimes committed in Montréal and Québec between 1670-1760: "Crime was disproportionately committed by men (80% of accusations). Montreal and Quebec were home to many young, unmarried men, particularly soldiers, and this demographic which accounted for a quarter to a half of the total crime in the Saint-Laurence Valley. The majority of crimes that took place were related to property and sales. Nearly a quarter (96 out of 396) of documented crimes were theft with another 90 cases accounting for the illegal sale of alcohol to natives, as well as 49 cases of illegal sale to the English colonies. This is contrasted to a relatively low number of violent crimes such as murder (23 counts), assault (24 counts), rape (3 accounts), duels (8 counts), and infanticide (5 counts). Other crimes reported include; arson, vagabondage, suicide, desertion, fraud, sacrilege, and disturbing the peace."

Gaspard Joseph Chaussegros de Léry's 1749 Map of the Fort



Lieutenant Diedrich Brehm's 23 February 1761 Map of the Fort

By examining the size of the typical French-Canadian Home with the size of the homes and businesses in the Fort, one can see that it is highly unlikely that a French-Canadian could have repeatedly raped his slaves and escaped the notice of his family, neighbors, the *commandants*, and his priest.

Rather than relying on primary records and the best secondary sources for the history of slavery in New France and the history of Detroit under the French Regime, Miles appears to have accepted the statements found in seriously flawed books about slavery in New France as well as Sleeper-Smith's book about the fur trade. However, by relying on these books, Miles' statements about slavery and the fur trade are also seriously flawed. Rather than repeating the numerous errors in Brett Rushforth's, *Bonds of Alliance* or Susan Sleeper-Smith's, Indian Women and French Men, I invite you read Suzanne Sommerville's review of Rushforth and my review of Sleeper-Smith on the Book Reviews Page on the FCHSM website.

For those who are interested in exploring the true history of the Slavery in Detroit, I invite you to read the numerous articles found in the subpages of the French Canadian Resources parts of the French-Canadian Heritage Society of Michigan website (www.habitantheritage.org) especially the Slavery in New France Page and the Census Page which transcribes and annotates the 1762 Census of the Detroit River Region, as well as naming (if possible) the slaves living in the household.

I also recommend that readers purchase or borrow on inter-library loan the following books. Had Tiya Miles consulted these books, the Parish Records available for the Detroit River Region available from Ancestry and FamilySearch, the articles in *Michigan's Habitant Heritage* that discuss slavery or French-Canadian slave owners and Gail Moreau-DesHarnais' series of articles which list all of those buried from Ste. Anne's, Assumption, St. Jean Baptiste in Amherstburg, and St. Pierre's in Tilbury through 1805, the content of the chapters which discuss slavery during the French and early British Regimes would have been entirely different. The chapters would have been based on primary records and not on Miles' imagination or "intuitive descriptions" about what life was like for the slaves and their owners.

Cleland, Charles E., *Rites of Conquest – The History and Culture of Michigan's Native Americans* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, originally published in 1992; 1998 edition).

Dunnigan, Brian Leigh, *Frontier Metropolis: Picturing Early Detroit, 1701 – 1838* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2001).

Kelley, Sharon A., editor, *Marriage Records Ste. Anne Church Detroit 1701 – 1850* (Detroit: Detroit Society for Genealogical Research, 2001). Kelley records the marriages of all those who married in Ste. Anne's regardless of ethnicity, including slaves and freed slaves.

Kent, Timothy J., *Ft. Pontchartrain at Detroit: A Guide to the Daily Lives of Fur Trade and Military Personnel, Settlers, and Missionaries at French Posts* (Silver Fox Enterprises, 2001).

Lajeunesse, Ernest J., *The Windsor Border Region: Canada's Southernmost Frontier* (Toronto: Champlain Society, University of Toronto Press, 1960; 2010 reprint by the Essex County Historical Society). Lajeunesse published a transcription and translation of the 1750 Census of the Detroit River Region. This is the first census that enumerated Slaves in the region. Subsequent census transcriptions are limited to the Canadian Side of the Detroit River. This book is available online at:
https://ia800606.us.archive.org/13/items/windsorborderreg00laje/windsorborderreg00laje.pdf

Moreau-DesHarnais, Gail, Diane Wolford Sheppard (Volume 1) and Suzanne Boivin Sommerville (Volume 2), *Le Détroit du Lac Érié 1701-1710* (Royal Oak, Michigan: French-Canadian Heritage Society of Michigan, 2016).

Paré, George, *The Catholic Church in Detroit, 1701 – 1888* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1983, reprint).
This book is available from the Hathi Trust:
https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=mdp.39015071402997;view=1up;seq=1

Trudel, Marcel and Micheline D'Allaire, *Deux siècles d'esclavage au Québec* (Montréal: Éditions Hurtubise HMH Ltée, 2004). Includes records from Michigan. George Tombs translated an abbreviated edition of this book un the name *Canada's Forgotten Slaves – Two Hundred Years of Bondage* (Montréal: Véhicule Press, 2013)

Trudel, Marcel. *Dictionnaire des esclaves et de leurs propriétaires au Canada français* (Montréal: Éditions Hurtubise HMH Ltée, 1994, second edition). While we recommend this book, readers should be aware of the fact that many of the slave owners are misidentified because the author relied upon Donna Valley Russell's faulty identification in her annotations to the censuses.

The tragic thing about the mini-bibliography is that instead of using the resources that were available to her, Tiya Miles chose to vilify the French Canadians rather than write an objective portrait of French Canadians, their culture, and Slavery in New France. Nor, did she put much effort into studying the history of Detroit as Suzanne Sommerville points out in her July 2018 article published in *Michigan's Habitant Heritage*: "A Critique of *The Dawn of Detroit, a Chronicle of Slavery and Freedom in the City of the Straits* by Tiya Miles.