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Kristen Stromberg Childers. *Seeking Imperialism's Embrace: National Identity, Decolonization, and Assimilation in the French Caribbean*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2016. ix + 275 pp. Illustrations, map, notes, bibliography, and index. \$74.00 (cl.) ISBN 9780195382839.

Review Essay by Emily Marker, Rutgers University, Camden

Last spring, two women of color activists created a public firestorm when they announced at the Université de Paris 8 that they were organizing a “decolonial summer camp” that would be exclusively open to people of color. Their goal for the *camps d'été décolonial*—a second is planned for this August—is to bring together people who experience French racism first hand to develop new forms of autonomous, political antiracism.[1] The term “decolonial” might initially come off as just the latest academic jargon, but its meaning and provenance have specific resonances for this *H-France Forum*. About a decade ago, Latin American theorists began developing the conceptual vocabulary of “decoloniality” to connote a critical and political stance that they trace to the thought of Aimé Césaire and Frantz Fanon and the spirit of the 1955 Bandung Conference, when leaders from the non-western world organized themselves into a new force in geopolitics. Decoloniality, conceived as a particular mode of decolonization, calls for engagement with specific histories of inequality and domination that shape current relations of power in order to disrupt them. Walter Dignolo defines “decoloniality” as “delinking from the colonial matrix of power,” in which “he who includes and she who is welcomed to be included stand in codified power relations.”[2] The camps’ organizers’ insistence on *non-mixité* is a targeted strategy to disrupt precisely that power structure of includer/included. Unsurprisingly, their commitment to *non-mixité* has proved extremely controversial. In the press and on social media, the move has been condemned as communitarianism run amok and an unambiguous, possibly illegal, case of “anti-white racism.”[3]

But what if we take a “decolonial” view of racism as a system of unequal relations of power? In other words, what if we see racism as a system that reproduces itself even as it evolves through the continuous interplay between processes of racialization in the past and new modes of racialization in the present? If we understand whiteness as structural, as the dominant position in an historical constellation of power rather than an identity or personal trait, then “anti-white racism” becomes a contradiction in terms in the context of modern France. Of course, *non-mixité* could be considered “anti-white” insofar as it produces a crack in the racial armature of white privilege. Indeed, *non-mixité* is threatening because it creates a totally new form of power out of nothing more than sheer will, and so is quite literally a form of self-empowerment. At the same time, one can easily see why white French people who feel passionate about social justice but do not think about racism in this way would feel hurt, confused, angry, or resentful at their exclusion. However one views *non-mixité* as a political strategy, the decolonial summer camps and the hullabaloo they have caused poignantly illustrate the extent to which decolonizing France remains a hotly contested, vitally important, and utterly unfinished process that is inextricably bound up with questions of race and power.

Despite the French Caribbean connection with the genealogy of decolonial thought and the coalition-building emphasis of the summer camps, many Antilleans and Antillean organizations in metropolitan France are consciously keeping their distance from this kind of coalitional antiracist activism. As Audrey Célestine has observed, they do so to insist on the specificity of the Antillean experience of discrimination in France—that Antilleans are a unique group of “citizen-migrants” that distinguishes them from other “minoritized” populations in France today. Célestine has found that ever since people started talking about “*une question noire*” in the early 2000s, and especially after the founding in 2005 of the Conseil représentatif des associations noires de France [CRAN], Antillean groups like the Collectif DOM (*Départements d’outre mer*) have fiercely criticized the “irruption of race” into contemporary debates about social inequality. Fears of being “amalgamated” into a group defined by blackness that is associated primarily with Africans on the one hand, and suspicions that by virtue of their citizenship they might not receive the same consideration as North African immigrants on the other, have only served to reinforce Antillean activists’ strategies of differentiation.[4]

The specificity of the Antillean experience in the broader history of the French empire and postcolonial France is a central focus of Kristen Stromberg Childers’s *Seeking Imperialism’s Embrace: National Identity, Decolonization, and Assimilation in the French Caribbean*. Following in the footsteps of Martinican scholars Fred Constant and Justin Daniel, Childers approaches departmentalization as both a *culmination* (decolonization) and a *process* (national integration), and she considers the case of Guadeloupe and Martinique to be unique and historically significant in both respects.[5] Writing against a Créolist tradition that has pathologized departmentalization as feminine and weak and characterized its initial champions, including Césaire, as “psychologically imbalanced,” Childers is particularly concerned to portray Antilleans’ support for total assimilation as a perfectly “rational” choice (p. 47). She frames the Assimilation Law of 1946 that converted Martinique and Guadeloupe into overseas departments as a natural albeit overdue fulfillment of the promise of French citizenship that came with the abolition of slavery in 1848. That particular history, she argues, combined with conjunctural wartime factors, explains why Antilleans embraced departmentalization as an “alternative path to decolonization” after World War II (p. 1).

At the same time, Childers shows us the many ways delivery on the promise of equal citizenship remained cruelly elusive long after 1946. She spends five of seven chapters chronicling the deeply unequal, gendered, and highly racialized reality of Antilleans’ French citizenship with regard to state benefits, housing, economic development, migration, and historical memory. Indeed, she concludes that contrary to the idea of the “race-blind” Republic, the history of departmentalization demonstrates that “race has been a primordial, if unspoken, consideration in government policies and an inherent part of the republican tradition as it played out on the ground in the new departments and in the metropole” (p. 205). Nevertheless, after some cost-benefit analysis she contends that departmentalization has served as an advantageous framework, both rhetorically and substantively, for Antilleans’ ongoing struggle for health and wellness, social and economic equality, and cultural integration into the French national community on their own terms. She therefore suggests the “anomalous political journey” of the French Caribbean offers important lessons about decolonization as a process and the integration of “racial others” who are also “citizens with full rights” in modern France (p. 9).

And yet, decolonial theory would urge us to question whether citizens who remain subject to multiple forms of racialization are really “citizens with full rights.” Childers attempts to work through the crushing contradictions of the formal equality departmentalization established between Antilleans and metropolitan French and the ways in which legal assimilation merely reordered, rather than fundamentally dismantled, the interlocking political, racial, economic, gender, and cultural regimes—in decolonial parlance, “the colonial matrix of power”—that historically organized relations in France and its empire. It is precisely in the disjuncture between the promise of equality and the active reproduction of inequality that the Antillean case loses some of its specificity. Indeed, reading this book I was struck time and again by how much Antilleans’ experience of *really existing departmentalization* seemed to share with French Africans’ experience of postwar empire. Although Childers does engage with Frederick Cooper’s extensive body of work on French Africa in this period, it is to draw sharp contrasts rather than to locate the Antillean case in a broader imperial context.

Departmentalization was part of a total overhaul of French colonial governance in the postwar conjuncture that resulted in the empire being reorganized as the French Union. The 1946 constitution declared that the Fourth Republic and French Union formed an indissoluble whole and that all colonial subjects were “citizens of the French Union.” Like departmentalization, this new imperial citizenship was conceived as a form of *decolonization without independence*, only the French Union broadened the scope of that project to the wider French colonial world. Of course, much of that world was not interested, but as Cooper has shown, the first postwar cohort of francophone African leaders, like their Antillean counterparts, believed that national independence and complete separation from France would be a total disaster. What they wanted was to maintain ties with France on equal and mutually advantageous terms, and membership in the French Union initially seemed a like a viable way to do so.[6] For more than a decade, Cooper has insisted on the significance of the “explosion of citizenship” in postwar French Africa and the radical promise of the French Union.[7] However, his exhortations to take the French Union and imperial citizenship seriously lead us back to Childers’s impasse: his own research illustrates in exquisite detail the consistent refusal of French officials to take the necessary steps that would have made those institutions truly meaningful.

Putting Childers’s work in more sustained dialogue with Cooper’s reminds us that neither Africans’ nor Antilleans’ legal status in postwar Greater France mapped onto their lived realities as “citizens.” Though the rights that were supposed to be attached to their official statuses differed, Africans’ and Antilleans’ demands for political, social, economic and cultural equality were effectively the same and fundamentally linked, and their French interlocutors knew it. This was, after all, the *decolonial moment*, when the writings of Césaire and Fanon, despite their differences, contributed to the elaboration of a transnational movement for global decolonization that connected what was happening in the French Caribbean not only to French Africa but also to Pan-Africanism, black internationalism, and the spirit of Afro-Asian solidarity that led to Bandung and the spread of Third Worldism that followed.[8] These global currents collided with the more specifically French concerns Childers highlights, like efforts to dissociate the postwar Republic from Vichy and fears of American and UN interference in French colonial affairs. But it was precisely the confluence of those French concerns and broader global forces that sensitized postwar French officials to the impropriety and potential danger of outward signs of racism and

colonial domination in French Africa and the DOM. And so when both Antillean and African citizens started making more forceful claims for the equal rights they supposedly already enjoyed, French officials responded, but rarely in ways that fundamentally challenged the premise of French dominance. In both cases, then, we see a new kind of politics of insincerity emerging in postwar Greater France that obscured the reproduction of white supremacy and shaped the political field in which the ongoing struggle for racial justice would take place.

Institutional discrimination in the civil service is a case in point. Childers notes that a major rationale for Martinicans' support for departmentalization was to get more Antilleans into the civil service and guarantee their equal pay. While Antilleans believed that employing local people in the state administration was an obvious, necessary step in the political assimilation of the DOM, French officials drew the opposite conclusion. For them, Childers writes, "one of the most pressing needs in transforming the DOMs into little pieces of France across the sea was the right personnel; in the eyes of many metropolitans, this meant *white* personnel" (pp. 86-87). Martinique's first post-departmentalization prefect Pierre Trouillé constantly requested more staff from the metropole, despite protests from unions, politicians like Césaire, and even Martinique's Chamber of Commerce. Trouillé insisted that he could not find enough qualified local people, which he explained through rehearsals of longstanding racial-climatological tropes about Antilleans' competence and work-discipline. Crucially, Childers shows this was not the personal whim of one retrograde bad apple; it was the consensus view in Paris, and the practice of preferential hiring of *métros* (a local term for white French from the metropole) long outlasted Trouillé's tenure.

Childers emphasizes that much more was at stake here than just putting French ideals into practice; importing metropolitan *fonctionnaires* deprived Antilleans of rare and significant socioeconomic opportunities. To fundamentally disrupt historic relations of domination on the islands, Antilleans would have to achieve the same socioeconomic status as their metropolitan counterparts, which required access to well-paying jobs. In yet another blow to Antilleans' aspirations for real equality, Childers describes how the night before all metropolitan laws were supposed to go into effect in the DOM (31 December 1947), the government surreptitiously passed a law codifying different pay scales for metropolitan and "indigenous" *fonctionnaires*. The law set off a wave of protest in Martinique and Guadeloupe; at one particularly tumultuous strike in Martinique in March 1948, police fired on the crowd and killed three people (pp. 88-89).

In the wake of the violence, Césaire and others were able to pressure the government to guarantee equal salaries for all *fonctionnaires*. But the government continued to insist that metropolitan French in the DOM *should* earn more than local people because they expected and were indeed entitled to a higher standard of living. Moreover, the *métros* could be trusted to use that extra money more wisely than Antilleans, whom French officials believed did not have the same material needs or consumer desires that were necessary to modernize the economy.[9] And so administrators created a simple workaround: metropolitan *fonctionnaires* in the DOM received special *primes d'installation* (relocation bonuses) that raised their total earnings to as much as 60% more than their Antillean colleagues (p. 90). Césaire was unequivocal in denouncing this maneuver as "racist" and proclaimed before the National Assembly in May 1948: "The assimilation that you are offering us today is merely a caricature of the assimilation

we asked for” (cited 89). Thus Childers underscores that just *two years* after celebrating the assimilation law he had helped write, Césaire’s disillusionment was already profound.

Contestation over institutional discrimination in the civil service in postwar French Africa hinged on the same power dynamics and racial repertoires of development, expertise and living standards.[10] To Africans’ consternation, metropolitan personnel continued to be brought into the territories after 1946 and the government tenaciously defended the “rights” of white *fonctionnaires* in the territories to supplementary incomes. The mask of the *primes d’installation* was particularly galling in the African case, as these “relocation bonuses” were extended to white French who already lived in the territories. African deputies and labor activists waged determined campaigns to hire more Africans and ensure them equal pay and benefits, but like their Antillean counterparts, their repeated confrontations with a recalcitrant French administration left many of them deeply disillusioned before the decade’s end.[11] Indeed, the timeline of their disappointed hopes followed the same rapid arc as that of Césaire’s, rising and falling with official French commitment to imperial reform in 1945 and the government’s hard shift rightward in late 1947—what Gary Wilder has referred to as “the flash between the ‘no longer’ of late colonialism and the ‘not yet’ of the Cold War order.”[12]

Cooper does not come to the same conclusion as Childers on the role of race in these disappointments. He certainly acknowledges race as a factor, but as Richard Drayton has observed, Cooper “seems unwilling to argue that racism was central in a systematic way to the imperial arrangement, and completely foreclosed any possibility of a real transit from the utopian projects of shared citizenship of 1946 which so fascinate him to the concrete extension of the rights and benefits of equal citizenship.” Conversely, Childers, despite her own insistence on the significance of Antilleans’ citizenship, concludes that the departmentalization Antilleans were actually offered was “permeated with racial considerations at every level” (pp. 207). Although she never uses the term “structural racism” herself, her narrative and analysis of postwar France and the French Caribbean are captured perfectly in Drayton’s rejoinder to Cooper’s ambivalence on the role of race in the Franco-African context: “French political actors never entertained seriously at any time any option in which the power, liberties and standard of living of metropolitan French would be diminished in favor of their extension to France’s peripheries...Underlying this, was a structural (and sometimes ideological) racism, in which whites were understood to need or deserve a priority in policy outcomes.”[13]

We can recognize this common racial armature across postwar Greater France without losing sight of the specific location of the French Caribbean in a broader colonial matrix of power that was actively being reconfigured after the war. It would be a mistake to assume that focusing on structural racism on a wider spatial scale would necessarily flatten the experiences of Antillean “citizen-migrants” in postwar and postcolonial France. Indeed, taking a broader view may better illuminate what is actually distinctive about the Antillean experience given that conceptions of Antillean exceptionalism, with regard to Africa in particular, have their own deep roots in colonial racial hierarchies that pitted Antilleans and Africans against one another.[14] The legacy of those hierarchies is reanimated in both Childers’s approach in this book and the Créolist tradition she is writing against. It is also reanimated in the strategies of differentiation pursued by many Antillean activists in France today. Wilder has described the creation of the CRAN in 2005 as embodying Césaire’s lifelong commitment to forging bonds of solidarity between Antilleans

and Africans.[15] It is impossible to say how Césaire would have reacted to the more expansive coalitional approach of the decolonial summer camps. However, as Childers's history of departmentalization makes quite clear, Césaire certainly would have recognized the structural racism they seek to dismantle and the politics of insincerity they forcefully reject.

## NOTES

[1] The project was conceived by Fania Noël, who was born in Haïti and grew up in a Paris suburb, and Sihame Assbague, a native Parisian whose parents are originally from Morocco. For more about Noël and Assbague, and their definition of “political antiracism,” see <https://ce-decolonial.org/>.

[2] Walter D. Mignolo, *The Darker Side of Western Modernity: Global Futures, Decolonial Options* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011), xxvii-iii.

[3] I discuss accusations of anti-white racism as a rhetorical strategy to discredit black critiques of structural racism in postwar Greater France in Emily Marker, “Obscuring Race: Franco-African Conversations about Colonial Reform and Racism After World War II and the Making of ‘Colorblind’ France, 1945-1950,” *French Politics, Culture and Society* 33, no. 3 (Winter 2015): 1-23.

[4] Audrey Célestine, “Mobilisations et identité chez les Antillais en France: le choix de la différentiation,” *REVUE Asylon(s)* no. 8, juillet 2010-septembre 2013: “Radicalisation des frontières et promotion de la diversité” [URL de référence: <http://www.reseauterra.eu/article946.html>].

[5] Fred Constant and Justin Daniel, *1946-1996: Cinquante ans de départementalisation Outre-Mer* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 1996).

[6] Frederick Cooper, *Citizenship Between Empire and Nation. Remaking France and French Africa, 1945-1960* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2014).

[7] Cooper, *Colonialism in Question. Theory, Knowledge, History* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), 17-18. Cooper's work has been foundational for a rising generation of scholars, myself included, who have heeded his call to approach postwar colonialism on its own terms. See, *inter alia*, Muriam Haleh Davis, ‘The Transformation of Man’ in French Algeria: Economic Planning and the Postwar Social Sciences, 1958–62, *Journal of Contemporary History* 52, no. 1 (September 2016) and “Producing Eurafrica: Development, Agriculture and Race in Algeria, 1958-1965” (PhD diss., New York University, 2015); Emily Lord Fransee, “Without Distinction: Gender and Suffrage in the French Empire, 1943-1962” (PhD diss., University of Chicago, 2017); Rachel Kantrowitz, “‘So That Tomorrow Would Be Better for Us’: Developing French-Funded Catholic Schools in Dahomey and Senegal, 1946-1975” (PhD diss., New York University, 2015); Michael Kozakowski, “From the Mediterranean to Europe: Migrants, the World of Work, and the Transformation of the French Mediterranean, 1945-1974” (PhD diss., University of Chicago, 2014); Emily Marker, “France Between Europe and Africa:

Youth, Race and Envisioning the Postwar World, 1940-1960” (PhD diss., University of Chicago, 2016); Jessica Pearson-Patel, “From the Civilizing Mission to International Development: France, the United Nations, and the Politics of Family Health in Postwar Africa, 1940-1960” (PhD diss., New York University, 2013); Terrence G. Peterson, “Counterinsurgent Bodies: Psychological Warfare and Social Welfare in French Algeria, 1956-1961” (PhD diss., University of Wisconsin-Madison, 2015); Louisa Rice, “Between Empire and Nation: Francophone West-African Students and Decolonization,” *Atlantic Studies* 10, no. 1 (March 2013) and “Reframing Imperialism: France, West Africa and Colonial Culture in the Era of Decolonization 1944-1968” (PhD diss., Rutgers University, 2006).

[8] Mignolo, *op cit.* See also Christopher J. Lee, ed., *Making A World After Empire: the Bandung Moment and Its Political Afterlives* (Athens, OH: Ohio State University Press, 2010); Adom Getachew, “The Rise and Fall of Self-Determination: Towards a History of Anti-colonial World-making” (PhD diss., Yale University, 2015).

[9] Childers returns to this theme at greater length in her fifth chapter, “Difference and Belonging: Illusions of Equality.” Building on the work of Kristin Ross, Luc Boltanski and Richard Kuisel on Americanization and economic modernization in postwar France, she emphasizes that over the course of the 1950s and 60s, racial differentiation in the DOM was increasingly expressed through projections of the ideal *jeune cadre* with technical expertise who was also a model consumer, qualities that were coded white. The complex constellation of ideas about race, development and consumption behind the figure of the *cadre* continued to justify not only preferential hiring and compensation for metropolitan *fonctionnaires* but also unequal welfare benefits and social entitlements for Antilleans more broadly (129). To this I would add that Victoria Grazia has shown the transatlantic transfer of an American-style consumer civilization and the standard of living concept was not just between the US and France but rather between the US and all of Western Europe. If we begin to think at that spatial scale, we begin to see the emergence of what she provocatively calls the “White Atlantic.” She argues that the standard of living concept in particular hitched Europe to the American model and created a new kind of “way of life racism” that widened the distance between European lifeworlds and those in Asia and Africa, at precisely the moment that European colonial powers were detaching themselves from their colonies. See her *Irresistible Empire: America’s Advance Through 20th-Century Europe* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap, Harvard University Press, 2005), 11-13, 351.

[10] Cooper writes about this in Chapters 4 and 5 of his *Citizenship Between Empire and Nation*. See also Michelle Pinto, “Employment, Education and the Reconfiguration of Empire: Africanization in Postwar French Africa” (PhD diss., New York University, 2013), and Marker “Obscuring Race,” 11-14.

[11] That is not to say that African deputies abandoned the struggle, but a hard-fought 1950 law guaranteeing pay equity did not in fact put a definitive end to the special “relocation bonuses” for white *fonctionnaires* in the territories. Moreover, it was precisely when the French administration finally started to acquiesce to African demands for the “*Africanisation des cadres*” in the mid-50s that the expense of a truly egalitarian French Union rendered the whole postwar experiment with democratic empire less attractive to French leaders. The decentralizing “Framework Law” of 1956 (*loi cadre*) shifted the financial burden of funding the local civil service to the territories

themselves, and thereby absolved metropolitan France of ever having to deliver on equal benefits. While the details and ultimate outcome of all of this does of course differ from the Antillean case, the *effect*—that both substantive material inequality and its justification were preserved intact—was the same. See note 11.

[12] Gary Wilder, *Freedom Time: Negritude, Decolonization and the Future of the World* (Duke University Press, 2015), 256. The Cold War is only mentioned in passing in Childers' and Cooper's work, but it is important to recall that the France that both Antilleans and Africans had wanted to join in 1945 was a leftist, socialist France—an altogether different entity from the France they got from 1947 onward.

[13] Richard H. Drayton, "Federal Utopias and the Realities of Imperial Power," *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa, and the Middle East* (open access version, October 2016): 5-6. [https://kclpure.kcl.ac.uk/portal/files/58754440/Federal\\_Utopias\\_and\\_the\\_Realities\\_of\\_Imperial\\_Power\\_FINAL.pdf](https://kclpure.kcl.ac.uk/portal/files/58754440/Federal_Utopias_and_the_Realities_of_Imperial_Power_FINAL.pdf)

[14] These intricate hierarchies can also be nicely illustrated by looking at the civil service. Though discouraged from serving in their home territories or the metropole, Antilleans were recruited for the colonial administration in French Africa, most famously, in the case of Félix Éboué. Éboué appears briefly in Childers's account, but she does not engage with Éboué's overt racial paternalism toward his African subjects. Eric Jennings has shown Éboué's stance did not change with the onset of the war, and that Éboué's positions sometimes proved even too extreme for white Free French officials, as in his clash with René Cassin over the issue of forced labor. See Eric Jennings, *Free French Africa in World War II: The African Resistance* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 224-26.

[15] Wilder, *Freedom Time*, 249.

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