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Brett A. Berliner, *Ambivalent Desire: The Exotic Black Other in JazzAge France*. Amherst and Boston: University of Massachusetts Press, 2002. xii + 273 pp. Photographs, notes, and index. \$35.95 U.S. (cl). ISBN 1-5584-935-65.

Review by Michael G. Vann, Santa Clara University.

Writing the history of race is a daunting task. For individuals seeking to come to terms with racial differences, race poses a series of intellectual obstacles ranging from debates on its very existence to various ways in which race is experienced in different cultures. It is extremely problematic for historians seeking to situate race in a narrative of the past. We run into the danger of assuming contemporary constructions of race to be the norm and thus writing anachronistic concepts, values, and practices into our portraits of another time. For historians of France it is even more complicated. Here we encounter the overlapping myths of colorblind France, of the idealized universalist nation of reason and meritocracy, and of the inclusive legacy of citizenship from the French Revolution. Indeed, it is difficult for even the most critical observer of France in the twentieth century to deny the various progressive and admirable moments in France's racial history: its celebration of African art and African-American musicians; the haven Paris provided for refugees of American racism such as Josephine Baker, Richard Wright, and James Baldwin; and the public condemnations of the violence of American racism from Jim Crow to Rodney King. Yet one begins to notice a pattern here. These celebrated moments have everything to do with critiquing and condemning the American experience with race, but they really say nothing about France's own experience with race. Fortunately, with *Ambivalent Desire: The Exotic Black in Jazz-Age France*, Brett Berliner provides us with an important contribution to the history of race in France.

Despite the potentially misleading title, the subject of the book is not blacks on French soil but rather how the French social imagination created its own image of blackness (p. 3). Berliner's argument starts with the most problematic aspect of writing the history of race in France, the stunning contradiction between the popular celebration of certain black figures and the widespread circulation of racist stereotypes of blacks in general. The work starts by noting that in 1925 Paris saw the almost simultaneous debut of Josephine Baker in the *Revue Nègre* and the presence of a side show attraction at the *Exposition des Arts Décoratifs*, where visitors were encouraged to throw balls at a target in the hopes of dunk[ing] the nègre in the water (p.1). Berliner's selection of these contradictory representations of the Black Other cuts to the heart of the paradox of popular French views of blacks (be they African, Afro-Caribbean, or African-American). At times, the black body is the subject of interest, delight, and fantasy. At other times, the black body is the subject of paternalistic, and potentially violent, condescension and scorn, as well as a white desire to dominate the black individual. Berliner argues that these conflicting views of blackness are evidence of confusion, anxiety, and conflict in the French social imagination after the trauma of the First World War. He holds that the troubling aspects of damaged French national identity were worked out by representing the Black Other in a variety of tropes that

reassured white French of their Frenchness and of their whiteness (social and cultural constructs that emphasized superiority to the supposedly primitive black identity). With this discursive move, Berliner redirects the accusatory finger of the racial problematic. Here, race is not a black problem, the issue of an alien minority on French soil. Rather race is a white problem, calling attention to the anxiety in French minds about their nation's status, prestige, power, and identity. The book argues that representations of blackness helped define and stabilize French identity in the interwar years (p. 7). Berliner is to be commended for this theoretical construction of race as a central issue for French identity, rather than a marginal black or colonial issue.

After a brief theoretical introduction and a short chapter on the first arrivals of blacks in significant numbers during the Great War, Berliner deals with the history of the various images of the Black Other in the 1920s through a series of clearly defined and coherent chapters. As a historian, Berliner places these chapters in their proper chronological development and historical context, assiduously avoiding the anachronistic pitfalls of literary criticism and cultural studies. In these seven chapters, some of which could stand alone as essays in and of themselves, he examines the construction of the Black Other as *grand enfant*, object of female sexual fear and male sexual desire, uncivilized primitive, and dangerous savage. He notes that the image of the *nègre* was devoid of any historical context, thus applicable to Senegalese living in colonial West Africa, the colonial Afro-Caribbean, African-Americans, and any black person in France. Casting a wide net in the archives, his evidence includes a wide range of material.

Taking us into the minds of postwar French men and women who had just met the Black Other, the first two chapters draw on fiction, the popular press (including mass surveys published by weekly magazines), and memoirs from the period. Berliner shows us the variety of thoughts that occurred to the French as they tried to make sense of these exotic strangers on French soil. He shows us how male Africans were transformed from the threatening savages of the colonial conquest into the complacent, good-natured, and loyal *grands enfants*. Here the great image is that of the happy-go-lucky grin of the Banania advertisement, an icon that reassured French minds that these strong and potentially threatening primitives were under control.

Next, Berliner brings us into the world of the visual image in two chapters that make use of representations of blacks in advertising, ethnographic and popular photography, and exhibitions. With sources including the photographic collections of travelers in Africa, images published in journals promoting the colonial empire, the mildly pornographic genre of the colonial postcard, and ads for products such as soap, oil, rum, and shoe polish, he details the ways in which French popular culture continued to view the Black Other as one of several stereotypes. Generally seen as naïve or vain buffoons, in these images black males lack intelligence, civilization, or humanity. Rather, Berliner demonstrates that the blacks in these images embodied either barbarism or servitude. Importantly, they did not pose a challenge to white supremacy. While these images ignored black male sexuality, black women embodied an unaestheticized but desirable and available sexuality. Such images of black women presented Africa or the Caribbean as a sexual fantasyland for French men. Berliner calls attention to the development of the common image of the *nègre* as set apart from any temporal or geographic locality. This construction homogenized the diverse experiences of West Africans, Afro-Caribbeans, and African-Americans into a general black type.

Two chapters that describe the accounts of French travelers in Africa follow. Here Berliner's sources range from the published travelogues of well known literary figures, such as André Gide and Lucie Cousturier, to the multimedia press coverage of *La Croisière Noire*, a Citroën-sponsored rally in half-tracks from Algeria to Madagascar. We learn how white French deployed their constructions of the Black Other in his or her colonial home. Berliner argues that the colonial context hampered the ability of the French to truly understand Africans as individuals. Even relatively enlightened observers, such as Cousturier, failed to break out of their privileged racial position. Others, such as Gide, simply turned

blacks into part of the exotic landscape of Africa, denying them any real sense of identity as individual humans.

Finally, before a short concluding chapter, Berliner takes us back to France and into the nightspots of Paris where negrophilism was all the rage at the end of the 1920s. Here we see supposedly more positive stereotypes of the Black Other in circulation at sites where whites mixed with blacks. Berliner describes the origins of the *Bal Nègre* and the development of a trendy sexualized fascination with the Black Other. As post-war France entered the height of the Jazz Age's cultural uncertainty, it became acceptable to flirt with the exotic Black Other, provided these were carefully managed and controlled representations of blackness. The *bal* offered the danger and excitement of encountering blacks in what was supposedly their natural state, dancing to the primitive and erotic rhythmic sounds of the Caribbean. Such a setting played upon a common myth of the hyper-sexuality of black men and women. Berliner argues that the overwhelming sexual tension at the *bal* was part of the fun. He notes the danger that the *nègre* might defile white women but argues that such fears were rendered harmless through humor and a carnivalesque atmosphere; the supposed safeness of this encounter was unlike the situation in the United States of America where fears of interracial sexual contact remained the great source of white male anxiety (p. 214). Berliner then describes the reaction against the race mixing in the Parisian night life as seen in the short stories of Paul Morand. Morand, who professed to be a negrophile, revealed numerous deep-seated fears about interracial sex and many racist conceptions about the true souls, the essence, of the Black Other. His work indicates that despite some racial slumming, the French construction of the Black Other continued to see blacks as being less civilized than whites. Morand stands as a prime example of the ambivalence that Berliner argues is so central to this story.

Berliner's work fits nicely into the growing historiography of French racial history, both metropolitan and colonial. *Ambivalent Desire* compliments the work of American historians such as Tyler Stovall, Phyllis Rose, and Catherine Bernard, and the French scholar Michel Fabre on the history of African-Americans in France, a story primarily concerned with artists, intellectuals, and performers (although Stovall's work provides a more complete picture by including soldiers and numerous civilians who did not achieve the fame of Baker and Baldwin).[1] To this literature of the experience of black Americans in France, Berliner adds an analysis of the various tropes white French used to view, classify, and explain the Black Other in France. Importantly, he situates the presence of the Black Other of imperial France at the height of its colonial empire. Thus, Berliner's work resonates with the current wave of French colonial history, especially the work of Eric Jennings, David Slavin, and Patricia Lorcin.[2] By bridging the waters between the history of race in *l'hexagone* and in the colonies, Berliner pushes towards the goal of achieving an integrated history of imperial France, a narrative that intertwines the colonial and the metropolitan. Thus, *Ambivalent Desire* should be recognized as a significant development in the wider historiography of modern France.

Berliner thus presents us with a persuasive description of French racial formations in the 1920s. His analysis is insightful, his sources are numerous, and his organization is clear. While some historians may be uneasy with his discussion of such seemingly vague and elusive concepts as the French social imagination, Berliner's argument is grounded in historical context and supported with a sufficient range of documentary proof. Scholars interested in the history of race and in the cultural history of interwar France will find *Ambivalent Desire* a rewarding and enlightening text.

NOTES

[1] Tyler Stovall, *Paris Noir: African Americans in the City of Light* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1996); Phyllis Rose, *Jazz Cleopatra: Josephine Baker in Her Time* (New York: Doubleday, 1989); Claire Bernard,

AfroAmerican Artists in Paris, 1919-1939 (New York: Hunter College Art Galleries, 1989); and Michel Fabre, *La Rive noire: De Harlem à la Seine* (Paris: Editions Lieu Commun, 1985).

[2] Eric Jennings, *Vichy in the Tropics: Pétain's National Revolution in Madagascar, Guadeloupe, and Indochina, 1940-1944* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002); David Henry Slavin, *Colonial Cinema and Imperial France, 1919-1939: White Blind Spots, Male Fantasies, Settler Myths* (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001); and Patria M. Lorcin, *Imperial Identities: Stereotyping, Prejudice and Race in Colonial Algeria* (London and New York: I.B. Tauris, 1995).

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