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Félix Germain and Silyane Larcher, eds., *Black French Women and the Struggle for Equality, 1848-2016*. Foreword by T. Denean Sharpley-Whiting. Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 2018. xx + 270 pp. Notes and index. \$40.00 U.S. (pb). ISBN 9781496201270.

Review by Brett A. Berliner, Morgan State University.

In the last few decades, the interdisciplinary study of race and immigration in Europe has exploded, with especially robust research on blacks in Britain, Germany, and, of course, France. The research on France has now gone far beyond the experiences of African-American soldiers, intellectuals, artists, jazz musicians, and Josephine Baker, all of whose histories have been productively explored in canonical works by Michel Fabre, Tyler Stovall, and Phyllis Rose.[1] Black French citizens and colonial subjects, by contrast, have had a much different political and cultural experience than African Americans in France, one not always so positive, but one where many, especially women, asserted their agency to work for political and social equality and citizenship. This black French struggle both against racism, colonialism, and disenfranchisement and for an autonomous French and diasporic identity has been gendered, a story thoughtfully introduced in Félix Germain and Silyane Larcher's edited volume, *Black French Women and the Struggle for Equality, 1848-2016*.

This work of fourteen wide ranging chapters centers black French women and asks how race, class, and gender structure black subjectivities. Black French women were, obviously, shaped by their local conditions, patriarchal structures, politics, and behaviors; and through intersectional analyses, the authors in this volume collectively show how black women resisted local and structural oppressions to lay claim to their citizenship, becoming integral to the nation. In doing this, the authors present France not just as a former imperial nation, but still today as a postcolonial nation structured by its intimate connections to the Americas and Africa. This, then, is a study not of black women in the hexagon but of black women in the heterogenous republic and shaped by this heterogeneity, both on European soil and in overseas France. Stated more colloquially and with apologies to Vegas, what happens in the Antilles does not stay in the Antilles. This has enriched French feminisms, or at least black French feminisms.

Germain and Larcher organize the chapters into five thematic sections, with each section addressing related issues both in the metropole and overseas, and the chapters within each section are not organized chronologically. Though this can be unsettling, it serves the editors larger conceptual project: black feminisms emerged in transnational spaces with continuities over time and space.

“Black Women in Politics and Society,” the book’s first theme, opens with Hilary Jones arguing that urban women in Senegal’s four communes developed a gendered understanding of politics, indeed citizenship, in the early colonial period. Even without the vote and colonial suppression, female *originaires*, drawing on both traditional and republican political traditions, made their voices heard in elections and men addressed their political concerns. Across the Atlantic, in 1934 in Martinique, André Alier, the managing director of a communist paper, was murdered, ostensibly at the direction of the rich, white, propertied class. Monique Milia-Marie-Luce explores this murder not for the cause célèbre that it was, but to ask how the widow Émilie Alier responded. She stood up to the *béké* (white property owning) caste by making a legal claim against the alleged murderers. Though Émilie lost in the courts, twice, in part because the cost of pursuing justice was prohibitive, what is most instructive is that, even before departmentalization, a black woman asserted the power any citizen theoretically had to ask for redress through the French judicial system. A generation later, Christiane Taubira was born in French Guiana and would rise to prominence as a deputy and then, in 2013, minister of justice. Stéphanie Guyon argues that Taubira, a black woman from an overseas department, was subject to racial and gendered denigration, but she also flourished, for a time, politically. She promoted universal values and a heterogeneous France, and she demanded the commemoration of slavery, not just emancipation. As an outsider, however, she did not have a strong network of support and though she oversaw the legalization of same sex marriages, she could not pass penal reform and resigned from office when a bill was introduced to denaturalize individuals convicted of terrorism. These three articles, touching on three nodes of the historic triangle trade, show us that from the nineteenth century to today, black women in greater France have been making socio-political claims on the state, and though at structural disadvantages, they have made their causes heard—and occasionally enacted.

The second section of the book, “Feminist and Postcolonial Movements for Equality,” begins with Félix Germain’s contribution on Caribbean feminism after World War II, which originated with privileged black women, such as Paulette Nardal. First with a woman’s association, the Rassemblement Féminin, and then in her feminist journal, *La femme dans la cité*, Nardal and her associates sought social change and an egalitarian society—and did so from a Christian humanist tradition, which did not, at the time, adequately address class issues. Communist women, such as Gerty Archimède, thus organized to try to improve the conditions of poor women. Archimède, the subject of Annette K. Joseph-Gabriel’s chapter, was a powerful voice for an inclusive, decolonial citizenship in France. Born in Guadeloupe, she studied law in Paris and was elected to the National Assembly in 1946; Archimède’s activism deserves to be centered in the struggle for political equality in the overseas departments. Indeed, she knew departmentalization did not mean equality or the dismantling of all colonial structures, including those that subordinated women. So she became a forceful voice for the full extension of French laws to the DOMs. And as a lawyer, Archimède’s interventions spanned the Atlantic, fighting for disenfranchised political detainees in the Ivory Coast or defending Angela Davis, who was once arrested in Guadeloupe. Archimède’s activism thus anticipates black feminists’ increasing political alignment with the Global South rather than with metropolitan feminists. Silyane Larcher brings this divergence into stark focus as she unpacks a 2015 exchange of heated words between Sharone Omankoy, founder of the Afrofeminist Mwasi Collective, and Maya Surduts, a white second wave feminist who took great offense at a reference to “white feminism” suggesting a Euro-style “white fragility.”[2] Second wave feminists, Larcher states, were, and apparently still are, largely blind to how racism affected women, the very *raison d’être* today of Afrofeminism. As articulated by Omankoy and other Afrofeminists, black

French women start from the premise that their lives are political and that they will speak for themselves, in their own names, not as objects of study but as political, equal, and active citizens, ones especially sensitive to class, race, and the lingering power dynamics of the (post)colonial condition.

In the book's third section, "Respectability, Resistance, and Transnational Identities," Tyler Stovall offers a personal reflection and biographical sketch on the transnational life of the late Jean McNair, the revolutionary African-American Black Panther and hijacker who found political and social refuge from American racism and American justice in France. Although France did not extradite McNair to the US, it did convict her of hijacking, but then the republic offered her and her family a chance to re-enter society. Still radical, but now respectable, McNair worked within the system for social and racial justice, which ultimately brought her high praise from public officials--and forged a model for radical black grassroots activism in France. McNair's respectability and resistance, on first blush, has little in common with that of the early to midcentury writers Suzanne Lacascade, Paulette Nardal, and Jane Nardal, the subjects of Jacqueline Couti's exploration of black women's reframing of race and gender constructions to assert control over the black female body. In the novel *Claire-Solange: Américaine* (1924), Lacascade rejected the exotic sexualized archetype of the Caribbean woman, the *doudou*. The protagonist, though objectified, reframed herself as a nurturing, nonsexualized, and respectable black woman. Though Lacascade may have essentialized the black body, Couti argues that this representation was an act of resistance against dominant, demeaning archetypes. Nardal, too, Couti claims, rejected the sexualized black body in her sensitive story of a working class Martinican woman in France, *En exil*; more explicitly, Jane Nardal critiqued the very construction of the dancing black body for a more respectable--and bourgeois--image of the black female. Literature may have challenged archetypes, but it is real life where people perform respectability, which Stéphanie Mulot and Nadine Lefaucheur describe in their sociological study of contemporary Caribbean women's domestic life. Synthesizing much interview data, the researchers sketch a picture of women who experienced high rates of domestic abuse and economic hardship; yet they still were able to uphold social norms of respectability, which centered on the control and presentation of the female body. Men have the social, economic, and physical power to wreak havoc on the domestic lives of women, but Mulot and Lefaucheur's subjects did not succumb: they resisted, endured, and sacrificed to raise families, becoming the respectable *potomitan*, the steady pillar in the family. Black women's respectability thus takes many forms, some situational, some class based, and black feminism is encompassing enough to account for all of them.

The black woman's body is the focus of attention in the fourth section, "Dialectics between Body, Nation, and Representation." In a thoughtful transnational reading of contemporary women's magazines, Sarah Fila-Bakabadio argues that the popular media, run by French men, did little to subvert colonial constructions of the black female body. Furthermore, *Amina*, for example, the only Francophone black women's magazine from the 1970s to 2001, first published in Senegal, then Paris, presented images of black women that mimicked western beauty standards, and since its major advertisers were African-American beauty companies, it offered images based on American aesthetics. Only recently, she argues, has this changed: black French women are now publishing their own magazines, such as *Kabibi*, which has re-presented the black female body as the black woman wants to be presented, something not really possible for the subject of Robin Mitchell's chapter, Sarah Baartman, the Hotentot Venus. In a fresh reading of the Baartman phenomena, Mitchell focuses not on her body, per se, but on how her

body was a vehicle for social critique. Baartman was displayed in Paris in 1814, not long after the Haitian revolution and immediately following Napoleon's first fall from power. It was in this context that Charles-Joseph Colnet, a white man, misappropriated the black female body by purporting to be Baartman, and he wrote, under her name, a series of letters to the *Journal de Paris* that, Mitchell argues, were really about defining French identity—as a conquering nation of masculine white men, a salve to recent anxieties over defeat.

Finally, the editors group three chapters that “critique” the empire, both past and present. First, Joseph Diémé analyzes Fatou Diome's novel, *The Belly of the Atlantic* (2003), in light of the contemporary crises of immigration, writ large. The novel, Diémé argues, did not shy away from the potential for wealth in the west, but it more strongly exposed the disabling effects of neocolonialism and neoliberalism in Senegal—and offered hope that the Senegalese would find their own solutions to the future, which would be an act of emancipation. Claire Oberon Garcia, next, returns our focus to the interwar period to argue that Roberte Horth and the Nardal sisters anticipated intersectionality in their literature. Focusing on how space and place affected power relations and identity formation, Oberon Garcia suggested that Paris and its public spaces facilitated the awakening of a diasporic consciousness in Horth and the Nardals' writings; moreover, because of their positionality, they came to embrace heterogeneity, not either/or thinking, a step toward realizing equality and black women's agency. Across the Atlantic, in Cameroon, women were asserting their agency. Rose Ndengue, in the culminating essay of the volume, argues that elite Cameroonian women, employing a new imaginary after World War II, challenged patriarchy and colonialism both to seek equality and to become political actors, a new subjectivity.

This wide-ranging volume, in total, makes a compelling case for rethinking metropolitan politics and black French women's history and theory. In its interdisciplinary approach, its melding of colonial and postcolonial France and overseas France into one analytic field, it offers rich possibilities for future research and theorizing about black feminisms, resistance, and, perhaps the single most contested political ideology in the world, equality.

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NOTES

[1] Michel Fabre, *From Harlem to Paris: Black American Writers in France, 1840-1980* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1991); 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: Vintage Books, 1989).

[2] See Robin DiAngelo, "White Fragility," *International Journal of Critical Pedagogy*, 3 (2011): 54-70.

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