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Laila Amine, *Postcolonial Paris: Fictions of Intimacy in the City of Light*. Madison, Wis.: University of Wisconsin Press, 2018. 241 pp. Illustrations, notes, bibliography, index. \$44.95 (hb). ISBN 9780299315801.

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The literary and cultural production of European capital cities and their postcolonial and multicultural urban spaces has been a prolific area of study with works such as Sukhdev Sandhu's *London Calling* (2003), John Clement Ball's *Imagining London* (2004), John McLeod's *Postcolonial London* (2004) or, more recently, Maria Ridda's incisive study on South-Asian diasporic writing entitled *Imagining Bombay, London, New York and Beyond* (2015) and Elisabeth Bekers's and Daniel Acke's bilingual edited collection *Brussel schrijven/Ecrire Bruxelles: De Stad als inspiratiebron sinds de 19de eeuw/La ville comme source d'inspiration depuis le XIXe siècle* (2016). While works on London dominate the field, Laila Amine's study of Paris's colonial and postcolonial literary condition testifies to a renewed engagement with the migrant cultures of the French capital and the marginalized communities in its suburbs, following the earlier works of Bennetta Jules-Rosette's *Black Paris: The African Writers' Landscape* (2000) and Odile Cazenave's *Afrique sur Seine: A New Generation of African Writers in Paris* (2005), alongside more interdisciplinary approaches, such as Beth Epstein's fieldwork-based study *Collective Terms: Race, Culture & Community in a State-Planned City in France* (2011) and Juliet Carpenter's and Christina Horvath's edited collection *Regards croisés sur la banlieue* (2015). This renewed interest in Paris seems to have been triggered by the widespread uprisings in suburbs across the country in 2005, as well as the Charlie Hebdo shooting and Paris attacks in 2015.

In this context, Amine's study, published in University of Wisconsin Press's interdisciplinary "Africa and the Diaspora: History, Politics, Culture" series, sets out to "locate" Paris and its *banlieues*. The author pays particular attention to the French capital's geographical and social margins by bringing together "Maghrebi, Franco-Arab, and African American authors" (p. 3) who "respond to the demonization of Arab and Muslim men by rewriting colonial tropes of intimacy (the interracial couple, the harem, and the Arab queer) to uncover the long-standing deployment of gender and sexuality in constructing and contesting racial boundaries between Paris and its outskirts, France and Algeria, the West and the rest" (p. 3).

What makes Amine's study stand out from other works in the field of postcolonial city writing, film, and artistic production is her unique approach that focuses on intimacy, rather than on "diaspora," as a lens to investigate literary representations of racialization in Paris. Drawing the connection between postcolonial power relations, space, and intimacy is thereby not new:

Amine explains how her use of intimacy as a tool is borrowed from Ann Stoler's use of the term in the latter's seminal study *Haunted by Empire: Geographies of Intimacy in North American History* (2006). Amine's approach is, however, refreshing and certainly reduces the risk of pigeonholing the writers and artists in this study and reducing them to mouthpieces of their respective diasporic communities. The study's aim is to "[demonstrate] that the postcolonial other is both peripheral to yet intimately entangled with tropes so famously evoked by the City of Light: romance, love, modernity, freedom, and equality" (p. 3). Across five chapters, Amine sets out to investigate a rather heterogeneous corpus consisting of a range of novels, short stories, films, and graffiti art, which is laudable for its breadth and ambition, yet comes, as we will see, at the expense of precision and is overwhelmingly produced by male writers, filmmakers, and artists.

Chapter one, "Colonial Domesticity," provides a rich context and detailed overview of Driss Chraïbi's 1955 novel *Les Boucs*'s reception and analyses its representation of the first generation of Algerian labour migrants in post-war Paris. Amine reads the text as an early example of debunking the French colonial myth of a "harmonious" union between France and Algeria via the trope of the French-Algerian (heterosexual) couple and observes how "[the] portrayal of Paris in *The Butts* uncovers a metropolitan equivalent to the highly segregated realities of French Algeria, which the colonial metaphor of cohabitation obscures" (p. 44).

In Chapter two, "Romance and Brotherhood," Amine concentrates on a radically different demographic of writers and examines a number of novels and short stories by prominent (yet all very different) African American "expat" authors, such as Richard Wright, James Baldwin, and William Gardner Smith. Again engaging the trope of "interracial" romance, this time to analyze "the difference in French perceptions of North African and black American men" (p. 78), Amine notes how Wright contributed to the idea of a color-blind, race-free Paris, while Baldwin exposed colonial race relations in his essays and short story "This Morning, This Evening, So Soon" (she does not fail to mention that most of his fiction set in Paris does not directly deal with the race question as much as with colonial issues).

The third chapter, "The New Harem," which provides probably the strongest close-reading analysis of this study, focuses on Mehdi Charef's popular 1983 novel *Le Thé au harem d'Arché Ahmed*. This chapter mobilizes the image of the harem from the novel's title and employs it as a spatial metaphor to describe the social space of the *banlieue*: "[located] in the Paris outskirts, the harem invokes a site that is segregated and surveilled, fantasized by the mainstream as antithetical to the rest of the city [...] and a locus against which French society defines itself" (p. 91). Amine reverses the clearly gendered connotations of the colonial harem to examine "the politics of intimacy through the Orientalist trope," in particular with regard to the young male characters to come to an understanding of the way in which Charef disrupts the portrayal of the periphery as exotic (p. 92).

Chapter four, "Other Queers," moves from text to film: The chapter locates a number of films, such as Mehdi Charef's *Miss Mona* (1987) and Merzak Allouache's *Chouchou* (2003), while focusing on Zakia Bouchaala's *Origine contrôlée* (2001), within the context of the demonstrations and legal consequences of the 2013 French law that enabled "le mariage pour tous," as well as the peripheral status of queer studies in France. Amine connects these debates to "the use of gender during the colonial era to reject the assimilation of colonial subjects" (p. 122) in order to examine "interracial" queer intimacies and "marginal masculinities" to understand why these films are overwhelmingly set in central Paris rather than in the *banlieue*, and she pays particular

attention to these spatial binaries and “dominant ideologies about integration, individualism, and universalism” (p. 146).

Probably the chapter the most anchored in the urban space of the French capital, the final chapter five, “Embodying the City,” continues this focus on the visual and moves further away from the periphery into the geographical center of Paris. Here, Amine ventures to compare the use of graffiti and street art by Paris-based artists Princess Hijab and JR, as well as its textual representation in Leïla Sebbar’s 1999 novel *La Seine était rouge*. This chapter argues that the transgressive “street interventions” of literary protagonists and “real” artists “make the *minorités visibles* central to the capital, in ways that interrogate Paris’s exclusionary cultural expressions” (p. 148) and “claim Paris streets as a public sphere for the dissemination of postcolonial knowledge” (p. 153).

With a coda in lieu of a conclusion, entitled “Everyday Islamophobia,” *Postcolonial Paris* brings its reader back to the present day, by referring to the terrorist attacks in 2015 and 2016. Amine retraces islamophobia in France from the 1970s, by focusing in particular on media constructions of Islam, and perceptively notes that “these events have turned public debates about terrorism from long-distance chaos to homegrown urban carnage, marshaling fear about enemies within, a discourse that is not new” (p. 178) and calls for a careful engagement with cultural production that either reinforces or subverts harmful stereotypes.

Unfortunately, however, *Postcolonial Paris* presents its reader with a number of problematic issues. Firstly, the study’s exclusive focus on writers and artists from the Maghreb and the United States raises questions about the unexplained absence of any writers or artists originating from other parts of the formerly colonized Francophone world, especially those from Sub-Saharan Africa. Amine’s concentration on Maghrebi and, in particular, Algerian experiences, as narrated by Maghrebi and African American writers, is certainly illuminating in terms of colonial and postcolonial ethnic relations within the French capital and its suburbs, but seems to be based on a rather monolithic understanding of “race.”[1] For instance, the author claims in the introduction that “[the] myth of a universalist and particularly racially egalitarian Paris, which traverses the African American popular imaginary, portrays the capital as a space of liberation for populations of African descent” (p. 6). Yet, there is no engagement with any Black Francophone writers whereas, in chapter two, for instance, one would expect that such analysis would address questions, such as why Baldwin was much more comfortable discussing his solidarity with Algerians than with the Black communities of Paris (and the same goes for Smith).[2] What is more, authors such as Wilfried N’Sondé address many of the issues Amine discusses in chapter three (sex work in the *banlieue*, father figures, generational conflict, etc.) in his 2012 novel *Fleur de béton*, which would have provided an interesting comparison to Charef’s *Le Thé au harem d’Archi Ahmed*. “By ‘postcolonial Paris,’” so Amine states in the introduction, she “[refers] to a spatialized imaginary associated with the pauperized outskirts of the French capital where the majority of colonial migrant workers lived since the 1950s and where their children still reside” (p. 4), yet her narrow focus seems to represent a peculiar contradiction to her understanding of postcoloniality: “[whereas] other postcolonial studies cordon off postcoloniality to a specific era and set of authors, filmmakers, and artists, this book relates it to a racialized ‘imaginative geography’ that bridges temporal boundaries and cultural traditions” (p. 5).

As mentioned above, Amine “brings together Maghrebi, Franco-Arab, and African American authors” (p. 3), however, a certain confusion around terminology remains. At a later point in the introduction, these writers are referred to as “authors of African descent” (p. 20), however, the author does not clarify whether they self-identify as such and this issue extends to terms such as “nonwhites” (pp. 20-21) and “queer” (p. 116). These problematic inaccuracies might be linked to an absence of a rigorous copy-editing process, the impact of which is noticeable in both content and style and becomes visible in contradictory sentences such as: “[for] a broader global public, the existence of an impoverished multiracial fringe living in the shadows of the City of Light was something largely unknown until the 2015 terrorist attacks” (p. 4; a rather questionable claim, if only for the success of Mathieu Kassovitz’s 1995 film *La Haine* in the Anglophone world), but then the author states a few lines further down that “[in] 2005 this periphery made world news when a riot in Clichy-sous-Bois spread like a wildfire to more than 300 cities” (p. 4).

In the introduction to *La production de l'espace*, Henri Lefebvre accuses Foucault of “never [explaining] what space it is that he is referring to, nor how it bridges the gap between the theoretical (epistemological) realm and the practical one, between mental and social, between the space of the philosophers and the space of people who deal with material things” (p. 4) and this also constitutes an issue with *Postcolonial Paris*. Across the chapters, there is surprisingly little theoretical engagement with the “actual” spaces of the city and its marginalized communities, such as representations of specific neighborhoods, private and public spaces like cafés, and, thus also very little attempt to theorize the connection between the performance of intimacy and these urban spaces.

Ultimately, *Postcolonial Paris* provides an interesting, if not always unproblematic overview of a wide range of popular colonial and postcolonial cultural production about the urban space of the French capital and provides a useful resource for any undergraduate courses about the material.

NOTES

[1] In the introduction, Amine claims that “Algerians were not permitted to come to the metropole without a passport and a work permit until 1947. That year a new statute facilitated Algerian migration, resulting in a notable Muslim labor force entering France, the majority of which settled in Paris and its working-class periphery. This population represents the earliest, largest, and most culturally visible nonwhite settlement in Western Europe” (p. 8). While they might have been the largest and most culturally visible, regarding for instance, the Yemini communities of London and Cardiff or Liverpool’s mid-nineteenth-century “Chinatown,” calling them the “earliest” is incorrect. Across Europe, there are numerous other examples of non-white individuals and populations going back much further; the belief that “they” weren’t there (here) is itself an artefact of the colonial period.

[2] I am indebted to Ryan Augustyniak’s work on James Baldwin in Paris here.

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