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Justin Izzo, *Experiments with Empire: Anthropology and Fiction in the French Atlantic*. Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2019. ix + 282 pp. \$99.95 U.S. (hb). ISBN 978-1-4780-0370-0; \$26.95 U.S. (pb). ISBN 978-1-4780-0400-4.

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Justin Izzo's *Experiments with Empire* skips from West Africa to the Caribbean to Marseille and across the twentieth century, studying writers and filmmakers who blended anthropology and fiction as a creative way to "process colonial situations and imperial afterlives" (p. 2). Looking beyond the better-known and unsavory entanglements of anthropology and colonialism, Izzo examines intellectuals across the French Atlantic who practiced a more creative, open-ended ethnography. Izzo's focus here is on what he calls experimental anthropology (or, sometimes, ethnographic fiction). On the one hand, this mode had an epistemological remit: to "disrupt generic categories" in order to "think critically about social-scientific and literary ways of knowing the world" (p. 2). But such experimental forms of knowledge production also had a political dimension: they are said to be a "future-oriented epistemology" (p. 215) which has the potential to "project unforeseen futures" and imagine "new, postimperial political desires" (pp. 215-16). In practical terms, this means exploring syntheses of anthropology and fiction in a corpus of writers and filmmakers that includes Ahmadou Hampâté Bâ, Jean Rouch, Michel Leiris, Jacques Stephen Alexis, Patrick Chamoiseau and Jean-Claude Izzo.

Chapter one explores the "generic flexibility" between anthropology and fiction in the works of Hampâté-Bâ and Leiris. In Hampâté-Bâ—historian, ethnologist, novelist and all-around polymath—Izzo examines his "creative forms of distancing" (p. 21) and his "ethnographic didacticism" (p. 25) which danced so nimbly around the conventions of colonial ethnography. On a complimentary track, the chapter also traces Leiris from his embarkment on the Dakar-Djibouti expedition to his eventual disillusionment with anthropology and embrace of a more experimental methodology: "I can no longer tolerate organized research," Leiris wrote rather dramatically, "I need to soak in their drama, to touch their ways of being, to bathe in living flesh. To hell with ethnography!" (p. 43). Despite (or perhaps because of) such proclamations, Izzo suggests, Leiris (and Hampâté-Bâ) used ethnographic fictions to "reimagine the epistemological and aesthetic relationship obtaining between colonial-era fieldwork and empire by filtering it through an acutely felt sense of positionality" (p. 53).

Chapter two turns to film in the form of Jean Rouch's collaborative ethnographic oeuvre, from *Jaguar* (1967) and *Moi, un noir* (1958) to *La Pyramide humaine* (1961). For Izzo, Rouch "creatively decenters the production of anthropological authority" in the service of a "speculative,

decolonized ethnographic fiction” (p. 97). Rouch’s work is especially noteworthy for its “collaborative impetus” (p. 73) and its reflexivity—the ways in which these films try, through improvisation, to explore how “fieldwork might be represented on-screen” (p. 84). Rouch’s films, Izzo contends, ask “not only what decolonization might mean for anthropology but also how experimental ethnography might decolonize anthropological knowledge” (p. 58).

Chapter three shifts focus to the Caribbean, with an exploration of Haitian ethnographic fictions in the form of a string of authors that begins with Jean Price-Mars and continues through Jacques Roumain, Jacques Stephen Alexis and René Depestre to Dany Laferrière. Izzo argues here that ethnographic fictions were, for their Haitian authors, a “new way to know the nation” (p. 133). With the “dissolutive powers” of fiction yoked to ethnography, the above writers “transformed the nation into a self-reflexive epistemological project” (p. 100) by exploring “imaginative forms of national rewriting that sample, collaborate and engage in dialogue with literature’s ethnographic antecedents” (p. 132).

Chapter four moves within the Antilles to Martinique and explores the ethnographic impulses of the créolité writers Patrick Chamoiseau and Raphael Confiant, as well as their intellectual forebear Edouard Glissant. In this chapter, Izzo is especially interested in how, in the work of the *créolistes*, literary history itself becomes “an experimental anthropology in its own right,” which views “ethnographic knowledge and histories of form as both mutually constitutive and mutually transformative” (p. 138). More concretely, the question is where the *créolistes* actually went after the bold provocation they issued in their manifesto that “Caribbean literature does not yet exist” (p. 139). The answer, Izzo suggests, is toward methodologies and practices that can be considered experimental ethnography. The chapter is noteworthy for its compelling overview of the ethnographic in Chamoiseau, from *Texaco* to *Solibo Magnifique* and beyond.

Chapter five completes an Atlantic circuit with a turn to postcolonial France and Jean-Claude Izzo’s “new noir” crime trilogy, published in the 1990s and set in Marseille. Here, (Justin) Izzo unpacks genre fiction and explores how the detective character becomes an “experimental ethnographer” who must “engage in critical thought experiments in which alternative or repressed cultural possibilities go head-to-head with the dominant political or discursive trends that would otherwise marginalize them” (p. 201).

The book closes with a substantial conclusion that brings together the disparate geographical threads into a strong argument for experimental anthropologies. Alternative anthropological works like the ones studied in this book are, Izzo writes, “speculative projects that read empire as an epistemological expedient facilitating the imagination of entirety different political, historical, and geographic assemblages” and “a comparatist motor that prompts us to read texts beyond questions of commensurability and instead in terms of alternative knowledges and lifeworlds” (p. 206). The argument draws on a range of theoretical interlocutors, notably the work of Achille Mbembe, particularly *Ecrire l’Afrique-Monde*. Alternative anthropologies are said to offer precisely “the kind of ‘new assemblages’ and ‘new stylistic’ forms Mbembe calls for in his planetary Africanism” (p. 208). Experimental ethnographies are thus said to entail a “methodological imperative...to seek out texts and social forms that indicate not just where empire’s common sense contradicts itself, but where new political logics are elaborated in its place and how these logics project unforeseen futures” (p. 215).

This is a compelling book—expansive in its design, densely argued in its details. Of its many virtues, one of the most useful is the ways in which it suggests links between writers and intellectuals that might otherwise go unremarked. Izzo convincingly traces the mutations of a creative, open-ended anthropology that was (and perhaps can still be) a vital ground for envisioning alternate futures within and beyond coloniality.

Another strength is the highly elaborated metaphors that undergird Izzo's comparative method: at the heart of these is the notion of "orthogonality." Taken from geometry, this figure entails "intersection and connection but also separation and divergent movement" and is intended to capture the ways in which the experimental anthropological projects studied here interacted in fraught ways with imperialism (p. 209). It is quite difficult to find new ways of describing the often-paradoxical intellectual positions that existed under colonial conditions, but with this figure Izzo has done just that. Orthogonality is a precise and movable concept, and one which will surely be generative for future scholars of empire.

As with any productive and ambitious project, there are also aspects of the book that caused this reader to want to know more. A modest question nagged at me as I turned these pages: what isn't experimental anthropology? In *Experiments with Empire*, Izzo considers a wide range of practices as representative of this mode. Many of them are immediately plausible, while others caused this reader to pause. Should one count René Maran's claims to observational authenticity in *Batouala* as examples of this mode, or even Aimé Césaire's "documentary impulses" in the opening of the *Cahier* (p. 10)? Or what about "dwelling at some descriptive length" on folklore traditions, as Stephen Alexis is said to do (p. 112), or making use of a "social-scientific register" as does Edouard Glissant (p. 144)? To be sure, Izzo does not definitively assign all these varied methods and approaches under this category, and accounting for the unremarked connections between a variety of social-science-adjacent practices is precisely his point in sketching the contours of experimental anthropology. But the very elasticity of the category raises the question of where (or how) one draws the line.

This initial question led me to wonder: in seeking to understand what can go under the banner of experimental anthropology, does it matter *what* the experimental practices were, or is it rather a matter of *who* the writers were who were practicing them? To put that question somewhat differently: does this project's focus on fairly well-known intellectuals doing experimental anthropology risk overshadowing a larger field of not-quite-so-standard-either anthropological discourses and methods practiced by a variety of characters and institutions who never accrued the renown of the figures studied in these pages? Is there more to the story of anthropology under late colonialism (and after) than either people doing what we might call bad old colonial anthropology (BOCA) or exceptional individuals doing experimental things with it?

My sense is that there probably is more one could say here. To take the case of West Africa, which I know best among the several contexts Izzo studies so skillfully, there were indeed quite a few writers doing strange things with anthropology who were hard to simply slot into the BOCA category but who also never achieved the renown of the writers studied here. Anthropology was an integral part of French colonial education in West Africa at a variety of levels from the 1930s onwards, resulting in a field of amateur social scientists whose works are still quite hard to pin down with regard to the fiction/anthropology binary Izzo unpacks. Writers such as Abdoulaye Sadjou, Dim Delobson, Maximilien Quenum, Mapaté Diagne, Mamby Sidibé, Ousmane Socé, Fily Dabo Sissoko, and Paul Hazoumé wrote texts that exist (in various ways) at

the intersection of ethnography and fiction. They published in journals, newspapers, and, more rarely, in books; they competed for prizes, sought and found patrons, and capitalized on the recognition they achieved in various ways. This generation was largely (and, sometimes, willfully) forgotten by the Negritude and independence-era writers who succeeded them. But a few of its most recognizable names have endured. Of those in the non-exhaustive list of names above, Izzo mentions Sissoko and Hazoumé in passing, but focuses most extensively on Ahmadou Hampâté-Bâ. Any study is entitled to draw its own frame around its object, of course, but I was curious to know why Hampâté-Bâ stood in for experimental ethnography in this era in West Africa. Was Hampâté-Bâ's work perhaps more representative of ethnographic fiction, or was he, for lack of a better phrase, just better at it?

In either case, when Hampâté-Bâ was working simultaneously as a colonial civil servant while also collecting oral traditions in French West Africa in the 1920s and 1930s, it is unlikely that in doing both these things he was "not fitting in" as Izzo quotes him as saying (p. 18). Rather, Hampâté-Bâ was participating in a broader and quite visible conversation around the study of African cultures that included many African intellectuals (organic and otherwise) who produced works in which anthropology existed in curious admixture with various fictional modes. Izzo is right, though, that Hampâté-Bâ does stand out for the nuanced and nimble ways in which he redeploys the ethnographic across his work. Perhaps we ought to focus primarily on such virtuosic *détournements* of the anthropological. But I wonder what we might also stand to learn from the experimental ethnographies of the writers who never quite garnered the cultural capital of a Price-Mars, a Chamoiseau, or a Rouch? Or how an insightful and persuasive account of experimental anthropology such as this one might look a bit different if it were to expand to consider the minor as well as the major writer?

Perhaps an expanded focus might also have managed to include more work by women writers or filmmakers practicing what Izzo calls experimental anthropologies. *Experiments with Empire* is a capacious book, but it does strike one that all of the authors who have a chapter devoted to them in the table of contents are men. Women did take up experimental anthropologies across the Atlantic world—Zora Neale Hurston or Lydia Cabrera come to mind. I wonder where it would have led this study to consider who their francophone counterparts might have been? Or, if there were none to be found, why might that have been? And what might that say about gender and experimental anthropology across French Atlantic?

I do hope it is clear by now that these are just a few collegial prods of what is a very generative and generous monograph. In detecting and tracing such exciting experiments with fiction and anthropology across the French Atlantic world, Izzo has helped trace the outlines of an interdisciplinary problem space that will surely endure for years to come.

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