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Rachel Anne Gillett, *At Home in Our Sounds: Music, Race, and Cultural Politics in Interwar Paris*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021. xvii + 235 pp. Figures, bibliography, and index. \$74.00 U.S. (hb). ISBN: 9780190842703; \$72.99 U.S. (eb). ISBN: 9780190842710.

Review by Rebecca Scales, Rochester Institute of Technology.

Rachel Anne Gillett's *At Home in Our Sounds* examines how music became central to anti-colonial and antiracist cultural politics in France between the two world wars. While the *tumulte noir*, or the arrival of jazz in France and the subsequent interest in Black culture it unleashed, has been well-documented by historians, musicologists, and art historians, Gillett's book offers a fresh perspective on the relationship between music and racial politics by investigating how African diasporic populations responded to the jazz craze and deployed music to claim recognition and inclusion in French society. The diverse African diaspora of interwar Paris included French colonial subjects and citizens, as well as people of African descent from the Caribbean, Madagascar, North America, Guiana, and Réunion. To capture their voices and perspectives, Gillett draws on a wide array of sources, from diaries and correspondence to Black newspapers and police surveillance files. While "Black French" (a term Gillett uses to refer to francophone people of color) were sometimes divided along lines of class, gender, citizenship status, and region, Gillett argues that music and "music-making" (defined here as performing, rehearsing, or even listening) "facilitated an outward looking, mobile, yet race-conscious form of cosmopolitanism" that often transcended their differences (p. 5). "Music helped to raise consciousness of Black French around the Atlantic," Gillett concludes, and created the "tools and conditions for *négritude* and subsequent francophone literary movements such as *créolité*" (p. 209).

*At Home in Our Sounds* opens with an investigation of Black French reactions to the *tumulte noir* and the representations of Black culture it produced. The First World War brought large numbers of colonial soldiers and workers to the metropole, making racial difference a factor in the lives of French workers for the first time. The popularity of jazz and the increased circulation of images of Black men and women, Gillett insists, cannot be separated from broader anxieties about non-white migration into France. "Whenever they landed on the issue," Parisian commentators linked "Black immigration, cultural practices, and the powerful influence of jazz on the European public. They lurched between admiration of the music and art...and apprehension about the long-term social and cultural outcomes," deploying metaphors of invasion, colonization, and conquest (p. 50). Black communities in Paris—all too aware of how these negative commentaries might affect their lives—formed associations to defend their interests, which ranged from assimilationist bourgeois groups calling for colonial reforms to more radical communist or student organizations demanding an end to imperialism. Music

reviews featured prominently in their associational bulletins and newspapers, and Black French writers sought to correct misperceptions about their cultures. They also tried to distinguish the experiences of Black French from those Black Americans, the latter suggesting they experienced less racial discrimination in France than in the United States. Others contested associations between jazz and the purported hypersexuality, primitivity, and frivolity of Black men and women. Here Gillett offers a lengthy and nuanced analysis of the Martinican writer Jane Nardal's response to Josephine Baker—one of the most iconic figures of the 1920s—and Nardal's subsequent call for “black, humanist cultural production to counter and expand the available representations of Black men and women” (p. 57).

Chapter two turns to the experiences of Black American musicians who traveled and performed in France, documenting how they experienced Paris as a “site for the expansion of possibilities, for jazzing and enjoying life to the fullest” (p. 67). Readers familiar with the work of Tyler Stovall, Jeffrey Jackson, and William Shack will encounter the well-known figures of Ada “Bricktop” Smith, Duke Ellington, and Sidney Bechet, as well as lesser-known Antillean and African performers such as Ernest Léardée and Léona Gabriel. Using memoirs and letters from archival collections on both sides of the Atlantic, Gillett analyzes similarities and differences in performers' experiences, noting how African-American and Black French performers enjoyed a cosmopolitan lifestyle defined by freedom of movement, consumer spending, and the ability to “cross the color line” in Paris (p. 69). In Europe, Black performers found themselves working in environments that required them to collaborate with men and women of every nationality. While this contributed to musical mixing and a cosmopolitan outlook, Gillet observes, tensions surfaced between Black American and Antillean musicians, as the latter were often treated differently by white French musicians and their publics. However, these differences did not prevent the emergence of an “international Black solidarity” that would continue to grow in the 1930s.

The first two chapters of *At Home in Our Sounds* set the stage for the final three chapters of the book, which I found to offer the most original research and analysis. Chapter three moves to the Colonial Exposition of 1931 at Vincennes, where musical showcases featuring colonial performers offered Black activists the opportunity to educate their members about the perils of French colonialism. The Exposition's music has attracted significant interest from musicologists, due in part to the sizeable collection of ethnographic recordings it produced (currently housed at the Bibliothèque Nationale), and the fact that European composers cited it as inspiration their incorporation of Asian and African instruments and musical motifs in their work. Gillett adopts a different approach, arguing that music provided visitors with an “exegesis on racial hierarchies and the value of the *mission civilisatrice*” (p. 109). Official guidebooks and press accounts pointed to West Africans as the “most ‘primitive’ and in need of French influence,” citing the presence of the tam-tam and drum as evidence of their “intoxicatingly alive and spiritually vibrant—if dangerous—culture” (p. 110). In contrast, Madagascan musicians were “discussed positively, and their grace of their culture praised,” suggesting that they were more “developed” than West Africans (p. 112). However, commentators reserved most of their acclaim for the performers from Martinique and Guadeloupe, using romantic language and imagery to describe their music—most notably the *biguine*—as the product of a long history of French and African cultural mixture in the Antilles.

Of course, neither the colonial subjects performing in the Exposition nor the colonial citizens who attended as spectators were passive participants, but instead were “agents in the process of self-representation” (p. 121). As Gillett argues, some musicians willingly “collaborated with the

parade of ethnic stereotypes,” but “they must have reflected more cynically on their experience and the roles they were asked to play,” citing several articles from *La Dépêche Africaine* in which performers reflected cynically on their display and exploitation by Exposition organizers (p. 121). French citizens of color were quick to condemn the clichéd representations of their cultures on display, criticizing those that confirmed racial stereotypes about lazy and primitive natives while praising the occasional depictions of Black culture that showed the creativity, achievements, education, and modernity of French colonial peoples. In the end, Gillett proposes, “it is possible that the Colonial Exposition had a greater long-term impact on colonial subjects and their political engagement with colonialism than it did on the white metropolitan French who were the intended targets of the celebration” (p. 105).

Chapter four explores reactions of Black French writers to the *biguine* “craze” that swept through France in the wake of the Colonial Exposition, uncovering Antillean intellectuals’ efforts to claim “the *biguine* as a repository of some type of creole spirit unique to Guadeloupe and Martinique” (p. 138). European critics rarely distinguished Antillean music from jazz. The Nardal sisters, among other Caribbean intellectuals, wrote extensively about the *biguine*’s unique features, which included the use of the clarinet and shakers, as well as ensemble playing instead of the solos common in jazz. They also pointed to the importance of communal dancing in the *biguine*—where dancers stamped their feet to the rhythm—as a practice with a distinct Antillean heritage (p. 141). Black intellectuals took Western musicologists to task for underestimating the African elements of the *biguine*, as well as the sophistication and semiotic power of African music. For these writers, Gillett suggests, the “circulation of the *biguine* between the Antilles and France not only highlighted the interpenetration of the two regions but also revealed what was uniquely Antillean within French Black identity” (p. 144). While the Nardal sisters worried that the commercialization of Antillean music through French record studios would corrupt the “authentic” *biguine*, listening to the music also “facilitated sensory memory” and recreated the experience of being “at home” (p. 148). This “feature of the Antilleans’ connection with the music of their homeland offered valuable agency and cultural invigoration,” Gillett writes, in turn exposing the “falsity of the claims that the overseas French territories were part of the metropole and would become culturally or ethnically indivisible from it through the process of colonization” (p. 148).

The chapter then turns to examine how the *biguine* served as a source of Black community-building in Paris, offering a “space for an Antillean regional subset within a pan-African identity,” in turn becoming a “vehicle for anti-colonial organizing” (p. 139). In the 1930s, dance halls and political meetings fueled anti-colonial solidarities that outweighed some of the divisions within Black francophone political associations. Using newspapers and police surveillance files, Gillett traces the emergence of the “*bals nègres*”—dance halls where Black diasporans gathered to dance and white French came to gawk. When a popular dance hall was overrun by white patrons curious about the population and their music, a new *bal colonial* opened in a largely immigrant, working-class neighborhood. This new establishment required patrons to show the blue cards issued by the *foyer colonial* for entry, ensuring that patrons would not “feel as if they were an unusual and exotic sight” (p. 153).

However, if dance halls gave the Black population of Paris a space to express “racial and cultural solidarity through music,” their “desire to dance together did not indicate an uncomplicated solidarity based purely on skin color,” for differences of region, ethnicity, education, and social class remained (p. 154). Despite these distinctions, anti-colonial activists on the left became

increasingly aware of the need to mobilize a broad coalition of Black French citizens and subjects, and deployed music's potential to "reflect a nuanced identity that was French, that was Afro-diasporic, but differentiated by region of origin and even by political affiliation and class" (p. 158). Gillett reconstructs musical events organized by the Ligue Contre l'Impérialisme et l'Oppression Coloniale and the Ligue de Défense de la Race Nègre. Where Black women rarely participated formally in anti-colonial meetings, *bals* offered them opportunities to participate in political action that was frequently initiated by men.

Chapter five dissects two 1935 events that generated an "animated and passionate response among Black communities in Paris," revealing the "oscillation between pan-African solidarity and a commitment to specificity among communities of color" (p. 166). To commemorate the tercentenary of France's occupation of Martinique and Guadeloupe, the French state organized a series of artistic and scientific expositions in Paris and the Antilles. The centerpiece was a musical celebration at the Paris Opéra headlined by the popular singer Alamby, who composed a special *biguine* for the event. The largely middle-class and assimilationist Antilleans in attendance praised the concert for its positive portrayal of Antillean culture, which they sought to link to their demands fuller civic and social recognition. But the left-wing Black press saw the events as a wasteful display of resources and a distraction from the abuses of French colonialism. Some critics even went so far as to accuse Antilleans who participated as collaborators colluding with the colonial regime. In contrast, protests and meetings organized to respond to Mussolini's invasion of Ethiopia succeeded in building cross-class coalitions that included West and North Africans as well as Antilleans and Madagascans, contributing to the emergence of a broader pan-African solidarity grounded in shared feelings of outrage about colonial violence.

This review does not fully capture the nuances of Gillett's analysis of the varied positionalities adopted by Black French during the interwar decades. In every chapter, Gillett carefully interrogates the intersections of race, class, and gender politics that underpinned discussions of music and racial difference. Written in clear and jargon-free prose, Gillett's book will be particularly useful for teaching undergraduates about the multifaceted experiences of France's Black populations and their efforts to negotiate for social, civil, and political rights, whether as French citizens or colonial subjects. Gillett is equally attentive to the ways the commercialization of music through records and the radio affected the experiences of Black performers as well as the reception of their music by Black and white audiences alike. However, when reading the book, I found myself wanting to know more about the music that became the subject of such heated debates and went online looking for recordings of particular performers. Given the democratization of recorded music during the interwar years, more analysis of existing recordings would have only enhanced Gillett's work. Moreover, the French security services' interest in policing the radio and record habits of colonial subjects in the colonies led me to ask whether the consumption and listening practices of metropolitan Black French—even in private settings—fell under similar scrutiny. While we learn about police surveillance of live events, I wanted to know more about how "mechanical music" changed the dynamics of political activism. These caveats aside, *At Home in Our Sounds* is an engaging and provocative book that is sure to find a welcome audience among scholars and students of race, multiculturalism, and cultural politics in twentieth-century France.

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