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Katharina Fritsch, *The Diaspora of the Comoros in France: Ethnicised Biopolitics and Communitarianisation*. New York: Routledge, 2023. x + 226 pp. Illustrations, maps, and index. \$144.00 U.S. (hb). ISBN: 9780367627942; \$43.99 U.S. (eb). ISBN: 9781003111665.

Review by Melissa K. Byrnes, Southwestern University.

Katharina Fritsch's rigorous study of the Comorian diaspora in Marseille is a welcome contribution to the scholarship on postcolonial France, in which discussions of populations with North and West African origins tend to dominate. Comorians make up an estimated 10% of Marseille's population. All four Comorian islands were subject to French imperial rule during the nineteenth century: three islands (Ngazidja, Nzwani, and Mwali) unilaterally declared independence in 1975. Mayotte, however, voted to remain part of France, and was formally added as the 101st *département* in 2011. Comorian migration to Marseille began within the colonial framework, increasing and diversifying significantly after decolonization, such that Marseille is regularly referred to as the "fifth island of the Comoros" (p. 1).

Fritsch is fundamentally concerned with power relations among a wide variety of actors and across politics, economics, and culture. In the first two methodological chapters, Fritsch introduces "communitarianisation" in contrast to *communautarisme*, which most often stands as a Republican dismissal of ethnicized and racialized identities that are coded as divisive. As an important corrective to the notion that French Republican identity is universal, and only nonwhite communities stake out ethnicized definitions and boundaries, Fritsch examines how Comorian community is constructed by "both (top-down) governing and (bottom-up) self-governing processes" (p. 6), further emphasizing that "communitarianisation in the context of the diaspora is related to the communitarianisation process on the part of the 'national community'" (p. 9). Fritsch employs Michel Foucault's concept of the *dispositif* to consider everyday social, economic, and cultural practices that contribute to communitarianisation. Foucauldian biopolitics are, in turn, instrumental to postcolonial power relations in which "members of diasporic communities make (strategic) use of ethnicised biopolitics to negotiate postcolonial power relations, while simultaneously reproducing said power relations" (p. 8). Fritsch further draws on Judith Butler's performative approach to reveal how "communitarianisation depends on a constant reiteration of community through discourse and practices, which simultaneously opens up possibilities for negotiation and resistance" (p. 24). Her melding of Foucauldian understandings of power with postcolonial and intersectional approaches allows Fritsch to highlight Comorian agency and strategy, even as she deftly traces the contours of French national, social, and cultural pressures.

Fritsch further reckons with her own positionality in a thoughtful and generative way. White scholars in many fields still neglect—or do not feel required—to provide such discussions. Chapter three’s “Reflections on Doing Ethnography...from a (Critical) White Perspective” offer a meditation on “the constant unease at reproducing colonial power relations where a white researcher studies Black subjects and communities” (p. 51). While avoiding a prescriptive approach, this essay effectively calls out the ways that whiteness operated in her research process without making whiteness or herself the center of analysis. She draws from a series of interactions to ensure that her Comorian interlocutors voice their own sense of her position and highlights the expertise that Comorians in Marseilles have developed on how to engage with white researchers. Openness about such scholarly unease, and a willingness to sit with this, serves as a vital reminder and an important model for critically assessing the role of white scholars, particularly those whose research involves populations of color in France.

The rest of the book moves through Fritsch’s analysis of Comorian experiences within Marseille’s city spaces, cultural markets, and politics. These empirical analyses are the real strength of the book, rich with illustrative examples. Chapter four considers the spaces that Comorians use, claim, and contest, with a particular focus on cultural and political event spaces. Fritsch provides a compelling discussion of the Dock des Suds show venue as a site of gentrification, part of a process of urban renewal. Investment in such cultural venues is meant to shore up visions of Marseille as a “cosmopolitan city” and France as a “tolerant nation” (pp. 84, 93). Fritsch draws an effective parallel between promoting spaces for community “mixing” and the appropriation of non-Western musical traditions into an undifferentiated and flattened category like “world music.” Both processes work to channel ethnicized communities’ cultural production into commodities and create supposedly multicultural spaces that still center whiteness and white consumption. In this way, the Dock des Suds is refashioned as a valuable space within Marseille’s local fabric, in contrast with the venues that cluster near the southern edge of Marseille’s *quartiers nord*, which mirror the spatial segregation and racialized marginalization associated with the *banlieues* of other large French cities. This discussion, particularly the sections on developing neighborhoods and housing projects, could benefit from thinking through and with the rich historical investigations of Marseille communities by Minayo Nasiali and others.[1]

Chapter five delves deeper into the culture and economy of *twarab* and the interplay of gendered and labor identities within the Comorian diaspora. Notably, Fritsch collaborated on a 2016 documentary, *Histoires de Twarab à Marseille*. [2] The book carefully investigates *twarab*’s musical origins—and Comorian musicians’ understandings of these. *Twarab* has deep associations with customary wedding practices and has been repurposed by Franco-Comorian associations as a fundraising system for infrastructure projects on the Comoros. Comorian musicians view migration to France, on the one hand, as a sign of artistic and financial success, which they play up in the videos they release. On the other hand, Comorian musicians in France feel compelled to participate in *twarab*, regardless of their own artistic interests. Most musicians pursue music alongside other employment; their *twarab* performances are often assumed to be a form of nonremunerated community contribution, and they are not formally recognized by the French state as artists deserving of *intermittence* payments. In addition to this consideration of the interplay of community and artistic labor, Fritsch’s discussion of *twarab* also offers her clearest analysis of gendered relations through the pairing of male *twarab* performances in the evening with female *wadaha* dances in the afternoons. The practice makes *wadaha* dependent upon and merely supportive of *twarab*, similar to the ways that women’s labor as “caterers” is devalued (p.

117). Throughout the analysis, Fritsch makes a strong case for understanding *twarab* as a means of defining and supporting the diaspora even as its meaning is contested.

Contestation is an even stronger thread through chapter six, which foregrounds the experience of Franco-Comorian youth. Young Comorians negotiate their identity position not only within the dominant French culture but also within the diaspora and along generational lines. Fritsch furthers her analysis of ethnicized cultures within the French Republic, highlighting how an ethnic “origin” is commodified both to serve the narrative of French tolerance and diversity and as a means for young Comorians to assert their own sense of belonging. Comorian youth are associated—and associate themselves—with the *quartiers* and, by extension, French *banlieue* culture. Older Comorians express concern about youth disconnection from the Comoros and even echo ideas that French-born youth are potentially problematic. Younger interlocutors, for their part, regularly invoke their own sense of Frenchness, of being part of a larger *quartiers* culture, and their desire to connect with certain parts of their Comorian heritage while rejecting others. Fritsch suggests that though Franco-Comorian youth are not yet in a position to challenge the community-organizing structures of the older generations, a larger shift and renegotiation of tradition and cultural identity is underway. While it is vital not to read every racialized French community through the experience of North Africans, this discussion of generational developments could engage more with, in particular, Jean Beaman’s work on second-generation Maghrebins and Abdelalli Hajjat’s careful examination of the origins of the 1983 Marche pour l’égalité et contre le racismisme.[3]

Fritsch’s final chapter examines the use of “ethnicisation as a political resource” (p. 170). She traces the colonial and postcolonial contours of power relations within the French system and how these can be shaped by “Franco-Comorian politicians [who] govern themselves by affirming a role as community brokers between the Republic and ‘their’ communities” (p. 179). Diasporic relationships are maintained through community councils and connections to Comorian traditional elites. Franco-Comorians also mobilize along community lines in ways that mirror the clientelist politics of Marseilles.[4] Fritsch and her interlocutors effectively critique Republican universalism even as they explain how to maneuver through it. One local politician insists that the Comorian community cannot simply “go back to the Republican ideal which does not exist, which exists nowhere” (p. 173). Fritsch emphasizes how the real need to represent Comorian interests and values challenges the “problematic tension between the social existence of ethnicised communities in France and the negation of a political representation” and “unmasks the communitarianism inscribed in French Republicanism, which continuously maintains the ethnicised and racialised boundaries of a white community” (pp. 187, 198). In other words, the “communitarianism” strategies, practices, and rhetorics that she foregrounds throughout the book are valid and necessary means of navigating a French Republican system that derides communitarianism even as it establishes and continues to guard a national community racialized as white.

As carefully as Fritsch approaches the intersections of Comorian identity and experience with gender and generation, there are some additional forms of identity that could be explored further. Fritsch briefly addresses how Mayotte’s formal differences, as the only Comorian island to remain a French *département*, play out in the political realm, with the strategic inclusion of Maorais in Comorian political collectives. This opens up many questions about Maorais difference in social, cultural, and economic realms. Even if such difference is not made or marked

by the communities, it would be worth considering the existence or lack of such differentiation more explicitly, given one interlocutor's assertion that Mayotte can be a "problem" (p. 195).

The interplay of Black and Muslim identities could likewise be addressed in more depth. Fritsch seems to suggest that there is a shift away from Muslim--and "secular Muslim"--identities, particularly in the political realm, with one young Comorian politician explaining in 2013 that "the Comorian is first of all seen as Black, not primarily as Muslim" (pp. 184-5). Yet Islam still seems to function as a significant marker--either self-invoked or projected by others--and Islamophobia remains a prevailing form of French racism. It would be helpful to hear more about how Muslim identity can be racialized, how Blackness and Muslimness function together, how they create different opportunities for coalition-building, and whether there may be a generational divide here as well.[5]

As a scholar of city communities, I also wonder about local (explicitly non-national) identities and the ways some Comorians invoke a connection to Marseille. In her discussions of locality, Fritsch seems only to consider affiliations to sites on the Comoros. Yet, one interlocutor declares, "I feel *Marseillaise* before all," and many others invoke the importance of being in Marseille, being of Marseille, having built Marseille, or knowing Marseille intimately (p. 178). This might productively be put into dialogue with the insistence by younger Comorians on their place-based neighborhood identities, belonging to the *quartiers nord* and sharing a broader *banlieue* experience with other marginalized French youth. Instead of merely marking a departure from identification with Comorian localities, young Comorians may instead--or in addition--be cultivating new local connections to Marseille and its neighborhoods.

The book is not an easy or quick read. It is aimed at experts and theorists and unlikely to be effective in undergraduate--or even many graduate--classrooms. It will however be valuable for scholars wishing to understand Comorian diasporic experiences in France, as well as those looking for models of how to take racialized differences and power systems seriously within a context that formally rejects such categories. Fritsch is at her best when foregrounding Comorian and Franco-Comorian agency and voices--and the multiple, overlapping, and multidirectional power relations within the diaspora.

NOTES

[1] Minayo Nasiali, *Native to the Republic: Empire, Social Citizenship, and Everyday Life in Marseille since 1945* (Cornell: Cornell University Press, 2016). See also Ed Naylor, "'Un âne dans l'ascenseur': Late colonial welfare services and social housing in Marseille after decolonization," *French History* 27:3 (2013): 422-447; Dustin Harris, "A 'Capital of Hope and Disappointments': North African Families in Marseille Shantytowns and Social Housing," *French Politics, Culture & Society*, 40:1 (2022): 48-82; and (for earlier in the twentieth century) Mary Dewhurst Lewis, *The Boundaries of the Republic: Migrant Rights and the Limits of Universalism in France, 1918-1940* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2007). For further investigation (published after Fritsch's work), also look to Danielle Beaujon, "The Chaouch of Marseille: Metropolitan Intermediaries and Colonial Control, 1928-1945," *French Politics, Culture & Society* 41:1 (Spring 2023): 1-21.

[2] More information available at <https://histoiresdetwarab.wixsite.com/documentary>.

[3] Jean Beaman, *Citizen Outsider: Children of North African Immigrants in France* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2017) and Abdelalli Hajjat, *La Marche pour l'égalité et contre le racisme* (Paris: Editions Amsterdam, 2013); also available as *The Wretched of France: The 1983 March for Equality and Against Racism*, Andrew Brown, trans., (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2022). On issues of youth and music, see also Nasiali, *Native to the Republic*, chapter 6, "Banlieue Youth and the Body Politic."

[4] Here too, see Nasiali, *Native to the Republic*.

[5] See, for example, Beaman, *Citizen Outsider*, chapters three and five.

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