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Elizabeth Ezra. *The Colonial Unconscious: Race and Culture in Interwar France*. Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2000. Illustrations, notes, index, and bibliography. xvi + 173. \$39.50 U.S. (cl). ISBN 0-8014-3726-1; \$16.95 (pb). ISBN 0-8014-8647-5.

Review by Brett Bowles, Iowa State University.

Ezra's slender yet dense volume is the latest contribution to the growing scholarly literature on the history of colonial representations and their impact on collective mentalities during the interwar period, a relatively new field that enriches the already substantial corpus of works analyzing political, social, and economic dimensions of French colonialism. In her analysis of the "colonial unconscious", Ezra aims not to reveal the psychological dynamics and consequences of colonizer-colonized interaction (à la Frantz Fanon's classic *Black Skin, White Masks*), but rather to show how "the discourse of assimilation concealed a latent but powerful desire for cultural separatism" (p. 153). Moreover, she contends, this collective, unacknowledged racism "extended beyond both individuals and intentions" (p. 8) and resulted from "a simultaneous attraction to and repulsion of difference" (p. 9).

While attraction was rooted in the interwar vogue of primitivism and exoticism, according to which French contact with "uncorrupted" indigenous cultures would presumably combat national decadence and reinforce international French prestige, repulsion stemmed from the equally strong fear of racial contamination and biological contagion. This view of repulsion, expressed by eugenicists and pseudo-scientists such as the infamous Joseph-Arthur de Gobineau, whose *Essay on the Inequality of Human Races* (originally published in 1853), reached the height of its popularity in France during the 1920s.

Ezra argues compellingly that the interwar shift in French colonial policy from coerced assimilation to the more indulgent strategy of association did not, insofar as attitudes about race and interracial contact were concerned, constitute a shift toward a kinder and gentler form of colonialism, as is sometimes claimed by historians. Instead, the move to association and the supposedly increased respect for indigenous cultures that this move demonstrated can be understood as part of France's response to its perceived national decadence and weakness vis-a-vis Germany, Italy, and Britain; it also can be understood as an attempt to preserve "noble savage" cultures on which to draw for moral rejuvenation and strength. In the process, the racism that had always structured colonialist attitudes remained intact; it simply disguised itself better.

Ezra finds evidence of this attitude in a variety of cultural texts, ranging from well-known public spectacles such as the 1931 Colonial Exposition, the 1937 Paris World's Fair, and the French films of Josephine Baker, to the relatively obscure plays and short stories of Raymond Roussel, René Crevel, and Paul Morand. The voyeuristic way that colonial peoples were displayed for public consumption at the Colonial Exposition and World's Fair, analyzed in detail by Ezra using photographs, guidebooks, and journalistic accounts, clearly betrays the simultaneous French desire for, and fear of, cultural mixing. The most striking example is the 1937 "Best Colonial Marriage" beauty pageant sponsored by the

French Eugenics Society, which in the interest of pro-natalist efficiency had invented a series of race- and nationality-based typologies to evaluate the biological suitability of intercultural reproduction.

The message of Baker's movies is less clear, at least on the surface, for they underscored the virtual impossibility of successful inter-racial romance (*Zou-Zou*, 1934) and exposed assimilation as an unrealizable, self-serving European fantasy (*Princesse Tam-Tam*, 1935). Although these films criticize core colonialist values by prompting spectators to identify with Baker's marginalized protagonists, Ezra claims that, in the end, they express a resigned attitude toward European racial and cultural prejudice. *Princesse Tam-Tam*, she writes, "preaches cultural separatism, whether it takes the form of an antidemocratic division of classes or an opposition to immigration" (p. 127).

Retrospectively, the protagonist's failure to integrate into French society and her joyful return to the idyllic surroundings of her native North Africa may support such a reading, but the rest of the film very clearly exposes the "civilizing mission" as manipulation and exploitation of the powerless (poor colonial people of color) by the powerful (the rich and white). As a black servant bluntly tells his white master, the best way to "civilize" Baker's character is to "teach her to lie" (p. 123). In the context of the mid-1930s, such a stance was not only ideologically daring and subversive, but rare as well.

Although Ezra is perhaps excessively harsh in her analysis of these films, she is dead-on in her denunciation of Paul Morand, a right-wing "literary ethnographer" and Gobineau disciple whose best-selling short stories dramatized in heavy-handed fashion the supposed unassimilability of Blacks into French culture as a way of justifying not only racial segregation, but also anti-Semitism, nationalism, and closing France's border to all immigrants. In Morand's works, Blacks are greedy imposters who, for a time, impersonate Whites but whose "true" savage nature is always exposed, often in gleefully sadistic fashion.

Methodologically speaking, Ezra employs an extraordinarily wide array of theories in her analysis of the colonial unconscious, ranging from the psychoanalysis of Freud, Klein, and Girard to the anthropology of Clifford and Levi-Strauss, to the linguistic deconstruction of Kristeva and Derrida. Ezra has a particular flair for the latter, reading texts against themselves to reveal latent attitudes and premises that inevitably undermine the apparent intentions of the author. For Ezra, every word and every detail in these stories, however seemingly mundane, has a profound significance to be unlocked through theory. In some cases, this approach yields convincing support for the argument that the inter-war shift in French colonial policy—from coerced assimilation to the supposedly kinder and gentler alternative of cultural association—produced no significant change in racist mentalities.

Unfortunately, the analytical thread often gets lost in frequent theoretical digressions that at times render the argument unconvincing. For example, in Raymond Roussel's 1925 play, *L'Etoile au front*, an assimilated Indian maid working in France is forced to return home by her lover to prevent the sacrifice of twin babies, and, in so doing, to confront conflicting facets of her mixed cultural identity. After a three-page rumination on Girard's theory of sublimated, sacred violence and the phenomenon of doubling, Ezra abruptly concludes that "the Indian twins may be spirited away, out of harm's reach, but the difference whose effacement they represent does not escape immolation" (p. 61). Similarly, she interprets a Russian-Indian character who has one black and one blue eye as evidence of an unconscious, frustrated desire to eradicate the differences that separate European and colonial cultures: "Hybridity is shown here to resolve differences but not to efface them. [T]he figure of the hybrid itself is grounded in the concept of mutually exclusive racial categories, without which it would be indistinguishable from other identities" (p. 56).

Whether such rhetorical manipulations accurately reveal a latent disdain toward racial mixing is contestable. If true, the more important question is whether this mentality was shared by the French as a whole. Roussel was unique to say the least, a self-styled literary impresario who traveled Europe in a

custom-built mobile home and produced hermetic, apparently nonsensical plays whose lack of plot and intentionally Byzantine narrative structure (using the techniques of *collage* and *mise-en-abyme*) violated all traditional theatrical conventions. Since Roussel's plays flopped with both critics (the Surrealists notwithstanding) and the general public (*L'Etoile au front* closed after only a three-day run), it seems a stretch to claim that his work functioned as "the very enactment of the colonial unconscious" (p. 49).

Roussel's writing was as hermetic as it was eccentric; as such it was clearly not representative of a broader, collective mentality. Given Roussel's esthetic and discursive sensibilities, it seems more likely that his work, like so much of his Surrealist and Oulipo fellow travelers', was an exercise in outlandish, overblown satire intended to mock the artistically hackneyed and commercially driven genres of the colonial novel and play. Ideologically speaking, the value of such mockery would have been even greater given the Surrealists' vocal opposition to the chauvinistic nationalism and economic exploitation that fueled colonialism.

Elsewhere, Ezra criticizes the Surrealists and the French Communist Party for abandoning their anti-colonial stance between the 1931 Colonial Exposition, which they publicly denounced, and the 1937 World's Fair, when the need to combat fascism and the political imperatives of the Popular Front coalition had supplanted the fight against imperialism. In so doing, she emphasizes the inherently equivocal, flawed nature of anti-colonialist discourse, citing novelist René Crevel as a representative example of the Surrealists' "colonial ambivalence." Yet Crevel consistently exposed and ridiculed the prejudices of colonial thought: racial typologies and hierarchies, the fallacy of total assimilation, the idea that Africans were uncivilized, simple-minded and aggressively sexual.

He did so using ingenious and often shocking role reversals, attributing cannibalism and rapid sexuality to Europeans rather than Africans, as in the 1927 novel *Babylone*, where a French grandmother bites a priest lasciviously on the neck during Mass, exclaiming: "White meat, beautiful white meat!" (p. 87). Conversely, Crevel embraced the counter-discourse of primitivism and the myth of the noble savage: the image of Africa as sensual, instinctual, and morally uncorrupted by European decadence. In this sense, Ezra concludes, Crevel's work actually did not subvert colonial discourse. Instead, it reinforced the essentialist, mutually exclusive cultural categories on which colonial prejudice depended. Because Crevel "allegorizes the function of stereotype, which effaces difference within groups in order to establish differences between them, [his] cannibalistic imagery represents the ultimate in colonial violence" (p. 96).

Although the discourse of African essentialism was clearly used to justify racial segregation and xenophobia in colonial representations authored by many white Frenchmen, it must also be recognized that Negritude writers such as Aimé Césaire, Léon Damas, and Léopold Senghor used the same essentialism as a tool of resistance against colonial racism and the systematic devaluation of indigenous cultures. Ezra's tight theoretical framework does not allow for this possibility, thereby conflating the discourse of colonial apologists such as Morand with that of courageous anti-imperial authors who exposed and denounced assimilation as a self-serving European fantasy.

If judged by the ethical standards and ideological boundaries of interwar culture (both admittedly flawed, to be sure) rather than by the retrospective criteria of pure deconstructionist theory, writers such as Roussel and Crevel must surely be judged differently. Though their attempts at subversion failed to question the fundamental assumptions at the root of colonial prejudice, it seems unfair to imply that their actions were complicitous in perpetuating racism and exploitation. Colonial unconscious or not, intentions must be acknowledged, as well as the crucial role that anti-colonial discourse, however residually tainted by the desirability of racial separatism, played in ultimately ending the oppression of overseas imperialism.

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