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Annette K. Joseph-Gabriel. *Reimagining Liberation: How Black Women Transformed Citizenship in the French Empire*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2020. Bibliography and index. \$110 (cl.). ISBN 9780252042935. \$14.95 (eb). ISBN 978025205191.

Review Essay by Régine Michelle Jean-Charles, Northeastern University

An abiding Black feminist ethic of care infuses and propels Annette Joseph-Gabriel's *Reimagining Liberation: How Black Women Transformed Citizenship in the French Empire*. The author takes us on an enthralling journey into the lives of seven Black women, each of whom made claims to French citizenship in unique ways ranging from activism and writing to other forms of intellectual work. Along the way Joseph-Gabriel highlights how these women's positionality and lived experience of multiple oppressions informs their determination to build a more free and more just world. Reflecting on *Re-imagining Liberation* through the prism of my recent book *Looking for Other Worlds: Black Feminism and Haitian Fiction*, I am interested in how Joseph-Gabriel's chronicling of these women as political protagonists is guided by a Black feminist framework rooted in an ethic of care.[1] As Farah Jasmine Griffin writes in *Read Until You Understand: The Wisdom of Black Life and Literature*, while describing the work of Toni Morrison: "Morrison portrays moments that are governed by an ethic of care...Her expressions of goodness are most often guided by an ethic of care...Love is equated with care, and care is life-giving and life-affirming." [2] In *Reimagining Liberation* this type of life-giving and life-affirming care emerges as a method for writing Black women's lives into a global historical narrative that has heretofore neglected, elided, or ignored their contributions.

A Black feminist ethic of care is immediately apparent as the book begins with the heartbreaking story of Andrée Blouin, a mother whose toddler son's preventable death catapults her into unprecedented action. That Blouin's "experiences of exclusion and discrimination as an African woman in colonized territory propelled her to advocate for a more expansive form of citizenship beyond France's exclusionary, race-based, tiered citizenship policies" make her an emblematic introduction to the kinds of "political protagonists" we meet in *Reimagining Liberation* (p. 6). I also see her as prefiguring contemporary anti-racist activists in France like Assa Traoré who has valiantly led a movement in response to the preventable death of her brother Adama who died while in police custody. Joseph-Gabriel's book thus effectively proffers a past history that is still present and exceedingly relevant in today's world.

One of the defining characteristics of a Black feminist ethic of care is how it holds and amplifies Black women's labor, understanding that our energies can be channeled in multiple and complex ways. As a Black feminist project, this ethic of care is deeply invested in wresting Black women's activist, intellectual, and artistic work from the male-centered contexts that seek to ensnare it. *Reimagining Liberation* unsettles dominant (masculinist) narratives about transnational decolonization movements, leaning on assiduous use of historical documents and centering the voices of Black women intellectuals. The grace with which Joseph-Gabriel conducts this research further demonstrates the ethic of care infusing her study. In its steadfast

portrayal of Black women as political protagonists, *Reimagining Liberation* does the Black feminist work of recovery and excavation that amplifies Black women's contributions to history and asks us to interrogate their exclusion as freedom dreamers and world-makers on the world stage. As Joseph-Gabriel explains, "reading them as political protagonists therefore illuminates the multiple terrains on which they battled colonialism" and the amplification of those battles helps us to see decolonial activism through intersectional eyes (p.7).

What is equally striking—and perhaps especially important—to me, is how lovingly Joseph-Gabriel writes about these women's lives. She thus effectively embodies a Black feminist commitment to love as a political practice that others, such as Jennifer Nash, have delineated. As Nash explains:

Black feminism is distinctive in its commitment to love as political practice. From Alice Walker's definition of womanism that places self-love at the center of Black feminist subjectivity to the Combahee River Collective's statement that its political work emerged from 'a healthy love of ourselves, our sisters, and our community,' Black feminists have long emphasized the importance of love as a form of collectivity, a way of feeling, and a practice of ordering the self. In other words, love operates as a principle of vulnerability and accountability, of solidarity and transformation, that has both organized and undergirded Black feminist practice.[3](Italics added for emphasis).

To Nash's conclusion that love is a form of collectivity, a way of feeling, and a practice of ordering the self, I add that love is an ethic, and it is one that resounds with clarion precision in *Reimagining Liberation*. For Joseph-Gabriel love as a collectivity, a way of feeling, and a practice of ordering the self can be noted in her engagement with the writing, activism, and interior lives of these seven Black women. Put simply, *Reimagining Liberation* demonstrates what an ethic of care looks like in the context of global Black women's history and literature in both form and in content.

I am also struck by how this project of Black feminist worldmaking adheres to what by Kevin Quashie maps beautifully in *Black Aliveness, Or A Poetics of Being*.^[4] Quashie points out that thinking alongside, inspired by, with, and through Black feminists is a form of worldmaking unto itself because "feeling is being in the work of one's doing."^[5] He goes on to explain—"Black femaleness is ecumenical, which in its root means 'the whole inhabited world.'"^[6] The whole inhabited world that Joseph-Gabriel invites us into teems with a Black feminist politics and praxis at the levels of form and content. As Joseph-Gabriel argues, to reimagine liberation requires acts of unmaking, making, and remaking. It involves, dismantling, incorporating, protesting, and working toward a decolonized world. The Black women demanding full citizenship from France effectively reimagine liberation and turn the promulgated motto of the French Republic on its head. Rather than *liberté, égalité et fraternité*, they present us with *libération, solidarité et sororité*—a Black feminist version of proclaimed but never realized French values.

The Black feminist ethic of care that I elaborate in *Looking for Other Worlds: Black Feminism and Haitian Fiction* (UVA Press, 2022) champions love and care as critically relevant affects that should be a part of our scholarly interventions; what I see in *Reimagining Liberation* is a similar attention to care and love that is also precise in its acuity of detail and regard, which is to

say that the author scrupulously covers and uncovers the details of these women's lives from multiple perspectives.

The idea of Black women demanding full citizenship is without question a Black feminist preoccupation. Furthermore, the Black women's geographies of resistance that *Reimagining Liberation* chronicles asks us to contemplate how women are using the language of citizenship to make and remake a decolonized world. By writing a book that “underscores the need for continued scholarship that attends to black women's global voices as central rather than peripheral to decolonial thought” (p. 189) Joseph-Gabriel prods us to “rethink the relationship between race, gender, belonging, and political agency” (p. 3). The lives of these women were fascinating and their ideas about race, gender, citizenship, and belonging, were equally compelling. Given the overwhelming tendency for Black intellectual traditions in the Francophone world to center the lived experience of men, *Reimagining Liberation* takes the field into a new, much needed direction with Black women at the center. These political protagonists are indefatigably active—the book bursts with active women, deploying multiple action verbs describing what they do.

Reimagining Liberation carefully elaborates the idea of decolonial citizenship, which Joseph-Gabriel describes as “remaking, redefining the very terms on which collective identity and belonging can be imagined” (p. 12). Her idea of citizenship builds conceptually on the work of well-regarded Black feminist scholars such as Carole Boyce Davies and Kaiama Glover, as well as theorists of world literatures in French, such as Françoise Lionnet and Breny Hayes Edwards, demonstrating how Joseph-Gabriel's work navigates multiple theoretical contexts and is in conversation with a well-established tradition. Exploring the intellectual and philosophical bases upon which Black women radicals made their freedom claims in the context of a worldwide movement against colonialism, Joseph-Gabriel deftly unpacks these questions and explains the tensions therein. In so doing, she unravels the mythologies of a male-centered colonial struggle that focuses on canonical figures like Aimé Césaire and Léopold Sédar Senghor, to bring to light overlooked women such as Suzanne Césaire, Paulette Nardal, Eugénie Éboué-Tell, and Jane Vialle. Throughout *Reimagining Liberation*, Joseph-Gabriel masterfully illuminates Black women in the Francophone world as “political protagonists” with central roles in the “intertwined domains of anticolonial politics and literary production” (p. 6). She thus does the important Black feminist work of recovery by highlighting contributions to decolonization that have largely been overlooked or underestimated. Correcting and contributing to the historical record, Joseph-Gabriel's scholarship richly enhances our perspectives on the struggle against colonialism. As she upsets the center/periphery binary, a major strength of Joseph-Gabriel's research troubles some of the most dominant discourses that characterize studies of the anti-colonial struggle in the French speaking world. The inclusion of figures like the African American Eslanda Robeson allows Joseph-Gabriel to make rich connections across contexts that do not collapse the complexity of Black women's diversity across the African diaspora.

Reimagining Liberation pores over the work of several lesser-known Black women from the francophone world who contributed to shaping the ways we think about race, citizenship, and colonialism in the twentieth century. By exploring Black women's active participation and engagement in anticolonial politics of liberation throughout the twentieth century, Joseph-Gabriel shows that women deployed a range of practices and forms of engagement to participate as actors, agitators, and what she calls “political protagonists” in the creation of an international

black French identity. In so doing, these women help imagine a decolonial future that re-negotiates the meaning of citizenship for Black subjects of the French speaking world. Through rigorous archival work and meticulous close readings Joseph-Gabriel shows the ways in which Black women's engagement with the French speaking world was feminist, transnational, internationalist, and forthrightly decolonial. By mapping how these women "actively sought to build feminist networks throughout the African diaspora as an expression of a more expansive notion of belonging beyond the French empire" (p.25), Joseph-Gabriel establishes that there exists a transnational global feminist version of the vaunted Black internationalism. The Black feminist ethic of care she espouses while rendering these captivating stories takes us from a determined mother's plight to a brilliant wife's erasure.

The book's structure reflects an ethics of care given how the author devotes one chapter to each of the women studied and how Joseph-Gabriel trains a focused eye on the contributions of each one. In the final two chapters, her incorporation of literary analyses to situate the work of her featured political protagonists complements and enhances the archival work. *Reimagining Liberation* reminds us that centering Black women's lives requires that we bear witness to their fugitive acts of resistance, insurgent worldmaking, and otherwise unimaginable freedom dreams. For example, Joseph-Gabriel takes Suzanne Césaire and extracts her from the gripping context of her luminary husband who casts a long shadow over her life and work so much so that certain revolutionary ideas of hers have been attributed to him. As Joseph-Gabriel reminds us in her study, the erasures of Suzanne Césaire extend to the political realm where she was often present and active though subsequently unmentioned. "Although often relegated to a passing reference in the story of Aimé's intellectual engagement with Haiti, Suzanne was also an official member of the delegation that traveled from Fort-de-France to Port-au-Prince" (p.29). I read Joseph-Gabriel's acute attentiveness to the erasures of Suzanne Césaire's contributions as being guided by an ethic of care. Take, for example, how she explains the divergences in compensation for the Césaire's labor on behalf of France while they were in Haiti. "In this account, Suzanne, identified not by name but by her relation to Aimé, is scripted after the fact. She is suspended quite literally between the lines, held in parentheses, and inserted into the narrative with the aid of a long, curved arrow drawn in Aimé's hand to indicate her place at his side" (p. 30). A Black feminist ethic of care opens the critic's eyes to how Suzanne Césaire is identified only by relation, scripted after the fact, suspended between the lines, and held in parentheses. Joseph-Gabriel's methodology in this chapter is emblematic of a Black feminist ethic of care that pays attention to what Hortense Spillers refers to as the interstices, reminding us not only of "the importance of engaging with the totality of a thinker's work, not just the genres that are privileged by academic discourse," but also that to do so opens pathways to Black feminist theorizing.[8]

By focusing on the political participation of women in a field dominated by male actors as the liberators of the colonies and the leaders of Black internationalist thought, Joseph-Gabriel asks readers to rethink previous evaluations of the field and effectively demonstrates what re-imagining looks like as a scholarly and intellectual praxis (not unlike the women she features in the book). As a study that foregrounds Black women's radical imaginings (and re-imaginings), shaping and re-shaping, making and re-making, and framing and re-framing of identity, citizenship, and belonging, this book rigorously reimagines liberation through a Black feminist ethic of care.

NOTES

[1] Régine Michelle Jean-Charles, *Looking for Other Worlds: Black Feminism and Haitian Fiction* (Charlottesville, VA: University of Virginia Press, 2022).

[2] Farah Jasmine Griffin, *Read Until You Understand: The Profound Wisdom of Black Life and Literature* (New York, NY: W.W. Norton, 2022), p.13.

[3] Jennifer Nash, *Black Feminist Re-imagined: After Intersectionality* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2019), p.115. Italics added.

[4] Kevin Quashie *Black Aliveness, Or A Poetics of Being* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2021).

[5] Ibid., p. 124.

[6] Ibid., p. 125.

[7] See, for example, Carole Boyce Davies, *Black Women, Writing and Identity: Migrations of the Subject* (NY, Routledge: 1994); Kaiama Glover, *A Regarded Self: Caribbean Womanhood and the Ethics of Disorderly Being* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2021); Françoise Lionnet, *Postcolonial Representations: Women, Literature, and Identity* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2013); and Brent Hayes Edwards, *The Practice of Diaspora: Literature, Translation, and the Rise of Black Internationalism* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003).

[8] Hortense Spillers, “Interstices: A Small Drama of Words,” *Black, White, and In Color: Essays on American Literature and Culture* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2003), 25.

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