

H-France Forum

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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 Korika Sall, University of Minnesota, International Development in Senegal

Reimagining Liberation delves into decentering practices of resistance from a male centered genealogy to a vital countering of Black women as political protagonists who have been at the center of fighting institutionalized racism, systemic inequality, and imperialism. In fact, the 1920s was a watershed decade in Black history with the development of an international discourse that focuses on building transnational solidarity. The goal of such work is to recognize the interconnectedness of experiences caused by oppression and colonization. In this captivating story-telling book, Annette Joseph-Gabriel revisits the historical context of World War II and also the period prior to the war in France, the Antilles, Africa and the Americas to reposition Black women who positively impacted the political, cultural, and socio-economic spheres of Africa and its diasporas. Thus, there emerged a transnational solidarity geared toward a revolutionary and liberatory dimension that battled the colonial and imperial functions.

Joseph-Gabriel focuses on published and unpublished archives of Suzanne Césaire, Paulette Nardal, Eugenie Eboué-Tell, Jane Vialle, Andrée Blouin, Aoua Kéita and Eslanda Robeson to shed light on how these women used their shared spaces to create anti-colonial movements which extended across the globe. Joseph-Gabriel tells the story of these Black women who strategically occupied many spaces as political agents, soldiers, family agents, writers, and spies in order to recenter their identities, locations, and experiences while France rebuilt its Empire during World War II. These women demonstrated that institutionalized racism affects identity formation and is tied to citizenship. Being a citizen requires the nation-state to recognize one's humanity and contribution to building the nation, but it also requires the nation to support and protect individuals. France, however, did not want to extend citizenship to its overseas departments and colonies. In the interwar period, France redefined the notion of citizenship to maintain a racial hierarchy where only white French men occupy the top and Black people stay at the bottom of the social hierarchy.

Reimagining Liberation begins with the troubling and difficult experience of Andrée Blouin, a Black woman who lost her *métisse* son to malaria because he was denied treatment based on his mixed race status (malaria treatment was strictly reserved for white people). With this example, Joseph-Gabriel gets at the heart of institutionalized racism, colonization, and its consequences on creating fractured systems that promoted white supremacy and isolated black people and people with multiple identities, like Blouin's son. Making it clear that according to the French government, individuals from the French colonies and French overseas departments cannot expect to be full French citizens. In bringing the voices of these women, Joseph-Gabriel once again refutes the idea that the making of the French Union or the French Empire was exclusively done by white people. She demonstrates that Suzanne Césaire, for example, worked tirelessly,

even with ill health, through her writings as a liberatory agent serving Martinique and Black people from the French colonies. In her essays, personal correspondences, and personal interactions with the French government in Martinique and Haiti, Césaire kept a focused agenda of liberation and demand for full citizenship possibilities. She advocated for a cultural citizenship that has to entail full benefits or even a Pan Caribbean identity which forces France to recognize the participation of French colonies in the making of its Empire. We learn that Césaire's stay in Haiti had a profound impact on how she approached identity formation and the notion of belonging as she combined politics and poetry with her personal experiences in efforts to liberate Black women around the globe. In my work, I have read Césaire's writings and word choices as revealing of her practical use of liberation and resistance. For Suzanne Césaire, the recognition of Caribbean people's multiple identities and of their different heritages is critical to obtain liberation.

My research intersects with Joseph-Gabriel's as I spotlight the contributions of Black women writers and students in Paris, extending the work of some scholars who have highlighted the participation of Black women in the Négritude movement. I re-examine the movement by focusing exclusively on the writings and personal experiences of Paulette Nardal and Suzanne Césaire from Martinique and Aminata Sow Fall and Annette Mbaye d'Erneville from Senegal. What drew me to this research was that there was no significant scholarship that puts into conversation these Black women thinkers from Martinique alongside those from Senegal as they analyze Négritude and feminisms in their writing and personal trajectories in response to colonization and imperialism. I demonstrate that within their works all four women demonstrate how Négritude and feminism thought shape their anti-colonial and independence struggles. By centering Black women in the global blackness discourse, these four women move beyond Négritude as they frame their political agenda around a woman-centered decolonial project. In line with Joseph-Gabriel, in my dissertation "Négritude Feminisms: Black Women Writers and Activists in Martinique, Senegal and France from the 1920s to the 1980s," I show how Black women have shaped and complicated liberatory movements around politics and socio-cultural spaces that affect their lives around the globe.[1]

To accentuate their practical use of the movement, in other words, how they articulate and focus on the realities of black women within the scope of the negritude movement, I argue that these women are doing Négritude. They understood that the term negritude should not just be used as theory or ideology but also needs practical actions to improve the lives of Black people all around the world. Particularly for Black women's issues, they were looking for practical solutions to actual problems caused by inequalities within their societies. This active use of the negritude movement is what I call doing negritude in my dissertation. Thus far, Négritude has been treated as a set of ideas rather than as a set of practices. Nardal, Césaire, Sow Fall, and Mbaye d'Erneville are doing Négritude and frame the movement as a set of practices; practices that elevate the focus of Négritude to the concern of Black women accompanied with concrete actions to improve their experiences. In their practices of Négritude and their interests in the experience of Black women, Sow Fall, Césaire, Mbaye d'Erneville and Nardal were active thinkers of Négritude and feminism, but do not feel defined or limited by these social movements. In other words, they incorporate Négritude theory in their writings and activism to highlight Black women's lives. My focus begins in the 1920s, which covers the period prior to the birth of Négritude, when Paulette Nardal and other Caribbean women writers published essays in that period. I ended my study in the 1980s because twenty years after the independence

of most African and Caribbean French colonies, the Négritude movement is still relevant in the works of Annette Mbaye d'Erneville and Aminata Sow Fall. As I demonstrate in my dissertation, Aminata Sow Fall in particular, who is still writing novels, carries out the goals of Négritude feminisms in today, among other young feminist activists who focus on Pan-African solidarity building, collective resistance, contestation of land grabbing and other issues that affect the lives of Black women worldwide.

Joseph-Gabriel repositions Black women as political protagonists by retelling the story of Aoua Kéita who focused on non-literate women, women in rural areas, women who for the most part were at the core of community and grassroots organizing with a decolonial agenda. In including Aoua Kéita's experience and trajectory, Joseph-Gabriel answers some of my initial questions as a young scholar when I started my research on women in transnational and international liberatory movements: where are Black women? Where are African women?

Nardal's political engagement, her invitation to Martinican women to politically involve themselves, her reshaping of Black women's roles while believing in the plurality of identities and citizenship, makes her an important agent of political change as *Imagining Liberation* demonstrates. In addition, Joseph-Gabriel invites the reader to examine Nardal's interdisciplinary work in France, Martinique and around the Black world. Furthermore, through the study of international mobility, Nardal's journals, her work on a tourist guidebook, and her 1946 report on colonial feminism, along with *La femme dans la cité*, Joseph-Gabriel draws connections to make Nardal's commitment to liberation visible to the world.

Aoua Kéita's *Femme d'Afrique* gives us the sense of how Black women navigated the public and private spheres. Kéita chooses not to reveal much of her love life and used the family setting as a means to reflect on the public experiences of Black women (p.145). Joseph-Gabriel puts Kéita's work in dialogue with Blouin's experience to show how both women were treated differently in colonial settings. Reading *Femme d'Afrique* and *My Country, Africa*, allows readers to grasp the nuances of identity formation, citizenship, and belonging from these two women's perspectives. *Reimagining Liberation* offers a deep understanding of Black women's experiences as political protagonists and complicates a narrative that would limit their contributions to only their published work. Eugénie Eboué-Tell and Jane Vialle are the perfect examples of Black women as elected officials who go beyond borders, connect with other women, and redefine power dynamics in the making of the new French Union. In the process of French Resistance, even though the role and place of women was given a new approach, they were still excluded because the priority and privileges were given to white men. As for Eboué-Tell "Citizenship, she believed, would symbolize France's recognition of the humanity of those who gave their lives to liberate the Hexagon, of those Africans who occupied the footnotes of French history as expendable on the battlefields of Europe" (p. 94). There is therefore a need to reframe Black women's contributions in the liberation movements that freed France.

Blouin's story delves into further detail as Joseph-Gabriel focuses on the nuances of identity, citizenship, and the interlocking oppression that Black women suffered. This part of the book highlights groundbreaking similarities between the necessity of Pan-African citizenship and the recognition of their double belonging. An Empire that continues to expand and maintain Black women's position invisible, building walls of division between them and politics making resistance and liberation difficult to obtain. Black women face the hypocrisy of France which

promotes *liberté, égalité, fraternité* and yet exploits people from its colonies. *Reimagining Liberation* continues the discussion of citizenship and Pan-Africanism with the focus on Eslanda Robeson's international mobility, since she had a global south project of rejecting white supremacy, promoting transnational citizenship, and calling for resistance to imperialism. Once again, Black women support the decolonial project by advocating for global solidarity and connection among Black people.

Reimagining Liberation is a thought-provoking innovative study about the decolonial process. Joseph-Gabriel represents Black women as political protagonists who challenge notions of citizenship to dismantle the nation-state and show that liberation goes beyond boundaries. Joseph-Gabriel retrieves hidden archives, secret correspondences, and formal discussions to reevaluate Black women's contribution to world history.

NOTES

[1] Korka Sall, "Negritude Feminisms: Francophone Black Women Writers and Activists in France, Martinique, and Senegal from the 1920s to the 1980s," PhD diss. (University of Massachusetts Amherst, 2021).

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