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Annette K. Joseph-Gabriel. *Reimagining Liberation: How Black Women Transformed Citizenship in the French Empire*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2019. Bibliography and index. \$110 (cl.). ISBN 9780252042935. \$14.95 (eb). ISBN 978025205191.

Review Essay by Grégory Pierrot, University of Connecticut-Stamford

In France, over the past two decades, Black women have started appearing, with increasing regularity and in growing numbers, in places and among people where they used to be invisible: in academia, in politics, in the media. It is not that Black women were not present in these circles prior to the twenty-first century, but they have traditionally been ignored, remained unseen and, in those rare cases where they had managed to draw public attention, they were swiftly returned to oblivion. By systemic design, undoubtedly, as patriarchal and racist dynamics have long restricted public spaces within which Black women can address the broader French and Francophone publics; by habit, certainly, as it is a function of erasure to make active acts of ostracism and ignorance seem like unremarkable, natural occurrences. Pondering “the many ways in which the production of historical narratives involves the uneven contribution of competing groups and individuals who have unequal access to the means for such production” in his landmark study *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History*, Haitian anthropologist Michel-Rolph Trouillot asserts: “The ultimate mark of power may be its invisibility; the ultimate challenge, the exposition of its roots.”[1] Inseparable from the rise of Black women in the French public sphere has been an engagement with this challenge, one involving not just the increasing visibility of Black women today, but light is now shed on the work and lives of their foremothers. With *Reimagining Liberation: How Black French Women Transformed Citizenship in the French Empire*, Annette Joseph-Gabriel takes up this gauntlet with gusto, exploring how, in the crucial period spanning from the Interwar to the early decades of decolonization, Black women contributed to redefining notions of citizenship and belonging in France, in its colonial empire, and beyond.

Joseph-Gabriel provides thorough and insightful portraits and analyses of seven such figures, whose work spans literature, education, philosophy, politics, and more: Martinican thinkers Suzanne Césaire and Paulette Nardal, Assemblée Nationale representatives and Resistance fighters Eugénie Éboué-Tell, from Guyane, and Congo-born Jane Vialle; decolonization activists Andrée Blouin—born in French Congo—and Aoua Kéïta, from Mali (formerly French Sudan). Their experiences demonstrate the incontrovertible fact that, then and now, French citizenship is meaningless if it does not take into account France’s worldwide history of colonization. These women’s work, Joseph-Gabriel tells us (quoting Ramón Grosfoguel) “highlights a simple but sometimes elusive truth: that ‘a global problem cannot have a national solution’” (p.194-5). Mid-twentieth century debates over the meaning of Frenchness to denizens of the colonial empire revealed that colonial subjects were crucial to whatever Frenchness might mean and would necessarily remain so as colonial ties did not disappear but merely changed shape.

The efforts of Vialle or Éboué-Tell to imagine the possibility of Frenchness in the colonial empire may seem out of step with their times, developing as they did on the eve of the struggle for decolonization; but their reflections appear strikingly prescient and current for twenty-first century France, notably considered in the light of France's so-called great debate on national identity. Rebooted recently by President Emmanuel Macron, the first such debate was initiated by President Nicolas Sarkozy in 2009, who made national identity a talking point of his successful presidential campaign two years earlier, in the wake of the massive 2005 riots. Ignited by the death of two *banlieue* teenagers fleeing from notoriously abusive policemen, the riots led the French government—which featured Sarkozy as minister of the Interior—to trigger the state of emergency, which until then has only ever been used in the French colonies. The parallel was not lost on everyone: sociologist Matthieu Rigouste, notably, pointed out how the increasingly normalized brutality meted by police in the *banlieues*, on populations with roots in France's overseas possessions and its former colonial empire, had origins in practices once reserved for the colonies. What hope there may have been for a sincere exploration of the notion of citizenship was crushed early, as the online platforms and townhall debates set up for this purpose saw an avalanche of racist and offensive comments. Sarkozy himself had declared in 2006 that those who do not love France should leave it, not so subtly hinting that in order to be truly French, one should not point out France's flaws. Yet, as Joseph-Gabriel shows time and again, critics of the French government's close-minded approaches to citizenship have long expressed a commitment to the promises of French citizenship, rather than the hatred so casually bandied by the likes of Sarkozy. “[T]he tensions that persisted between republican promises and colonial reality” (p. 117), highlighted by Senator Jane Vialle in the early 1950s, persisted as this reality survived the era of independence, perpetuated in the neo-colonial system of *Françafrique* and carried in the flesh of the people France colonized and in their descendants.

Joseph-Gabriel's knack for compelling analysis extends to the gripping anecdotes she shares throughout *Imagining Liberation*. In the final chapter, Joseph-Gabriel compares instances in which both Jane Vialle and the African-American anthropologist Eslanda Robeson, each entered post offices in colonial Central Africa and “found themselves [...] navigating strikingly similar instances of racial discrimination” (p. 169): in Vialle's case, a white Frenchwoman venomously telling an African beggar to get lost. Meanwhile Robeson describes watching a white Belgian clerk serving every white customer and Robeson herself before African customers. In both instances, Vialle and Robeson witnessed instances of casual racism from a peculiar vantage point of direct understanding as Black people, and of relative socio-racial and national privilege. Indeed, in contrast to Vialle “appealing to the constitutionally enshrined right to French citizenship,” Robeson's reaction, “shaped by the American lens through which she viewed racism and by the specific contours of Belgian colonialism,” contributed to her conceiving of a citizenship “premised on transnational black solidarity that acknowledged shared experiences under imperialism and, above all, highlighted a collective vision of liberation to come” (p.172-3). Twenty years ago, in *The Practice of Diaspora* (whose chapter on the Nardal sisters undoubtedly informed Joseph-Gabriel's own), Brent Hayes Edwards noted the importance of “*décalage*”—“the kernel of precisely that which cannot be transferred or exchanged, the received biases that refuse to pass over when one crosses the water”—to account for the minute differences and disagreements over terminology, definition, outlook, etc. within the African diaspora.[2] Far from considering these divergences crippling, Edwards further argues that “it is exactly such a haunting gap or discrepancy that allows the African diaspora to ‘step’ and

‘move.’”[3] The anecdotes Joseph-Gabriel focuses on are stellar examples of how the personal inevitably informs the political, and how the movement initiated by *décalage* tends to be activated precisely at that confluence.

Evocations of blackness can easily lead to contention, but France’s Black history has become an increasingly common topic, including in mainstream media. Earlier this year, “La Case du siècle,” a history program on French TV channel France 5 broadcast an episode dedicated to “Les soeurs Nardal, oubliées de la négritude.” Mixing archival documents and interviews of American and French scholars, the documentary film—written by Léa Mormin-Chauvac and directed by Marie-Christine Gambart—sheds light on the Martinican sisters’ central role in the conception of Négritude, but also more broadly as generators of Black thought and conversation. In the interwar period, their salon in the suburbs of Paris became a hub for African diasporic artists and thinkers. The documentary further explores their lives and work during and after World War II, in Martinique, continental France and beyond, a legacy long erased from French and broader Black history, under what Black and women’s rights activist Frances M. Beal called in 1969 the “Double Jeopardy: to Be Black and Female.”[4] Prior to founding the Black Womens’ Liberation Committee, Beal had spent formative years in France. She describes the development of apolitical consciousness and a commitment to Black women’s liberation, which she first developed in France in conversation with African and Caribbean students who compared the American and French empires. This experience echoes the Nardal sisters’ intellectual journey: it is a different progression through the same circuits. The history of Black activism and thought has always been an international affair. Even, and perhaps, especially, when developed locally, Black activist groups and thinkers grow in relation to peers around the world, informed by their actions and ideas in contact with them or in light of their memory and an active effort of recovery.

How this dynamic plays out in Joseph-Gabriel’s monograph may be most evident in its last chapter. It focuses on Eslanda Robeson, who can be seen as a stand-in of sorts for Joseph-Gabriel herself. In recovering the relation between the African-American thinker and the struggle for Black citizenship and independence in the French colonial empire, she reflects on her own journey, but that journey—an individual and scholarly, personal and political one—opens up compelling ways to think through contemporary French citizenship. Explaining how she first conceived of her topic of study, Joseph-Gabriel evokes how it grew out of a photo of her mother as a baby, “strapped firmly to [her] grandmother’s back as they danced to highlife music on the old polo grounds, a whites-only space in the former Gold Coast, re-baptized Independence Square in present day Ghana.”[5] Turning away from the “triumphant narrative of decolonization” attached to Ghana, Joseph-Gabriel set out to explore the complexity of departmentalization and the French Union, and the role women played in them. Yet even as this distance parallels Robeson’s own engagement with Black French citizenship in the mid-twentieth century, Joseph-Gabriel records and analyzes her forebears as an invitation to emulate their sharp-eyed scrutiny and experimentation in considering citizenship in our day. *Reimagining Liberation* was recently translated into French as *Imaginer la libération*, a title that purposefully emphasizes the urgency and immediacy of the book’s ideas rather than its work of recovery.[6] There is much work yet to be done in France to conceive of a form of citizenship that would be truly welcoming of Black women; Joseph-Gabriel’s *Reimagining Liberation* has its place among the texts that will help us get there.

NOTES

[1] Michel-Rolph Trouillot, *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1995), xix.

[2] Brent H. Edwards, *The Practice of Diaspora: Literature, Translation, and the Rise of Black Internationalism* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2003), 14.

[3] *Ibid.*, 15.

[4] Frances M. Beal, “Double Jeopardy: To Be Black and Female.” In *Sisterhood is Powerful*, Robin Morgan ed. (New York: Vintage Books, 1970): 340-353.

[5] “Research.” *Annette Joseph Gabriel*. Archived (20 October 2019): <https://web.archive.org/web/20191020223222/http://www.annettejosephgabriel.com/research/>

[6] Annette K. Joseph-Gabriel, *Imaginer la libération*. Jean-Baptiste Naudy, trans. (Paris: Rot Bo Krik, 2023).

Grégory Pierrot
University of Connecticut-Stamford
gregory.pierrot@uconn.edu

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