

H-France Forum
Volume 19 (2024), Issue 2, #4

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 by Jean-Baptiste Naudy, publisher and translator of *Imaginer la liberation: des femmes noires face à l'empire* (Sète: Editions Rôt-Bò-Krik, 2023)

We have not built any walls to limit our world.
Walls have been built against us, but we are always fighting
to tear them down, and in the fighting, we grow, we find new
strength, new scope.

Eslanda Goode Robeson, *African Journey*, 1945.[1]

Eslanda Goode Robeson is responsible for my first encounter with Annette Joseph-Gabriel's *Reimagining Liberation*. In 2020, I translated into French *African Journey*, the extraordinary account of Robeson's first trip to Africa.[2] Impressed by Eslanda Robeson's subtle analysis of the articulation of class, race, and gender oppressions, I became interested in the second trip to Africa she made in 1946, after the U.S. publication of *African Journey*. She documented this travel in another logbook, never published, filed under the title "Congo Diary" in her archives at Howard University's Moorland-Spingarn Research Center. After experiencing the racist violence of the South African regime and the very fabric of colonial oppression in her British (Kenya and Uganda) and Belgian (Ituri) coordinates in 1936, Robeson was introduced in 1946 to the particular flavor of French colonialism in Congo and the Central African Republic (formerly known as Oubangui-Chari). In Bangui, she had the opportunity to meet Jane Vialle, the *métisse* daughter that the director of a French concession company had with his African servant. Living in Marseille during the Second World War, Vialle became an important figure in the French Resistance. When she returned to her native colony after the war, she was able to be elected as her country's representative to the French Senate.

Eslanda Robeson and Jane Vialle meeting in Bangui? Considering how much these two had in common—two black women engaged in a decolonial struggle while circulating in the Atlantic space—and how different their political choices were—one was an internationalist communist and the other a French republican politician—what was the nature of their conversation? The significance of this meeting came to my attention thanks to Annette Joseph-Gabriel's *Reimagining Liberation*, and in many ways, the major political issues at stake in their dialogue can be seen as the heart of this magnificent book. From the French editorial and militant perspective that is mine, the premise of the book was already unsettling: to bring together the experiences and approaches of black anti-colonial female activists at a pivotal moment in the anti-imperialist struggle, given that the book covers a period that spans from Suzanne Césaire's

return to Martinique in 1939 to the U.S. government's restitution of her passport to Eslanda Robeson in 1958.

Although the women studied in this book have been largely invisibilized in France for more than fifty years, some of them are beginning to regain some light. Such is the case of Paulette Nardal, recently “rediscovered” by the French, if only as an inspiration to the “founding fathers” of the Négritude movement.[3] We can also consider that the republication of Suzanne Césaire's texts in 2009 by the prestigious éditions du Seuil, as well as the more recent research conducted by Anny-Dominique Curtius, have contributed to the French reassessment of an author who has been the lifeblood of one of the most substantial anticolonial journal of the twentieth century, *Tropiques*. [4] As the widow of the great hero Félix Éboué and as a prominent Gaullist, Eugénie Éboué-Tell is occasionally entitled to some respectful (and utterly discreet) remembrances, mainly in the name of her so-called convinced assimilationism. The French Republic likes to commemorate those who have served it zealously, but not before stripping them of all complexity. In contrast, Jane Vialle, Andrée Blouin, or Aoua Kéita have remained actively forgotten, whether by the French historical canon or by androcentric postcolonial panafricanist narratives.

What makes Annette Joseph-Gabriel's book so compelling is her investigation into what bound these women together. Whether West Indian, Guyanese, or African, they have been subjected to similar oppressions, being women, being colonized women, being Black women. Similar, also because it was the same power structure that intended to subdue them, namely French colonial imperialism and its republican ideology. Yet it is by focusing on comprehending the central node of this ideology, a more than ambiguous conception of citizenship, that Annette Joseph-Gabriel manages to unravel the complex web that constitutes both the French empire's project and the multiplicity of its dissent. To do so, the author relies on critical theory and on a thorough analysis of her protagonists' written productions and the aesthetic and political stakes they imply.

For its theoretical part, Annette Joseph-Gabriel's development echoes Jamaican writer Sylvia Wynter's deconstruction of civil humanism and the modern invention of the rights of man, of which the French Revolution has been a notable accelerator.[5] Wynter contends that the *Man* concerned by these rights is not a metonym for mankind, but a fraction of it, namely the Western white male property-owning bourgeois. In her well-known article, *Unsettling the Coloniality of Being/Power/Truth/Freedom*, Wynter urges readers to go precisely beyond this *Man* in order to finally reach the *Human*—an unrestricted humanity.

This is not an unheard of story. This universalizing conception of a homogenized humanity, from which the greatest part and the essential multiplicity are severed, has been contested in its French republican version from its very elaboration by another most decisive disruption, the Haitian revolution. When the French bourgeoisie proclaimed to the face of its aristocratic rivals that all *Men* were to be born free and equal in rights, the Haitian revolutionaries in turn asked the French: which *Men* exactly?

In her chapter dedicated to Eugénie Éboué-Tell and Jane Vialle, Annette Joseph-Gabriel recounts a press conference Éboué-Tell gave in New York to the American press, and especially to the African-American press, which quickly turned into a misunderstanding, and then into a full-out dispute. The American journalists could not understand why Éboué-Tell refused to consider the

possibility of independence for the French colonies and advocated so much the French Union project, which in her opinion was to bring a gradual integration of the colonized into a kind of international French republican political entity, that would guarantee a *de facto* and *de jure* equality. Shared by most of the Black women studied in *Reimagining Liberation*, this investment in the French republican universalist project is indeed impossible to understand if one refuses to see its properly Janusian or even schizophrenic aspect.

For there are different French Revolutions and different framings to the universal. Or to put it differently, the universal claimed by the French Revolution is a permanent oscillation between two opposing poles: *Man* versus *Human* in the words of Sylvia Wynter. When in revolutionary France, the most radical clubs demanded the immediate abolition of slavery and the integration of Haitians and all slaves into the republican political community, it was in the name of the *Human*, who had a “natural, unalienable and sacred right” to equality. When Bonaparte and his goons slaughtered the Parisian plebs and, at the same time, re-established slavery in the colonies, it was in the name of *Man*, who had “a natural, unalienable and sacred right” to order. When the French Third Republic colonized Africans, West Indians, South Americans, Asians, Oceanians, declaring that, where it had destroyed everything, there was nothing before, it was in the name of *Man*, who had “a natural, unalienable and sacred right” to civilize, i.e. appropriate and plunder. When the wretched of the (French) earth rose up to put down colonial, racial, political, cultural and gender hierarchies, and impose concrete democracy instead of the Western bourgeoisie constitutional scam, it was in the name of the *Human*, who had “a natural, unalienable and sacred right” to dignity.

If we omit to consider this contradiction at the inception of Western modern so-called humanist revolutions, the French one no less than the others, how could we understand that a Caribbean author and revolutionary communist like Suzanne Césaire called for Haiti to preserve the teaching of French (the former colonizer’s language) against the hegemony of American English (the new colonizer’s language)?[6] How could a figure as fundamental to black transatlantic exchanges as Paulette Nardal claim to be West Indian and French? How could Andrée Blouin, kingpin of the African independence movement, derive her political flame from the example set by the French resistance to the Nazi occupation? How could Aoua Kéita, the most revolutionary of them all, justify registering Malian rural women en masse on the French Union's voting lists?

Annette Joseph-Gabriel’s book is a brilliant historical and literary study whose contemporary relevance, from a French point of view, is immense. It begins with the fundamental question of representation. It shows major political protagonists of the decolonization of the French empire who are first and foremost Black women. Black women towards whom one projects oneself, identify with, especially for the part of French people made up of Black women. The study enables a projection and an identification made possible by a shared belonging or identity assignment, as much as the extreme diversity of these protagonists’ singular paths. It is crucial to work on the recognition of these figures, to have them studied, known, and taught in schools. It must be said and repeated that if the historical object called “France” is made up of an endless cohort of slaughterers, invaders, exploiters, enslavers and their proud descendants—who currently own the so-called French Republic and its trademarks—the same historical object also conveys a particular vocabulary of liberation, as evidenced by Suzanne Césaire’s archipelagic poetic prose, by Paulette Nardal’s reminiscent short stories, by Eugénie Éboué-Tell’s feminist exhortations, by Jane Vialle’s heroism in serving the French resistance, by Andrée Blouin’s

repeated escapes to freedom, or by Aoua Kéïta's political and literary foresight. Nothing national about it, since all of these figures have worked to weave identity as a multiplicity and to make French belonging nothing more (and nothing less) than a tile in the truly universal mosaic of the Human. This is another link between them and Eslanda Robeson, who, as much as she was a relentless activist of world liberation, straddling continents, bridging transatlantic battlefields, never failed to be a girl from Harlem.

In my humble opinion, *Reimagining Liberation* addresses contemporary France at its political core, since we are still immersed in the very same conflict. Referring to the French Revolution, author Daniel Guérin analyzed this discord as the struggle between a bourgeois republic and a *Bras-nus* democracy, that is to say the emancipatory project of those who have nothing more than their bare arms to fight.[7] All the figures studied by Annette Joseph-Gabriel are embedded in a revolutionary idea that came to life simultaneously, at the end of the eighteenth century, among the workers of the Parisian faubourgs (what we would call nowadays the *banlieue*) and the revolting maroons of Bois-Caïman: the *Human* must prevail over the *Man*. From their own peculiar sites, with their own words, their own strengths and of course, their own limitations, Césaire, Nardal, Éboué-Tell, Vialle, Blouin, Kéïta, and Robeson endeavored to go beyond the *Man* and to reach for the *Human*. They have taken on the same historical task that we must carry on, illuminated by their unhinged determination: “Too bad for those who think we are dreamers. The most unsettling reality is ours. We will act. This earth, our earth, can only be what we want it to be.”[8]

NOTES

[1] Eslanda Goode Robeson, *African Journey* (New York: The John Day Company, 1945), p. 152.

[2] Eslanda Goode Robeson, *Voyage africain* translated by Jean-Baptiste Naudy, with an afterword by Alice Diop (Paris, Nouvelles éditions Place, 2020).

[3] Paulette Nardal's first anthology is forthcoming as *Écrire le monde noir*, ed. Brent Hayes Edwards and Ève Gianoncelli (Sète: Rôt-Bò-Krik, 2024).

[4] Anny-Dominique Curtius, *Suzanne Césaire: archéologie littéraire et artistique d'une mémoire empêchée* (Paris, Editions Karthala, 2020).

[5] Sylvia Wynter, “Unsettling the Coloniality of Being/Power/Truth/Freedom Towards the Human, After Man, Its Overrepresentation—An Argument,” *CR: The New Centennial Review*, Michigan State University Press, Volume 3, Number 3, Fall 2003, pp. 257-337.

[6] Suzanne Césaire, *Le grand camouflage : écrits de dissidence, 1941-1945*, Paris, éditions du Seuil, 2009.

[7] Daniel Guérin, *La lutte des classes sous la Première République, bourgeois et “bras nus,” 1793-1797* (Paris, Gallimard, 1946).

[8] Suzanne Césaire, "Malaise d'une civilisation," *Tropiques* 5 (April 1942): 43-49. For an English version, see "The Malaise of a Civilization", in *Negritude Women*, ed. T. Denean Sharpley-Whiting, University of Minnesota, 2002, pp 130-134 (Sharpley-Whiting's translation has been modified).

Jean-Baptiste Naudy
Publisher and translator
jbnaudy@gmail.com

Copyright © 2024 by the Society for French Historical Studies, all rights reserved. The Society for French Historical Studies permits the electronic distribution for nonprofit educational purposes, provided that full and accurate credit is given to the author, the date of publication, and its location on the H-France website. No republication or distribution by print media will be permitted without permission. For any other proposed uses, contact the Editor-in-Chief of H-France.

H-France Forum
Volume 19 (2024), Issue 2, #4