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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

Response by Annette Joseph-Gabriel, Duke University

I begin with gratitude. Sincere and immense gratitude to Mame-Fatou Niang for convening this forum, to Hélène Bilis for shepherding it through the editorial process, and to the four reviewers, Régine Jean-Charles, Jean Baptiste Naudy, Grégory Pierrot, and Korka Sall for lending their time and expertise to this endeavor. Their responses are so very rich, and I will not be able to do justice to all the crucial points they raise. But the care, kindness, and intellectual generosity they each bring has meant that rather than writing from a defensive posture, I can simply indulge in the pleasure of thinking with them about where and how my book has travelled over time.

As I have explained elsewhere, my goal in writing the book was to examine Black French-speaking women's political visions at a particularly volatile time when the French Republic was actively redefining both its national identity and the configuration of its empire. For the seven women profiled in the book—Suzanne Césaire, Paulette Nardal, Eugénie Éboué Tell, Jane Vialle, Andrée Blouin, Aoua Kéita, and Eslanda Robeson—World War II had provided an opening to challenge France on the continuities between the political repression and violence of wartime, and the oppression and death that the imperial power had long wrought on its colonies. They believed that for France to truly live up to its egalitarian republican values, it would have to be rid of both fascism and colonialism as entwined ills. All seven women took up citizenship, in various ways, as a critical tool to achieve this end.[1]

Reimagining Liberation: How Black Women Transformed Citizenship in the French Empire was published in January 2020 by the University of Illinois Press, thanks in no small part to Dawn Durante to whose editorial vision this book is very much indebted. It was subsequently published in France as *Imaginer la liberation: Des femmes noires face à l'empire* by translator and editor extraordinaire, Jean-Baptiste Naudy, and the team at Editions Rot-Bo-Krik.[2] I offer this brief publication history because I believe that each time a book is read, taken up in a collective conversation such as this forum, or translated, these acts of engagement breathe new life into the work. As I have watched my book live its various lives as a course text in American universities, picked up by a biracial woman from Mali asking questions about language and politics in a bookstore in Toulouse, or skimmed by my mother who wants to know when I will write about Ghanaian women, I have been surprised each time to learn what resonates with readers.

In the American academy, readers of *Reimagining Liberation* often come to the text for Suzanne Césaire. Césaire was my own entry into this work, and long after the book's publication, she continues to provide the theoretical lens for my continued engagement with the questions of political dissidence, citizenship, and literary expression that are at the heart of this study. On the contrary, the readers of *Imaginer la libération* whom I encountered in bookstores in France and Belgium in the summer of 2023 were most enthusiastic about Aoua Kéita. Why Kéita?

I have always thought of "Aoua Kéita: Rural Women and the Anticolonial Movement" in *Femme d'Afrique: La vie d'Aoua Kéita racontée par elle-même* as my least favorite chapter in the book, the one I found most difficult to write. It is not that Kéita is not an important political protagonist worthy of her spot—and of far more—in the book. It is that her autobiography is the least literary. *Femme d'Afrique* is not the rousing exhortation to a Surrealist descent into dream and madness with which Césaire dazzled her readers in *Tropiques.* Nor is it the hard-to-stomach rhetorical flourishes of a white amanuensis intent on lifting Andrée Blouin up from the mire of genital mutilation and domestic drudgery "to which African women are consigned with a swat."[3] *Femme d'Afrique* is a cut and dry account of women's activism in rural Mali that records in exhaustive detail the minutiae of the pro-independence Rassemblement démocratique africain's (RDA) internal party politics, rallies, and voter canvassing. If I had set myself the task of recovering the ignored history of women's roles in the independence struggle in rural Mali, Kéita's autobiography would have been a godsend. But, interested as I was in literary questions of narrative voice, this text gave me little to work with.

So, why Kéita? What drew readers of *Imaginer la libération* to her out of the book's seven protagonists as most emblematic of the ideas about decolonial citizenship that I examine across their writings? Jean-Charles, Naudy, Pierrot, and Sall each offer crucial ways to think anew with Kéita's *Femme d'Afrique,* and to reflect on how the text, both in its content and in its narrative form, continues to intervene in still-urgent conversations about the literary and political dimensions of Black women's writings.

Care

Reimagining Liberation opens with a woman screaming. Born in the French colony of Oubangi-Chari (today the Central African Republic) to a French father and an African mother (colonial terminology is never satisfactory), Andrée Blouin had lived a life of fraught and painful proximity to whiteness. On this fateful day, she found herself in the office of the mayor of Bangui, pleading for access to the whites-only quinine medication that would save her infant son from malaria. The mayor's "no" was a death sentence. As guards dragged Blouin out of his office she screamed; "I am a French citizen, the same as you, and so is my son"[4]. French citizenship did not save two-year-old René's life in 1944. It did not save seventeen-year old Nahel Merzouk from being shot at point-blank range by French police in 2023. As Pierrot reminds us in his contribution to this forum, "French citizenship is meaningless if it does not take into account France's worldwide history of colonization."

Jean-Charles and Sall see this opening anecdote as doing more than simply serving as a dramatic hook for the book's opening. In an act of layered reading through the lens of Black feminist texts, Jean-Charles examines this scene of a colonial administrator's denial of a Black child's humanity through the eyes of Farah Jasmine Griffin who is herself reading 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." For Jean-Charles reading my book, this "life-giving and life-affirming care emerges as a method for writing Black women's lives into a historical narrative that has heretofore neglected, elided, or ignored their contributions."

If I have been certain about my occasional feelings of indifference to some of the details of political organizing that Kéita recounts with documentary-like precision in her autobiography, I have felt far more ambivalent about reproducing the more dramatic moments of violence and pain in my book. Did I show care in my writing about René's death? Have I done so now in replicating his mother's desperation for an audience beyond my book and beyond the autobiography in which Blouin recounts this life-altering incident? I am not the first person to wrestle with the ethics of exhibiting Black pain and death in the service of some hoped-for but still elusive justice. Griffin writes in *Read Until You Understand* that according to Toni Morrison the very act of putting stories of suffering on display is necessary to obtain justice.[5] Still thinking with Morrison, Griffin wonders "if the acquisition of self-knowledge" that comes from witnessing suffering can lead to us "having gained moral insight, [that] might…be the end result of a process of restorative justice."[6] This is an important provocation. What do we come to understand about ourselves or know about the world through this recounting of the murder of a toddler condemned to death by French racism? Is it the knowledge that racial segregation was not solely a U.S. American story? That it was wielded with just as deadly efficiency by French colonizers? In the moments when I wonder whether Assa Traoré relives her brother's death with every protest march and TV interview, I find that I am less certain than Griffin and Morrison about what it means to replay violence. How do we think about care when recounting scenes of violence?

In *Femme d'Afrique,* care takes on multiple meanings as both caring and careful narration. Kéita was a tireless grassroots organizer who focused her activist energies on registering women in what was then French Sudan to vote in local elections. On the eve of Malian independence, Kéita arrived in the village of Singné to oversee election proceedings in her capacity as a representative of the RDA. The people of Singné were angered that she had the temerity to usurp a man's role. Kéita was chased out of the village by a group of irate women intent on tearing her limb from limb ("me réduire en miettes" are her exact words).[7] It is clear in her autobiography that Kéita feels their virulent hostility in the most visceral way. The splash of kola-tinged saliva that was spat onto her dress, the cloud of dust that dissipated to reveal a crowd of women bearing down on her fleeing Land Rover. Each detail indelibly imprinted on Kéita's mind resonates with Frantz Fanon's description of the violence that the colonized turns back onto himself.

But, some months after her narrow escape, Kéita writes that she went back to Singné "pour faire la paix."[8] She returned three times, and although she was initially rebuffed, there finally came to be a tense understanding between her and the women of Singné. A few paragraphs later, she goes on to describe the heady first days of independence: Malian women inaugurating new fashions, composing songs, and decorating public spaces. This moment of women's jubilant collective cultural production tells the story of solidarity that we have come to expect or at least hope for when reading African women's writings. But Kéita's narration of the women's attack on her in Singné is important too because in that moment when solidarity between women frays and Kéita finds herself fleeing for her life, violence and care come to be entangled in the brutal setting of a colonial empire. Kéita's repeated forays into hostile territory are acts of care that recognize a crucial place for all Malian women "au rendez-vous de la conquête."[9]

There are other moments of care in *Femme d'Afrique* that illustrate the transnational dimensions of Kéita's work and thought. If we understand transnationalism to mean mobility across national borders, then there is no more local story than *Femme d'Afrique.* Early in her political career,

Kéita finds that the coveted French passport that allows for travel and for voting in French elections is more of a curse than a blessing because it precludes her from voting in local elections. She renounces her French citizenship and never looks back. Her activism becomes doggedly focused on the far-flung rural outposts to which the colonial administration frequently transferred her, a move intended to punish the activist midwife for her anticolonial organizing. And yet, here in the hyperlocal, we find another curious intermingling, this time of care and transnationalism.

Throughout her autobiography, Kéita describes the birthing centers where she works as sites of narration, pleasure, and activism. Likewise, her home is a space for collective education where women congregate daily to be in community. As they thumb through glossy copies of *Marie Claire* and *Femmes du monde entier,* those who cannot read focus on the photographs in the magazines. Kéita reads to them the accompanying stories about clashes between protestors and police in apartheid South Africa, and African American women's experiences of poverty in inner cities in the United States. Kéita undertakes here an act of translation, from image to written word to spoken word, that brings Mali, South Africa, and the U.S. in proximity and renders these experiences legible for the women around her. Pierrot says it best: "There's nothing new under the sun: 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 with peers around the world, informed by their deeds and ideas in direct contact with them, but also in the light of their memory, and the active effort of recovery." This too is care.

The Vocabulary of Liberation

Still, why are readers of *Imaginer la libération* so enamored with Kéita? Are they drawn to the careful and meticulous blow-by-blow account of RDA party politics that stands in sharp contrast to her just as careful side-stepping of any information about her own personal life? Unlikely.

Naudy writes that "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 'French Republic' and its trademarks—, the same historical object also conveys a particular 'vocabulary of liberation.'" What Naudy articulates as a contradiction in France's long history as a liberty-espousing empire is also the paradox at the heart of decolonial citizenship. Why did Blouin look to French citizenship for her son's salvation? How can citizenship be a path to decolonization? Perhaps readers find Kéita revolutionary because unlike many of the Negritude thinkers that Sall describes who inherited their "vocabulary of liberation" from France, Kéita was not tethered to the French Republican promise of citizenship via assimilation. She had neither love nor antipathy for France. In her narrative there is no angst-filled handwringing about the Black man's exclusion from an Enlightenment that serves the interests of slavery, or from a humanism marshaled in the service of colonialism. French citizenship was simply not of use to her and so she happily discarded it. Not everyone can do so today.

So perhaps instead of "Why Kéita?" the question I should have been asking was "Why Kéita now?" It may be that as we witness the domino-like effect of coups that have occurred in former French colonies in the Sahel region, readers find that Kéita's firsthand account of the independence struggle in Mali in the twentieth century can offer us today some way to think

beyond the violence, the naked power grabs, and the ghosts of colonialism that haunt our politics and our language, all of the epistemic violence that, as Pierrot so aptly states, "survived the era of independence, [is] perpetuated in the neo-colonial system of Françafrique and [is] carried in the very flesh of the people France colonized and their descendants." Kéita looks elsewhere for, as Naudy calls it, her "vocabulary of liberation," to the women of rural Mali who through solidarity, hostility, violence, creativity, and celebration, articulated their own visions of the post-colonial world they imagined.

Reimagining Liberation/Imaginer la libération has not travelled alone. I have been a traveler along with my book, learning to see it anew through conversations with readers on both sides of the Atlantic who have brought their investments and insights to this still unfolding story. Pierrot sees in my trajectory a parallel with Eslanda Robeson, the only one of the seven protagonists who was not from a French colony. My mother is still waiting for a book about Ghanaian women's anticolonial activism. In writing *Reimagining Liberation*, my research took me to Martinique, France, and the United States, and as I continue to travel with the book in hand, I may very well find that all roads lead home.

NOTES

[1] Annette K. Joseph-Gabriel, "Unfinished Business: In Search of Other Women, Other Worlds.' *Small Axe,* 1 March 2023; 27 (1 (70)): 162–173.

[2] Annette K. Joseph-Gabriel, *Reimagining Liberation : How Black Women Transformed Citizenship in the French Empire.* Urbana Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2020; Annette Joseph-Gabriel, *Imaginer la liberation: Des femmes noires face à l'empire.* Sète: Editions Rot-Bo-Krik, 2023.

[3] Jean MacKellar, "Epilogue," *My Country Africa: Autobiography of the Black Pasionaria*. Westport, CT.: Praeger Publishers, 1983.

[4] Andrée Blouin, *My Country Africa: Autobiography of the Black Pasionaria*. Westport, CT.: Praeger Publishers, 1983, 145.

[5] Farah Jasmine Griffin, *Read Until You Understand: The Profound Wisdom of Black Life and Literature*. New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2021.

[6] Ibid.

[7] Aoua Kéita, *Femme d'Afrique: La vie d'Aoua Kéita racontée par elle-même.* Paris: Présence Africaine, 1975, 390.

[8] Ibid. 392.

[9]Aimé Césaire. *Cahier d'un retour au pays natal*. Paris: Presence Africaine, 1988.

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