

H-France Forum

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Olivia C. Harrison, *Natives Against Nativism: Antiracism and Indigenous Critique in Postcolonial France*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2023. 284 pp. Illustrations, notes, bibliography, and index. \$112.00 U.S. (cl). ISBN 978-1-5179-1059-4; \$28.00 U.S. (pb). ISBN 978-1-5179-1060-0; \$28.00 U.S. (eb). ISBN 978-1517910600.

Review Essay by Gemma King, Australian National University

As I write this review in October 2023, Olivia C. Harrison's incisive book, *Natives Against Nativism: Antiracism and Indigenous Critique in Postcolonial France*, feels as pressing as it did when the idea for the project first came to her. In the prologue of her book, Harrison describes being struck by the imperative to write about the rise of nativism—that is, the right-wing co-opting of the Indigenous vocabulary of native identity, in the service of anti-immigration discourse; in brief, the racist settler argument that immigrants should “go home”—since the aftermath of the 2016 United States presidential election. Harrison writes that “what had been evident in France for the past half-century under the veneer of republican egalitarianism—an increasingly unapologetic affirmation of white, Christian, European identity against the ‘invasion’ of foreign migrants—was suddenly creeping out from behind the pillars of American democracy” (pp. viii-ix). A scholar of modern France and Palestine, she resolved to channel these concerns into a study of the works of French “natives,” a translation of the French *indigènes*, descended from formerly colonised peoples and so defined by the activist collective *Indigènes de la République*. In literary, filmic and photographic works, these creators turn to the dual Indigenous figures of the American Indian and the Palestinian in order to parse narratives of belonging in ways that resist the right-wing anti-immigration rhetoric of nativism in postcolonial France.

Today, in the months following the publication of *Natives Against Nativism*, we find ourselves in the midst of the severest intensification of the Israel-Hamas war in years. A conflict only a week old at the time I write this has already led to the deaths of thousands of civilians, hundreds of bombing attacks, and an impending ground invasion of Palestinian territory in Gaza. Meanwhile, Indigenous peoples of Turtle Island (North America) are engaged in a truth-telling process about the cultural genocide exercised by the displacements and abuses of the residential school system, which was imposed across much of the United States and Canada in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. This process includes the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada's class action lawsuit on behalf of victims of the system. At the same time, as the 2024 US presidential election campaign ramps up, numerous Republicans are expressing support of Donald Trump's threat to withdraw US aid to Ukraine in the war against Russian invasion, arguing that the United States should focus on its own supposed war on the southern border; that is, on fighting the arrival of undocumented migrants into the US via Mexico.[1]

Nativist rhetoric only continues to rise across the Western world of 2023, in ways that justify both the history of settler colonialism in states such as the US and Algeria, and the active colonisation of territories including Gaza and Ukraine. Much of this may seem separate from the

case of France, yet *Natives Against Nativism* shows us how interconnected the experiences of North American Indigenous peoples, Palestinians, and racialized francophone migrants in postcolonial France may be.

Harrison's book analyzes a range of written and audiovisual works, including a number of feature films and documentaries. Chapter one ("Palestine As Rallying Cry") approaches several documentaries from a historical perspective. These short films were made by or with France-based pro-Palestinian groups in the 1970s, such as the CSRP (Committees in Support of the Palestinian Revolution) and the theatre troupe *Al Assifa*. In chapter five, "Indigeneity at the Borders of Europe," Harrison studies a series of Jean-Luc Godard's most politically engaged 1970s films. She demonstrates how these films mobilise the American Indian to express a pro-Palestine stance as well as how the figures of the American Indian and the Palestinian together advance an anticolonial argument in France and Europe. In her words, Harrison thus "read[s] the twinned figures of the Palestinian and the Indian across Godard's filmography to think through the recuperation of indigeneity in postcolonial Europe" (p. 129). The chapter then turns to Godard's much later, twenty-first-century films such as *Notre Musique* (2004) and *Film Socialisme* (2010).[2] In these works, symbols of North American Indigeneity return to critique colonialism in ways that appear far less interested in supposedly authentic manifestations of contemporary Indigenous identity than in harnessing the metaphoric weight of traditional Hollywood visions of the American Indian as an archetype of colonial resistance. A particularly illuminating section of the chapter cites Elias Sanbar, the Arabic interpreter who accompanied Godard, Gorin, and Marco while filming in Palestine in 1970. Sanbar noted not only that the European filmmakers were drawing on the native/settler iconography of Hollywood Westerns, but that the *fedayeen* themselves appeared to be channelling this iconography in their self-representation:

I had been taken aback by the sudden appearance of the militants... Today I suppose, in fact I am sure of it, that these men, who had been informed and knew that 'cinema' was about to happen, had imagined a scene to welcome us in their own manner. They were writing their own film, probably made up of reminiscences of Westerns and especially that archetypal scene when the horseman or convoy of pioneers suddenly see a multitude of "brave" Indians profiled against the surrounding hillcrests, silent and still. (pp. 147-148)

This section is followed by the excellent chapter six, "Palestine and the Migrant Question," in which the case study of Maki Berchache and Nathalie Nambot's 2014 documentary *Brûle la mer*, is a highlight.[3] However, both the Sanbar and *Brûle la mer* sections prompted a question I hope Harrison will be willing to address in this Forum. *Brûle la mer*, co-directed by a Tunisian migrant and a white French woman, portrays the friendship and differing relations to territory and Frenchness between a Tunisian undocumented Berchache migrant and the Palestinian exile Shadi Al Fawaghra in France, centering *indigène* voices both in the postcolonial French *Indigène de la République* sense and the Palestinian one, both on and behind the camera. The power of these voices caused me to wonder how and whether white European voices such as those of Jean-Luc Godard and Jean Genet, covered in chapter two, "Jean Genet and the Politics of Betrayal," truly fit into this paradigm. Surely they are not "natives" in the sense of reclaimed indigeneity by postcolonial migrants in France that the title of *Natives Against Nativism* conveys.

Nonetheless, the book's engagement with film is informative and compelling. Whether as historical document or in textual analysis, Harrison uses film to demonstrate not only a history of antiracism in France, but also a granular analysis of the representation of American Indians and Palestinians onscreen as a rallying cry for French anti-nativism.

Almost sixty years after Ousmane Sembène's 1966 *La Noire de...* and forty years since the advent of the *beur* film movement, cinema remains a key tool in the cultural negotiation of visions of postcolonial Frenchness. These negotiations can be both generative and reactive. For example, in discussions of her all-Black cast of disenfranchised girls in *Bande de filles* (2014).[5] Céline Sciamma famously denied any intention to represent the specificities of Black French girlhood, insisting instead on a republican universalism that rejects difference: "Je n'ai filmé que la banlieue, des filles qui sont dans le trouble, qui sont dans la construction de leur identité, qui se cherchent... C'est ce qui m'intéresse." [6] Created partly in response to *Bande de filles*, the 2017 documentary *Mariannes noires* from Afro-French director Mame-Fatou Niang and white US director Kaytie Nielsen, radically contests the color-blindness of republican universalism, arguing for the possibility of an antiracist, multicultural Republic in which Frenchness can exist in many different forms, particularly for Black girls and women.[7]

From Niang and Nielsen's *Mariannes noires* to Houda Benyamina's 2016 *Divines* and Ladj Ly's *Les Misérables* (2019), many contemporary French films confront and oppose nativist and universalist rhetoric in the voices of those descended from formerly colonised peoples.[8] However, effective anticolonial resistance can also be enacted at a slight remove, through transindigenous identification. In *Natives Against Nativism*, Harrison brings us an obscure but striking corpus of films that triangulate, without eliding, Indigenous experience across North America, the Middle East and France via the former empire. The result is a book that expands the limits of possibility for antiracist, anticolonial artistic resistance in postcolonial France.

NOTES

[1] Catie Edmonson, Carl Hulse, and Karoun Demurjian, "Border Takes Center Stage as McCarthy Seeks to Shift Shutdown Blame," *The New York Times*, September 27, 2023, <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/09/28/us/politics/shutdown-mccarthy-immigration-border.html>, accessed October 2, 2023.

[2] *Notre musique*, directed by Jean-Luc Godard (Avventura Films, 2004) ; *Film Socialisme*, directed by Jean-Luc Godard (Vega Film, 2010).

[3] *Brûle la mer*, directed by Make Berchache and Nathalie Nambot (Les Films du Bilboquet, 2014).

[4] *La Noire de...*, directed by Ousmane Sembène (Filmi Domirev, 1966).

[5] *Bande de filles*, directed by Céline Sciamma (Hold Up Films, 2014).

[6] Pauline Le Gall, "Céline Sciamma : « J'ai filmé la banlieue et des filles qui se cherchent »,» *Le Figaro*, October 23, 2014, <https://www.lefigaro.fr/cinema/2014/10/23/03002-20141023>

[ARTFIG00135-celine-sciamma-j-ai-filme-la-banlieue-et-des-filles-qui-se-cherchent.php](https://artfig00135-celine-sciamma-j-ai-filme-la-banlieue-et-des-filles-qui-se-cherchent.php), accessed October 2, 2023.

[7] *Mariannes Noires*, directed by Mame-Fatou Niang and Kaytie Nielsen (produced by Mame-Fatou Niang and Kaytie Nielsen, 2017); see also Niang's 2019 monograph, *Identités françaises : Banlieues, féminités et universalisme* (Leiden: Brill, 2019).

[8] *Divines*, directed by Houda Benyamina (Easy Tiger, 2016); and, *Les Misérables*, directed by Ladj Ly (Srab Films, 2019).

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