

DECOLONIZING THE METROPOLE

Decolonizing the Republic: African and Caribbean Migrants in Postwar Paris, 1946–1974.

By Félix F. Germain.

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In this ambitious study, Félix F. Germain uncovers the experience and activism of African and Caribbean workers who migrated to metropolitan France during the postwar economic boom between 1946 and 1974. Drawing creatively on a variety of sources, including state, union, and police archives, as well as the popular press, documentary films, song lyrics, and oral interviews, Germain largely sidesteps the experiences of the famous black intellectuals of the period, choosing instead to focus on the larger mass of anonymous migrants who made their way to the Paris region. He argues that these workers were the ‘primary agents of social change in black France’ and that they were engaged in what he terms ‘decolonizing the Republic’, that is, changing French attitudes towards peoples of the African diaspora through labor, activism, and the rejection of persistent colonial paternalism.

Apart from the introduction and conclusion, Germain’s book is composed of nine chapters that take a kaleidoscopic view on the black migrant experience in postwar Paris. In the first chapter, Germain briefly gestures to the black intellectual elite in 1950s Paris with an exploration of Alioune Diop’s promotion of black culture and black student activism. He then shifts gears, however, and devotes most of the book to working-class migrants. Chapter Two closely examines African migration to the Paris region in the context of what he calls a ‘postcolonial civilizing mission’ that was carried out by elements of the French state, particularly in the domain of public health, who saw Africans’ lifestyles, diets, and their very bodies as ‘problems’. In Chapter Three, Germain considers how African experiences were represented in French documentary films of the time.

While Chapters Two and Three focus mostly on French perceptions of African migrants, Chapter Four unearths strategies that Africans used to resist paternalism and combat difficult conditions in the workplace and the crowded foyers where they often lived. Housing protests solidified bonds between various African national communities, helped alter French perceptions of Africans as *indigènes* in the metropole, and gave migrants more control over their dwellings. In Chapter Five, Germain focuses on Caribbean women migrants to France, whose experience was shaped by dominant stereotypes of them as maids and oversexed ‘Jezebels’ (in the French view) and sexual victims (in the eyes of male Caribbean nationalists). These women were often ambitious, hoping to build careers in France, and they pushed back against the low expectations that constrained their opportunities, ultimately with some success. Chapter Six tackles how the famous singer Henri Salvador and male Caribbean migrants helped ‘decolonize’ the French imagination of Caribbean people as indolent and clownish, while it also calls attention to the ambiguities in Salvador’s stage persona. Drawing on the personal stories of four men, Germain shows both the possibilities and limitations faced by male migrants who chose paths in health care

and the military. Chapter Seven explores how, when their interactions with French labor unions proved dissatisfying, black migrants from Africa and the Caribbean turned to community organizations and political activism to contend with racism, inadequate housing, low wages, and poverty. Chapter Eight fits black activism into the seminal protests that rocked France in 1968, and shows how that period constituted a turning point for African and Caribbean migrants, although in different ways.

Germain concludes that until the early 1970s, class and cultural divides, as well as differing political statuses, kept the African and Caribbean communities in France largely separate. However, in his ninth and final chapter, entitled ‘Music, Le Pen, and the “New” Black Activism, 1974–2005’, Germain asserts that an all-encompassing black consciousness did eventually develop in France in the succeeding forty years. This was due to the maturation of a generation of black children in France, collaborations between African and Antillean musicians, and the rise of the racist Front National, which stigmatized immigrants of color and simultaneously provoked new forms of activism and solidarity within a heterogeneous black community.

Germain’s study is a welcome addition to the sparse historical literature on black experience in France in the postwar period. His eye for unusual sources, his careful attention to class and gender, and his irreverence for the black intellectuals who are lionized in existing scholarship (he notes that Frantz Fanon beat his wife), are compelling and refreshing. His interviews capture the voice of a generation that is now aging and passing away. (To that point, it would have helped to have a full list of his interviews in the bibliography.) But a reader who is not already familiar with the history of departmentalization in the French Caribbean, decolonization of French Africa, or the upheavals of 1968 will likely need additional scaffolding that is not provided by the lean chapters here. Indeed, some chapters felt like they should be book length studies, while the sources Germain uses sometimes beg for deeper problematization (such as how to gauge reception of films and music in the broader French public).

One thing conspicuously absent from the text was attention to the role of religion, and Islam in particular, in community formation and resistance to marginalization, exploitation, and abject living conditions. Germain cites some Catholic press (mostly in reference to Caribbean migrants), but he does not say much about whether Islam or Catholicism were important forces in the African migrant community. Nonetheless, this book covers new and exciting ground and suggests promising avenues for further research.

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NIGERIAN SEAFARERS AND NATIONALISM

Nation on Board: Becoming Nigerian at Sea.

By Lynn Schler.

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