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Gary Wilder, *The French Imperial Nation-State: Negritude and Colonial Humanism between the Two World Wars*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005. 352 pp. \$75.00 (hb). ISBN 0226897729. \$25.00 (pb). ISBN 0226897680.

Response Essay by Gary Wilder, Pomona College, to the Review Essays of his book by Martin Thomas, Gregory Mann, Robert Aldrich and Patricia Lorcin.

I. Introduction

It is rare for a first book to receive the kind of attention afforded by a public forum such as this. I would like to thank the editors of H-France for selecting *The French Imperial Nation-State* for inclusion in this series of valuable online exchanges. I am especially grateful to the four specialists in colonial history who have taken the time to write focused review essays responding to a wide-ranging work that does not always lend itself to straightforward summary. Producing such condensed analyses could not have been an easy undertaking. These are invaluable gestures of collegiality, and I have attempted to respond in the same spirit.

I appreciate the way in which these largely sympathetic readings of my book sought to represent its crucial points while engaging it critically. Each reviewer singled out different aspects of the book to praise and criticize. Each offered a number of useful comparative examples and counterexamples meant to broaden, deepen, or qualify my claims. (These include Martin Thomas' comments about interwar financial pressure on colonial reformers; Robert Aldrich's comments about *créolité*, colonial troops, the Popular Front, and whether colonial humanism existed in other French colonies; Gregory Mann's comments about a generation gap among field administrators; and Patricia Lorcin's comments on *métissage* in other parts of the empire and Houphouët-Boigny's funeral.) I value the opportunity to reconsider the book from these revealing perspectives. I am gratified that whatever their disagreements, the reviewers on balance found the book to be challenging, original, and provocative.

These essays present much rich material for further reflection and invite an extensive response. But I will resist the strong temptation to engage with them point by point. The provocative comments and questions contained in them certainly merit direct and detailed responses. But I fear that such an essay might prove tedious to readers not immediately party to the exchange. Instead, I will try to distill from them a number of crucial issues that bear directly on the kind of analysis developed in the book. My discussion of these issues will seek at once to respond to their important criticisms, clarify my claims, and reflect further on the historical matters in question.

Despite reviewers' good faith and generally positive assessment, there appears to exist some confusion about a number of terms, claims, and objects featured in the book. This essay may be read as an effort of clarification. I suppose it is common for authors to imagine that they are misunderstood rather than mistaken. But, at the risk of sometimes stating the obvious, I would like to try to clear up possible misunderstandings in order to bring into relief the actual axes of agreement or disagreement. My will to clarify should not, therefore, be read as an attempt to dismiss valid criticism. It derives above all from a belief that I as author bear primary responsibility for readers' possible confusion and need therefore to try to express myself in the clearest possible terms. I would contend that such misunderstandings are also related to the fact that my claims actually contest several deep-seated disciplinary assumptions.

II. Imperial Nation-State

Despite their different emphases and criticisms, all of the review essays appear to accept, even endorse, my analytic starting point: that historians should treat interwar France as an imperial nation-state. I find this to be especially encouraging, not only as an author whose book is being reviewed, but as a student of empire convinced that French colonial history cannot be regarded as a mere secondary supplement to French national history.

I use "imperial nation-state" to refer to that fact that under the Third Republic metropolitan-parliamentary and colonial-authoritarian societies and governments were linked together as components of an integrated sociopolitical formation. The term signifies that the empire was not elsewhere: Paris was inside of the empire just as colonies were inside of the nation. It also signifies that there existed empire-wide networks through which people, discourses, and goods circulated in such a way as to reinforce the interdependence between these supposedly antithetical poles. Finally, it signifies a peculiar political order in which republican politics become irreducibly imperial and vice versa.

How one attempts to research or represent such an entity remains an open question and ongoing challenge. Diverse scholars could pursue paths that would differ from and disagree with mine. But I believe that if more French historians were willing to treat the imperial nation-state as their object of and framework for research, the field would shift in surprisingly fruitful ways.

But let me be clear about this starting point as I define it. The term "imperial nation-state" does not seek to identify republicanism with universalism and colonialism with particularism. Nor does it signal some putative contradiction between the two. It cannot then refer to attempts or failures of policy-makers to apply republican principles to colonial societies in order to reconcile such a contradiction.

Throughout the book, on the contrary, I demonstrate that republican and colonial orders were each universalizing and particularizing simultaneously. Patricia Lorcin's useful observation that French women possessed citizenship without voting rights is an excellent example of this. To identify republicanism with universalism and colonialism with particularism, I argue, is to reproduce uncritically the self-understanding of the historical actors in question. Such identification also disregards the gradual reconfiguration of republicanism, beginning in the late nineteenth century, as statist, welfarist, and productivist. By the interwar period, I contend, a new postliberal republic had emerged to which colonial humanism, as a new form of administration, corresponded. It would be historically inaccurate to characterize the one as universal and the other as particular.

If the interwar imperial nation-state was characterized by a profound contradiction, it was not one between republican universalism and colonial particularism. Rather, I would suggest, a fundamental contradiction existed between the integrated imperial sociopolitical formation that had come to exist and the national form which could no longer contain it but which persisted constitutionally, juridically, and ideologically. Said differently, there was a growing contradiction between the inherited juridico-political form, which was national, and existing historical conditions, which were imperial and transnational.

While these developments did not originate in the interwar period, the forces of integration accelerated, and the contradiction between form and conditions became more acute at that time. Historical actors, whether in the metropole or in the colonies, could no longer disregard the imperial nation-state. They confronted directly the persistent but unacknowledged disjuncture between territories, populations, and governments that had come to define French (imperial) politics. This non-isomorphism, rather than a putative contradiction between metropolitan universalism and colonial particularism, allows us to understand more fully the longstanding tensions among citizenship, nationality, and race or culture that have haunted French political modernity.

In *The French Imperial Nation-State* I attempt to elaborate this problematic and analyze these contradictions through detailed studies of metropolitan debates over the idea of Greater France, colonial government in French West Africa, the black public sphere in Paris, and the Negritude project. The empire-wide networks linking these disparate domains, and which included representatives from the worlds of science, government, and public opinion across Europe and Africa, delimited the imperial scale of the French nation. These were sites where the contradictions associated with the imperial nation-state announced themselves forcefully. Moreover, historical actors associated with them were exceptionally self-reflective about the relationship between imperial disjunctions (among territories, peoples, and governments) and political categories (citizenship, nationality, and culture).

I do not believe that this starting point requires us to accept that the colonial empire occupied a prominent place in the minds of the mass of ordinary French people. Historians have made a persuasive case that the French public was largely unaware of and uninterested in imperial questions. But my claim focuses on historical conditions and structures, not on popular consciousness. More important was the conviction among a constellation of prominent decision makers in the public and private sectors that imperial renewal was crucial for national reconstruction.[1] In West Africa this reasoning accounts partly for the emergence of a new approach to administration that I refer to as colonial humanism.

III. Colonial Humanism

Some clarification of this formulation might also be useful. A certain degree of confusion around my use of "humanism" is understandable given the common-sense connotations associated with this term. The term "colonial humanism" may be doubly confusing because it has been used by previous historians to convey precisely this common-sense meaning of humanitarian colonialism, which I repeatedly call into question.

Finally, the term might lend itself to misunderstanding because I use it to refer at once to a reform movement, a form of administration, and the underlying political logic that informs both. Clarity may easily be compromised when an omnibus term is used for disparate objects. My book makes a case for assuming this risk, and readers can decide whether it enables or limits understanding. But because the term might be unnecessarily misleading, I want to clarify how I do and do not use it.[2]

Colonial humanism does not refer to the supposed humanitarianism of individual administrators who were purportedly sympathetic towards Africans or sincere about understanding or helping them. It does not refer to individual beliefs or intentions. Nor do I suggest that colonial humanists attempted to apply republican-universalist principles to racially stratified colonial societies.

Rather, I use colonial humanism to designate the way in which a cohort of reformers reconfigured and linked together inherited techniques within a new rationality of rule. As Lorcin correctly points out, nineteenth-century colonial rulers already joined administration to ethnography. These administrator-ethnologists developed a variant of postliberal welfare politics that was "humanist" insofar as the targets of administration were living and productive human beings, societies, and populations. Health, welfare, and happiness served as both means and ends of politics. Colonial humanism did not diminish or soften racism. It racialized colonial subjects in novel ways that affirmed rather than violated republican precepts.

In the book I elaborate the logic, targets, techniques, objectives, and forms of knowledge associated with colonial humanism. It was a system of rule with three overriding objectives: economic development, social welfare, and political order. Each was supposed to entail the other two (one could not exist without the others; each became a means of obtaining the others). I demonstrate that in French West Africa each of these objectives could only be met through policies that functioned simultaneously to protect and to transform indigenous social relations.

Colonial humanism, in other words, was not defined by a contradiction between its republican promises and colonial realities, or between universalist principles and particularist practices. It was a contradictory form of administration insofar as it was driven by competing imperatives to universalize and to particularize at the same time. It was compelled by its own logic and objectives to pursue antithetical routes. These antinomies of colonial rule were not irrational paradoxes. They were intelligible effects of a contradictory but coherent political rationality.

In my book I examine the ways in which these seemingly abstract antinomies of rule operated in a variety of concrete administrative domains. There are extensive discussions of economic development, social policy, cultural policy, customary law, indigenous chiefs, civil society, colonial schools, local political assemblies, and citizenship policy. My analysis explains how colonial humanism's competing imperatives created contradictory prescriptions for African peoples: economic development without social change, private property without independent proprietors, individualism without individuality, collectivity without collectivism, citizenship without culture, nationality without citizenship, civic virtue without civil society, cities without circulation. I explain how the logic, method, and system of administration were politically effective on certain levels yet also called forth the very types of sociopolitical disorder that they were designed to preempt.

Concerned as well with the historical emergence of colonial humanism, I trace how a variety of actors and agencies, in the metropole and in the colonies, contributed to the formation of this political rationality. An empire-wide infrastructure linked the spheres of scientific knowledge, practical administration, and public opinion. Each produced knowledge about colonial government and African societies that was redeployed by the others. Together they elaborated the new rationality of rule which produced and was enabled by corresponding books, journals, research institutes, training schools, official and commercial lobbyists, bureaucratic cohorts, high-ranking government officials, political programs, administrative projects, colonial agencies, technical experts, and field agents.

IV. Political Rationality

The actors, ideas, and policies that I gather under the term colonial humanism were neither isolated nor marginal during the interwar period. This new colonial rationality shaped administrative discourses and practices about French West Africa at every level: among scholars and bureaucrats, in the public and private sectors, in government reports and in published interventions, in metropole and colonies, among high-ranking officials (ministers, governors-general, and governors) and ordinary functionaries. My account emphasizes the continuum of practical rationality which linked ideas, ideology, writings, projects, plans, policies, and practices.

This was not merely a theory of administration; it was a method and form of administration whose wide-ranging import and impact I document in detail. But to claim that colonial humanism was pervasive is not to say that its tenets were universally accepted by all politicians and administrators. Its logic was contested; its plans were unevenly implemented; its projects led to unanticipated outcomes. Debates existed among reformers themselves. My argument allows for and references such contestation, unevenness, and failure. Their existence does not fundamentally alter the claims I am making about colonial humanism as a form of African administration.

My project, as the review essays note, is not to investigate implementation. I make a case for moving beyond what I call "the analytic of failure," which seeks primarily to correlate policy plans and outcomes, political promises and actual practices, as if a certain narrow calculus of "failure" was the overriding interpretive key to colonial history. I am more concerned with elaborating the logic, method, and form of administration I associate with colonial humanism. This focus is important because scholars have not yet adequately specified this system of rule, despite extensive documentation of this period. Misunderstandings about how to read reform initiatives are common. More broadly, late-colonial states

have been extensively described but, with a few notable exceptions, have not been adequately specified or theorized on their own terms.

If we become preoccupied with the overdetermined and unsurprising gap between discourses and practices, or between promises and outcomes, we only confirm what we already know about this and every other colonial context. I argue that we learn much more about French West Africa by exploring an intrinsically contradictory political rationality that expressed itself in discourses as well as practices, promises as well as outcomes. As Martin Thomas points out, my analytic framework may help us understand why interwar colonial projects often failed to meet their objectives. But it is also meant to raise counterintuitive questions about those objectives and what we even mean by failure and success. Discussions of supposed failure, I contend, must follow from not substitute for the more fundamental analysis that I present.

But, and this is a crucial point of clarification, to say that I am interested in political rationality is not to say that I am interested exclusively in ideas. The very point of political rationality, as I use the term, is to develop an approach that transcends the untenable opposition between ideas and the world, discourses and practices. One would have to subscribe to an overly restrictive and reductive understanding of practice to say that this is a book about saying rather than doing. It is not only the case that I examine both discourses and practices. I also reflect explicitly on the fluid and reciprocal relationship between them by exploring the reciprocal determinations among science, politics, policy, and public opinion.

The point, which informs my book, is that the objects historians commonly associate with intellectual history require social and political analysis. Conversely, the objects commonly associated with social or political history require conceptual elaboration. Accordingly, we cannot treat such objects as ontologically distinct from one another.

Given my detailed analysis of policy domains and my account of the underlying continuities among various forms of practical rationality, it is difficult to understand how the interwar reform movement can be construed in terms of rhetoric rather than practices (as if policy “failures” transform real practices into mere rhetoric magically) or how my account of it can be read as focusing on words rather than deeds.

One reason for these curious claims may derive from the fact that political rationality as an object of study challenges commonsense assumptions about clear distinctions between discourses and practices. Even now, scholars still often assume that historical phenomena must somehow fit into one category or the other. It then follows that a history of political logics, of categories of political practice, of real abstractions will be read as a history of ideas or rhetoric. From this perspective, colonial humanism is therefore understood to be a set of humanitarian ideas about colonial government rather than a welfarist or biopolitical form of government.

V. Structural Violence

We can see how, according to this reasoning, it may appear as if my formulation of colonial humanism ignores or fails to account for state violence in French West Africa, which Gregory Mann rightly characterizes as structural and systematic. This criticism, I would suggest, is actually informed by assumptions about colonial violence as necessarily contingent and unaccountable.

Violence, because pervasive in colonial societies, poses a challenge to scholars who want not simply to describe or denounce it. Too much attention to violence (without a clear justification) risks sensationalizing it and turning one into an unwitting voyeur. Too little attention to violence (without a

clear justification) risks minimizing it and turning one into an unwitting apologist. Finding the right balance, given one's particular topic and argument, is an analytic, political, and ethical challenge.

The early chapters of my book focus more on specifying colonial humanism as a form of administration than in presenting a familiar inventory of violent state practices. Such practices in French West Africa (e.g., the *indigénat*, summary imprisonment, military recruitment, forced labor, compulsory population transfers, etc.) have been well documented but not adequately theorized by historians. Repeated invocations of colonial violence that do not also attempt to account for it structurally often function to reinforce the spurious opposition between republican universalism, legality, and modernity, on the one hand, and colonial particularism, exceptionalism, and atavism, on the other. I decided that a more fruitful reckoning with colonial state violence would first require a deeper understanding of the colonial state itself in French West Africa.

Such a decision carries with it analytic, political, and ethical risks, which I fully assume. Perhaps my argument would have been better served if I discussed at greater length types of state violence in relation to colonial humanism as a mediated form of government. But we should be clear about terms. It is one thing to say that insufficient attention has been paid to the topic of violence, another thing to say that violence is ignored, and yet another thing to say that an argument fails to or cannot account for violence (as structural and systematic).

I submit that the presence of state violence in colonial West Africa, to which I refer explicitly in the book, does not undermine my argument any more than unimplemented plans do. More importantly, my formulation of colonial humanism serves precisely to account structurally and systematically for repeating patterns of violence that I argue are not contingent.

To invoke structural and systematic violence is to make an implicit claim about the existence of some kind of structure and system that produces such violence or at least a claim about the ways in which the violence is structured or forms a system. Otherwise, such an invocation refers only to a certain quantity or excess of violence, to the fact that violence is pervasive or repetitive or overdetermined, that it is "built-in" to the system itself. But these are descriptive assertions, not analytic arguments; they beg the very questions about structure and system they purport to answer.

My examination of colonial humanism attempts explicitly to account for state violence as structural and systematic. Whether or not it does so in a satisfying way is open for debate. There are certainly other ways to do so. But I discuss how manifold instances of colonial violence were not only contingent but were structural and systematic effects of the peculiar interwar logic and form of administration that I elaborate.

Specifically, after World War I added pressure was continually placed on administrators to increase economic productivity and manage social disorder in West Africa during a period of economic and sociopolitical crisis. Patterns of state violence derived from this pressure, given the contradictory imperatives that compelled development policies, social policies, and juridico-political policies to preserve and transform indigenous social relations simultaneously. The structural logic of colonial humanism unintentionally undermined productive networks, produced social disorder, and stimulated political dissent among African peoples. The colonial state often then responded with greater degrees of coercion, repression, and violence. At the same time, this dynamic confirmed the need for further welfarist initiatives and biopolitical regulation. A certain type of systematic state violence, in other words, was inseparable from and called forth by colonial humanism as a system of rule. To suggest, therefore, that colonial humanism was irreconcilable with structural violence is to misunderstand both of these terms. Similarly, to suggest that my book does not undertake to account for this violence is to misread the argument.

If my attempt to do so fails, as it well might, it would be helpful for students of this period to read about how or why it fails. In what specific way is my account of the colonial state irreconcilable with colonial violence? More importantly, students would need to be provided with an alternative account of the way in which state violence is in fact structural and systematic as well as an account of the state structures and systems that make it so. And it would have to do so without reproducing untenable ideological distinctions between republican universalism-legality-modernity and colonial particularism-exceptionalism-atavism. Otherwise we are left with violence as contingent and exceptional, a function either of sadism or chaos. And it is precisely this understanding of violence that has allowed historical actors and subsequent historians to treat violence, racism, and administrative despotism as episodic and extrinsic to republicanism rather than structural and intrinsic to it.[3]

However unintentionally, once violence is relegated to the contingent, political critique risks devolving into moral criticism. There is no need to account for violence if it is only contingent. It is enough then simply to point to it in order to denounce it as the transparent truth of an evil colonialism.[4] I am not suggesting that colonialism was not as bad as we often imagine. My point is that condemnation is unable to illuminate what was bad about it, i.e., the particular ways in which alienation and unfreedom were produced and maintained within any given colonial order.

If I choose to analyze political rationality (in an attempt to render violence intelligible) rather than catalogue instances of (seemingly unaccountable) violence, it is not because I am primarily interested in the "softer" intellectual aspects of colonialism rather than the "harder" realities of rule. It is because I believe we learn more about the dynamics of colonial domination from a self-reflexive critique of political rationality than we do from a reflexive moral criticism of seemingly irrational violence. The latter is motivated by a supposedly political indignation that ultimately functions in a depoliticizing way. By acting as if colonial violence violates expectations and transgresses norms, such indignation, whatever its motivation, reaffirms violence as contingent and exceptional.

VI. Historical Abstraction

It should be clear from this discussion that rationality is not equivalent to rhetoric. If colonial humanism and colonial violence were in fact entwined, an examination of political rationality cannot simply entail studying ideas. Rather it must engage the dynamic and reciprocal relationships among ideas, ideology, projects, plans, policies, and practices in a variety of intellectual, cultural, political, social, and economic domains.

The French Imperial Nation-State is not intended to be an intellectual history as such, although it may be read as intervening into that field as well. And just because this book is written in a theoretically self-conscious register does not mean it should be reduced to an example of the so-called linguistic turn. This book's methodology owes a greater debt to orientations developed in fields such as historical sociology, Marxist state theory, and world-systems theory (the kind of structural and core-periphery approaches described by two reviewers as outmoded) than to the more recent approaches that reviewers associate with this work (cultural history or postcolonial literary theory). The latter, in fact, are typically allergic to accounts such as mine that foreground logics, structures, and forms.

It is perhaps the prominence of abstractions in this book that invites readers to categorize it as intellectual or cultural history or to identify it with poststructuralist or literary theory. I would like, therefore, to clarify the ways in which abstractions feature and function in *The French Imperial Nation-State*. Such clarification is called for because conventional historiography is often reflexively resistant to historical abstraction. It is as if the presence of abstractions in a work violates the norms of proper historical exposition. A taint of shame or immodesty accompanies abstractions, as if they are an indulgence akin to wearing inappropriately fancy clothes or speaking in an invented accent. They are thus often treated as superfluous distractions from the real business of discussing the past.

Throughout the book I try to "think through" abstract terms and concepts in both senses of the phrase. I use abstractions to think about history, and I think about the abstractions themselves in relation to the history in question. When placing into question historical or historiographic assumptions, ordinary language may obscure more than it illuminates. In such cases, I employ abstract formulations to illuminate some complex or counterintuitive or not readily apparent aspect or dynamic of French colonial history. These abstractions may use unfamiliar terms to describe seemingly familiar phenomena in different ways, or use familiar terms in different ways to describe unfamiliar phenomena. Of course I understand that in any given instance the abstraction employed may be more or less useful; other choices might have been made.

A second modality of abstraction follows from the first. Deep impersonal logics, structures, and forms, as I understand them, are not immediately apparent, whether to historical participants or to historians reading archival records. This is why the answers to my questions are not simply to be found in regional African archives rather than the archives of the colonial federation or the ministry of colonies (unless the goal is to enumerate instances of successful project implementation). All archival documents require acts of abstraction if we are to recognize political rationality. Critics might contest their existence or question even their heuristic utility. But if we want to analyze such objects (and I believe that many accounts that would disavow them actually presuppose them), we can only do so by abstracting them out of or away from the overwhelming mass of empirical information and observable appearances, away from individual actors and conscious intentions, away from the everyday forms, in and through which they express themselves.

In short, if one deals with abstract objects explicitly, as I do, there is no avoiding abstracting modes of analysis. But such objects are no less historical or historically specific, no less real, for being abstract. And they can only be grasped by studying empirical data, individuals, utterances, practices, everyday appearances, and concrete forms. This is exactly why the detailed study of historical sources, published and archival, is so central to my analysis. If rationality is not reducible to rhetoric, neither is the abstract reducible to the fictive or imaginative.

Can historians just choose to ignore abstract objects and avoid abstraction? Certainly not when historical actors and processes themselves produce abstractions. Hence my concern in *The French Imperial Nation-State* with analyzing and historicizing concrete abstractions as central to colonial history. These include, among others: national-imperial categories, legal and political categories, racial taxonomies, typologies of African society, and consequential common-sense distinctions (e.g., between tradition and modernity, Africa and France, empire and republic, racism and equality, particularism and universalism).

Far from imposing abstractions on historical documents, historians must attend to the way in which such documents create and condense abstractions. Otherwise they authorize rather than analyze such processes. This third modality of abstraction leads me to examine concrete abstractions (fetishes) and processes of abstraction (fetishization) whereby appearances are mistaken for essences and relations are transformed into substantive entities which present themselves as oppositions. When Mann concludes that my book is a treatment of an "interface of abstractions," the term abstraction is meant to affirm the assertion that colonial reformers were a marginal group of theorists rather than actors of any import and to marginalize my account as merely a rarefied history of ideas somehow separate from real African colonial history.

However, it is important to note that abstraction is not in itself antithetical to clarity and need not be an excuse for obfuscation. I realize that a book such as this—written at the intersection of history and social theory, tacking between empirical and theoretical modes of analysis, containing dense passages and occasional excursus—does not provide a smooth reading experience. Surely certain sections or connections could have been clearer. In retrospect I might make different choices. And, as aspects of

these review essays underscore, certain formulations may be counterproductive because they are misleading or confusing.

But I sought, through the manuscript's long gestation and many revisions to be as clear and consistent as I could. Because of their potential to confound readers (and myself), I tried to be careful not to use abstract terms casually or gratuitously. I attempted to employ them in specific ways to convey precise ideas. When possible I tried to be explicit about what I was doing and why.

Such stylistic choices come at the price of an interrupted narrative when my voice intrudes repeatedly to emphasize and explicate key points, to reflect on moves made, and to gesture toward claims to come. Some readers may feel that such prose requires too much heavy lifting. Others may feel that it announces that which should go without saying. I decided that such a price was worth paying for the sake of greater clarity and self-reflexivity (i.e., being explicit about what it was doing and why, where its categories came from, and what work they are supposed to do) in a book that attempts to confound expectations, question historiographic assumptions, and reorient debate. The review essays deliver mixed evaluations on its clarity and accessibility.

To take one example, Patricia Lorcin contends that by referring repeatedly to binary oppositions I underestimate the reader's ability to comprehend the paradoxes of colonial rule. Such repetition, she suggests, fetishize binaries as such. But if I repeat certain formulations, it is not because I doubt my readers' ability to recognize a paradox. It is because my argument is heterodox and thus easily open to misinterpretation. For instance, I try to redirect historical debate away from spurious contradictions between republican universalism and colonial particularism (as well as plans and implementation, ideals and realities, discourses and practices) and focus instead on the competing imperatives within colonial humanism. I deliberately use antinomy rather than paradox to describe them. Colonial contradictions, in other words, are not self-evident. To treat them as such is to court historical misunderstanding and historiographic misreading.

Paying close attention throughout this book to the ways in which binary oppositions are generated by historical actors or reproduced by professional historians is a different matter. An excessive preoccupation with certain terms might lead one to reify them unwittingly. But repetition in itself does not necessarily constitute fetishism. Nor is it clear how my attempts either to think through apparent oppositions critically or to point out the contradictory imperatives of colonial politics might work to fetishize binaries. How after all would it be possible either to address processes of fetishization or to examine contradictory politics without discussing the oppositions in question? We would need to hear more about how such discussions are in fact repetitive, and if so, how reiteration mistakes appearances for essences or mistakenly transforms relations into entities.

VII. Historical Implication

Lorcin concludes that such "endless iteration" may be symptomatic of a transferential relationship to the colonial history in question. Similarly, Mann suggests that by confusing rhetoric and practices I unwittingly adopt colonial language in my attempt to portray and critique colonial politics. Neither reviewer elaborates on these assertions. But they direct us to the important issue of categories and complicity, or what we might call the problem of historical implication, which is worth considering.

Of course I have a transferential relationship to my object. We historians are always implicated in the histories we study. On one level we are implicated as individuals. We each have particular psychic and social investments that shape unavoidably the specific ways in which we delimit and comprehend what we study. But more importantly we are implicated historically in our objects of study in various ways. In order to objectify the past, we must to some extent abstract ourselves from these histories.

Our analytic categories have genealogies that lead directly back to the histories we attempt to recount. For example, we cannot escape the fact that our knowledge of African society is mediated by the legacy of ethnological and historical knowledge produced during the colonial era. Such knowledge production was implicated in the colonial project to which it provided and from which it received durable categories which continue to inflect historical and anthropological understanding and to haunt scholarly inquiry.

To write colonial history, to purport to represent colonized peoples, to objectify colonial violence is to be implicated in a colonial genealogy and to participate in an imperial enterprise. That we have entered a new age of empire only raises the stakes of the problem. But this is not an impossible aporia in the face of which we should abdicate writing colonial history. If the latter entails unavoidable implication, if it carries with it analytic, political, and ethical risks, it is no less important an undertaking. Such histories also impose on us the responsibility to engage these histories responsibly, precisely by assuming such risks.

In short, the question is not whether or not I am transferentially implicated in the history I study or how to avoid such implication. Rather, the twofold question is what form such transference assumes and what we choose to do about it. For if we are all unavoidably implicated, we are not all destined to be so in the same way. As historians of the twentieth century are well aware, all forms of complicity are not equivalent.

Given these considerations, if one chooses to write colonial history, one must do so self-reflexively. To be clear, I am not referring to moral self-criticism (self-flagellation over the fact of structural implication or past complicities). Nor am I asking historians in prefaces to flag their sociocultural locations or identities in order to acknowledge their partial or limited perspectives.

I am inviting French colonial historians be self-reflexive in an ethico-political sense and in an epistemological sense. Ethically and politically we must ask difficult questions about the ends of the enterprise. Why are we writing about these histories of colonial domination? For whom and to what end? What might it mean when doing so becomes a token of professional advancement? How can we avoid turning colonial violence into pornographic spectacle? What are the political implications of doing such work within our present political landscape? Does such work function to engage or to evade current political questions? Do aspects of the present historical conjuncture—its attendant investments, identifications, and implications—so overwhelm our relationship to aspects of the colonial past that writing about them invites us to act them out unproductively?

To be self-reflexive colonial history must also ask a related set of epistemological questions about the historical implications of its categories. How are our analytic categories implicated in the (colonial) history they describe? What are the analytic implications of using such categories? In what ways are they historically specific? What histories are condensed within them? What work are they meant to do? What insights do they enable and what do they foreclose? What do they presuppose about history and society? What implicit claims do they make on the world? What kind of analytic, political, and ethical responsibilities do we assume by employing them?

Critical history, then, must simultaneously be a history of categories. Otherwise we cannot work through the complex question of historical complicity. Otherwise we unwittingly reproduce the self-understanding of historical actors; we make transhistorical claims; and we fetishize our objects of study. However flawed the effort, I wrote *The French Imperial Nation-State* in precisely this spirit which accounts largely for its methodological orientation and rhetorical style.

VIII. Political Imagination

If this concern with self-reflexivity, historical implication, and colonial categories informs the whole book, it does so especially in the third part on black cultural nationalism in the imperial metropolis. I found Negritude to be a rich and challenging field of inquiry largely because one cannot engage the movement without confronting such issues.

While the review essays mention some of the points that I raise in these chapters, somewhat less attention was paid to them than to the book's earlier chapters. The sections on colonial humanism and Negritude are relatively autonomous and could be read separately. And I might, as Robert Aldrich comments, have integrated the two halves more explicitly. But one of the book's larger claims is that by considering the reform and Negritude movements together we learn more about each and, in the process, gain insight into yet something else.

The entire first half might be read as an attempt to create a framework for a more nuanced understanding of the Negritude project. Conversely, the Negritude chapters are meant to allow the reader to return to the imperial nation-state, the book's starting point, armed with a broader perspective and deeper understanding of this complex formation and historical condition. The intersections among colonial humanism, the black public sphere, and the Negritude movement also exemplify the existence of national-imperial circuits that delimited the scale of this expanded state form. The book, as Lorcin recognizes, is guided by my examination of the relationship forged by colonized elites to the categories of political modernity. The figures associated with Negritude were remarkably self-conscious about the dilemmas posed by such categories as they navigated their way through the unavoidable terrain of complicity and implication. Hence my attention to the multiple registers in which they pursued their vocations as public intellectuals (scholars, teachers, poets, philosophers, political and cultural critics, government consultants, and political activists).

Through ongoing dialogue with colonial politics, the black public sphere, and European culture, the Negritude cohort responded to the contradictions of colonial rationality with a series of double moves. They demanded political rights and cultural recognition from a standpoint that was at once universal and particular, republican and Pan-African, national and transnational, nativist and cosmopolitan, political and cultural, rational and irrational, immanent and transcendent. More precisely they elaborated a set of categories and positions that attempted to displace and transcend these inherited oppositions (i.e., concrete abstractions). Through exercises in political imagination that were at once strategic and utopian, they claimed both French citizenship and cultural autonomy within a reconceptualized imperial polity. They envisioned a transnational non-racial federation that would be founded upon reciprocity and cultural *métissage*.

In so doing they attempted to rethink conventional political norms regarding the proper relationship between citizenship, nationality, culture, and race. At the same time they formulated novel conceptions of universalism, humanism, rationality, epistemology, aesthetics, sociology, and socialism that did not attempt to overcome but were grounded in their (real and imagined) Africanity.

I argue that the Negritude writers produced an immanent critique of the imperial nation-state; they identified transformative possibilities within the existing order that pointed beyond it. We might say that their work demonstrated implicitly that the empire had created the historical conditions for postnational federation, or even that federation already existed but in the still alienated form of empire. These figures, for good reason, are more associated with valorizing identity than with advocating independence. But it would be a mistake to restrict their intervention to the field of culture rather than politics or freedom. They reflected as deeply, if differently, on the project and prospect of (colonial) disalienation, on the slippery phenomenology of emancipation, as did Frantz Fanon, their rebellious descendant.

The Negritude group thereby internalized and reconfigured various positions then circulating in the dynamic black public sphere in Paris and among colonial reformers in West Africa. But at the same time, recognizing that colonial domination was mediated by sophisticated forms of (practical) rationality, they also undertook a critique of (colonial) rationality itself, through philosophical reflection and poetic writing that engaged with traditions of vitalism, irrationalism, modernism, symbolism, and surrealism. Finally, I demonstrate that Negritude writers must also be read as engaging in an auto-critique whereby they placed into question the viability of their own project (thereby anticipating widespread critiques of Negritude among the next generation of Africans and Antilleans).

These public intellectuals were acutely aware of their inescapable complicity with colonial categories. Their project was profoundly self-reflexive. The point is not to catch them being complicit or to criticize them for not making better choices. As I demonstrate, the dilemmas they faced were sociohistorical not merely intellectual. Nor should we feel compelled simply to agree with or emulate their analyses.

We have more to learn about their movement and the colonial order which they confronted, I contend, by paying close attention to the way in which they negotiated these seeming contradictions, double-binds, aporias, impossibilities, and complicities. Their confrontation—what they did and what they wrote—further illuminates the fundamental disjuncture among peoples, territories, and populations that characterized the imperial nation-state. Negritude interventions bring into sharp relief the defining interwar contradiction between an imperial formation and a national juridico-political framework (i.e., between imperial conditions and a persistent national form). These writers reflected deeply on the crushing limitations and transcendent possibilities condensed within the peculiar national-imperial order that comprised the horizon of their lives and works.

This complex and self-reflexive engagement with the logic and categories of (French) (colonial) modernity meant that these figures and their writings have defied easy categorization. And they have confounded scholarship that often presumes to already know what needs to be known about Negritude before taking a closer look. I attempt in this section of the book to reorient our understanding of Negritude away from sterile debates about whether the project was primarily cultural or political, whether its politics were essentially nativist or Francophile, whether its poetry was radical or escapist, etc.[5] I also relate this novel interpretation of Negritude to the broader arc of my book. For example, I suggest explicitly that attempts between the wars by administrative reformers and Negritude writers to reconceptualize the nation-state as federal and imperial were genealogically related to post-World War II constitutional developments associated with the French Union.

IX. New Colonial History?

In sum, *The French Imperial Nation-State* develops what I believe to be innovative arguments about the imperial nation-state, colonial political rationality, the black public sphere, and the Negritude project and relates them to one another. I have also taken care throughout to specify what is distinct about my object of study, my analytic framework, and my claims. I am sure that my execution is uneven. Much that I propose is open for debate. But it would be difficult to assert, as Lorcin does, that the originality of this book lies not in what I say but how I choose to say it.

Does she mean that the book's innovations are primarily stylistic or rhetorical? Have other scholars, who escaped my attention, in fact framed these questions, developed these approaches, made these moves before? If so, it might be useful to direct students of this period to their specific works. Or is this assertion meant to say only that other scholars have previously treated some of the topics, issues, and figures that appear in my book? That latter is a very different claim to make and one that I fully embrace. *The French Imperial Nation-State* is not meant to report on some previously unknown imperial corner. It employs new research to rethink seemingly familiar aspects of French and colonial history in the service of unfamiliar arguments about empire.

Do we make contributions to historiography merely by planting our flags in unconsulted archival territories? Should history be driven by method rather than questions? Or does it mean something more to produce “new” work? It would seem to go without saying that for a research field to be vital, generative, and meaningful to anyone but overly specialized insiders it would require the kind of debate and refinement that only arises when many scholars approach similar issues from different perspectives. What would the literature on the French Revolution or the working class or Vichy look like without research overlap?

These questions point beyond the minor issue of whether or in what ways my book may be original. They address a recent tendency to invoke “the new French colonial history” without further explanation. Clearly, more and more French historians are turning their attention to colonial history. In this sense, we see the emergence of new research targets, a new subfield, a new wave of dissertations and books. But beyond such topical, professional, and quantitative novelty, what do we mean by “new” colonial history? Are there qualitative analytic ways in which recent French colonial history is new? Does novelty here refer to objects of study or to questions or to methods or to analytic frameworks or to conclusions? Is this scholarship supposed to be new with respect to an outmoded colonial history written during and immediately after decolonization? Or is it supposed to contribute to, or even revise, broader debates within French history itself? Or is it new with respect to the larger field of colonial studies?

This “new” interest in French colonialism, we should remember, is occurring almost a generation after the study of empire was refigured in the wake of Edward Said’s critique of Orientalism, the Subaltern Studies project, and the historical anthropology of colonialism. What does it mean that French historians are turning to colonialism at the very moment when the project of colonial studies may have reached an impasse? At the very moment when student interest in French history and readership for French historical monographs appears to be rapidly diminishing? When questions and frameworks developed by French historians are no longer shaping debate in related fields across the disciplines?

Research on colonialism may be able to revitalize French history as a profession. But if it is to be a truly vital intellectual field, the term “new” must be a self-reflexive starting point rather than a reflexive assertion. What are its objectives and interlocutors and implications? What is the relation between its insights and potential, on the one hand, and its blind spots and limitations on the other? What are the crucial axes of debate and what is at stake in competing positions? Without stakes scholarship becomes scholastic, debates become merely academic. It is only by asking such questions explicitly that this “new” research can possibly alter rather than just affirm how we think about (French) (colonial) history. To this end the histories we write need to be self-reflexive in the sense outlined above.

French colonial history should also be placed in direct dialogue with the fundamental assumptions and defining debates of both French historiography and colonial studies. How might insights from those fields inform fruitful approaches to the French empire? How might inquiries grounded in French empire make signal contributions to, or even reorient, French history or colonial studies more broadly? Moreover, we need once again to formulate questions and develop frameworks from within and through French (colonial) history that attempt to speak across the disciplines to fundamental issues that confront the human sciences today.^[6] This, at least, is what I have attempted to do in *The French Imperial Nation-State*, however successfully or persuasively. If it is to be “new,” in short, French colonial history needs to be a site of vigorous debate and to generate such debate in related fields. The kind of exchange enabled by this forum (and which this essay attempts to enact) will hopefully facilitate just such productive dissonance and critical self-reflection.^[7] It is exciting to be invited to participate in it.

NOTES

I would like to thank Laurent Dubois for commenting on a draft of this essay, Elisa Camiscioli for a recent exchange about my book, and Sarah Curtis for her editorial suggestions.

[1] Consider the situation in the United States today when an imperial war is popularly believed to be a legitimate response to criminality. Majority public opinion would not recognize that the so-called war on terror was part of a long-term imperial strategy and far-reaching imperial vision by a small but influential group of decision makers. Nor would it allow that these imperial practices were fundamentally transforming founding national-democratic institutions and gradually transforming this republican nation into some other political entity. But however significant in its own right, this public perception would not in any way change the imperial character of the strategy, vision, and practices. Nor would this national-imperial project require overwhelming consensus among powerful groups whose interests will never simply harmonize. It persists despite vigorous debate and dissent. We also know that American imperial policies fail; its plans are not successfully implemented; and its promises rarely kept. A peculiar imperial formation has come, nevertheless, to exist and to shape politics at home and overseas. Simply tabulating its “failures” or enumerating wholly expected instances when practices diverge from promises is not very helpful if we want to understand the formation itself.

[2] I deliberated at length over whether to use “colonial welfarism” instead. This term lends itself to a different set of confusions. I expect that the term “colonial humanism” will continue to invite misunderstanding.

[3] In the United States, public and governmental discussions of torture of detainees in Guantanamo Bay and in Iraq, especially following the Abu Ghraib scandals, function in this very way.

[4] Historians still often discuss violence as if it was self-evident. As with states and economies, we need to specify its historically specific logics, structures, forms, and dynamics, or the logics, structures, forms, and dynamics that allow such violence to be reproduced in patterned, systemic ways. If during the 1980s and 1990s scholarship risked treating “the body” as the irreducible and unaccountable bedrock of the real, it tends today to treat “violence” in a similar way.

[5] Accounts of Negritude writers have not analyzed them sociohistorically in relation to colonial state politics. Nor have accounts of the colonial state read these writers so seriously and attentively. Neither types of account, to my knowledge, have sought to integrate both within an argument about the imperial nation-state.

[6] Interdisciplinary work should not only be a matter of combining methods from various disciplines. It should entail “speaking across” disciplines in the sense of addressing scholars in multiple fields and engaging issues that cannot be restricted to a single professional discipline.

[7] These issues are discussed at greater length in Gary Wilder, “Unthinking French History: Colonial Studies Beyond National Identity,” in *After the Imperial Turn: Critical Approaches to 'National' Histories and Literatures*, ed. Antoinette Burton (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003). An expanded version of this essay was also published as “‘Impenser’ l’histoire de France: Les études coloniales hors de la perspective de l’identité nationale,” *Cahiers d’histoire: Revue d’histoire critique* 96-97 (October, November, December 2005): 91-119.

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