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Kristen Stromberg Childers. *Seeking Imperialism's Embrace: National Identity, Decolonization, and Assimilation in the French Caribbean*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2016. ix + 275 pp. Illustrations, map, notes, bibliography, and index. \$74.00 (cl.) ISBN 9780195382839.

Review Essay by H. Adlai Murdoch, Tufts University

Kristen Stromberg Childers's extremely well-researched text provides an all-encompassing portrait of Martinique and Guadeloupe following their vote to become overseas departments of France, or DOMs (*Départements d'outre mer*), in 1946, and constitutes a significant contribution to the study of postwar French colonial and metropolitan history. This vote set something of a postcolonial precedent, in that these territories not only chose to forgo the contemporary trend toward national independence following the Second World War, but they also remain the only case where former colonies voluntarily integrated into the territory of the colonial power that had held sway over them for centuries. Childers's complex and well-wrought analysis uncovers untold nuances, attitudes and strategies directed toward the new DOMs on the part of politicians and policy-makers in mainland France and—to a surprising degree—in the United States, whose close and abiding interest in these islands as far back as the Vichy Occupation is one of the several surprises revealed by this text.

Perhaps Childers's most impactful revelation is the extent to which race-based patterns of difference and discrimination continued to shape metropolitan attitudes toward the DOMs in the wake of the departmentalization vote. These avatars of colonial racism reappear repeatedly as she lays out the principal areas through which France and other interested parties sought to influence—if not determine—the social, demographic, legal and economic futures of these majority-black colonies, which are also characterized by the economic predominance of the *béké* descendants of the white planter class who, despite numbering fewer than five percent of the population of the islands, continue to maintain a monopolistic economic stranglehold on such key areas of the Antillean economy as agriculture, supermarkets, shopping malls, and car dealerships. Departmentalization is positioned and portrayed as both an ending and a beginning, as it was meant to catalyze the French state into finally recognizing the *quatre vieilles colonies* as equals after more than three hundred years as colonial possessions. Disappointment with departmentalization set in quickly, however, as the promised parity in salaries, social benefits, and economic infrastructure that was meant to flow from the 1946 law seemed elusive, if not invisible, and indeed the ongoing disparities showed that many assumptions, patterns and practices with regard to labor, income and “productivity” seemed even more glaringly race-based than before, if that were possible. On the one hand, departmentalization in 1946 brought infrastructural development, island-wide electricity and pipe-borne water, unemployment and health insurance, and the French

minimum wage along with it, while simultaneously the plantation and agricultural economies were steadily eradicated, even as the consumer societies that replaced them continued to suffer from unemployment rates of over 20%, and the importation of over 90% of all goods and services.

Childers traces the trajectory of this 70-year-long departmentalization through thorough and revealing feats of archival research, making it clear that the geopolitical status of the islands of Guadeloupe and Martinique produced the range of ambiguities that continue to plague the French Caribbean region, for if the departmentalization law theoretically bestowed the same rights and privileges on Martinicans and Guadeloupeans as on any other French citizens—as those of the Bouches-du-Rhône, for example—the practical implementation of departmental equality produced continuing colonial dichotomies of economy, demography, and social policy.

Childers's analysis of the sometimes surprisingly contentious relationship between metropole and DOM shows that the Republic's motto of *liberté, égalité, fraternité* was in actuality far from universal and egalitarian. Her approach is primarily a historical one, and from this perspective her survey of the metropole/DOM dyad begins with the Second World War which, paradoxically, laid the groundwork for much of the unequal relationship with the metropole that followed the war's end; critically, as she points out, 1940 "interjected a new player into the relationship between France and the Antilles: the United States" (p. 12). Concern about German naval access to the Caribbean led to the establishment of a naval blockade as well as a U.S. consulate in Fort-de-France, "whose main purpose was to provide the State Department with detailed reports on the political, social, economic, and cultural events of the islands" (p. 13). Antilleans' attachment to France was continually questioned during the Occupation, despite commissioner Georges Robert having "opted to put the Antilles firmly in Pétain's camp" and the U.S., having "recognized the Vichy government as the legitimate government of France" (p. 16). In a key way, the overtly racialized attitudes and decisions of the Robert regime portended their more nuanced echoes in the post-departmentalization era; the Admiral "had proceeded methodically to purge the local administration of most people of color" (p. 27) and "reinstated the predominance of white *békés* to a degree unseen since the Second Empire" (p. 29), decisions which departmental-era civil service policies would uncannily echo, as would the widespread uprisings of 2009, as Childers rightly emphasizes. At war's end, the gradual realization of "how little their contributions were valued by the *mère-patrie*" (p. 44) would prove to be a prescient reminder of the true nature of the nascent departmental relationship.

With the advent of departmentalization itself, the goal was "full participation in French national life" (p. 76), although Martinicans and Guadeloupeans remained acutely aware of the racial and cultural specificities that separated them from the metropolitan experience. Indeed, as Childers points out, these specificities are arguably at the core of the construction of Aimé Césaire's *Cahier* in 1939; its goal, as she puts it, was to "capture the attention of both surrealists and intellectuals from the colonies searching for new forms of artistic and cultural expression" (p. 76). But surely the content and the form of the *Cahier* suggest that its scope and substance were far greater; the poem is justly

celebrated for providing a platform to stand up against the colonial oppressor and to denounce the exploitation and depredations enacted by the colonial system. Indeed, the poem arguably subverts the triumphal vision of an ascendant colonial modernity, as Natalie Melas claims, “The neologism *négritude* seizes the improper colonial name *nègre*, seeking to transvalue denigration and alienation instead of positing something completely anterior to colonial history. It is fundamentally a contramodern gesture because it intervenes directly in the exclusionary consensus of colonial modernity and interrupts it. Furthermore, the assertion of a racial or continental identification that cuts across classes and nations contests the unity and contemporaneity of the French national culture.”[1] Indeed, it might be said that the poem embodies and enacts the paradoxes and specificities of contemporary racism that the *négritude* it articulates seeks to confront.

And so even at the very moment that departmentalization was conceived in the postcolonial vision of equality: as Aimé Césaire himself put it, retrospectively glossing his famous assessment of departmental policies as *génocide par substitution*: ‘L’assimilation pour moi, c’était l’aliénation, la chose la plus grave.’[2] Indeed, as his poetic as well as his political statements make clear, Césaire saw alienation, and, implicitly, assimilation, as the seamy, inescapable underbelly of the harsh realities of France’s colonial policies. Hence the vision of transformation that was envisaged in departmentalization’s new era of equality. With the practical implementation of departmentalization, little of this would change; as early as 1947, Childers writes, there were “delays in implementing the actual provisions of the assimilation law... none of the social laws granting real benefits to Antilleans had been put into action” (p. 68). But in this case, the past was merely prologue, “On the last day of December 1947, the very night before all metropolitan laws were to go into effect in the new DOMs, the government surreptitiously passed a law codifying different salary scales for metropolitan civil servants, guaranteeing them more substantial salaries than those offered to ‘indigenous’ civil servants in the new departments.” Césaire immediately protested this “racist sentiment that runs contrary to French traditions” (p. 88), but unfortunately, such race-based discriminatory acts and attitudes would prove to be endemic. Childers writes that “the law set off waves of protest in Martinique and Guadeloupe and provoked widespread strikes that paralyzed the islands” (p. 88), the first of many periodic outbreaks of race-based unrest in an expanding population in the Antilles that gave the lie to claims of economic development as an all-encompassing panacea.

But it is her gift for archival research that is really Childers’s strong suit; in short order, she proceeds to reveal the striking contents of a 1953 confidential memo from a group of industrial leaders. Their requests for additional subsidies for metropolitan *fonctionnaires* serving in the DOMs reveal the depths of their deep-seated and persistent racism; from housing, since “very few houses in Martinique were fit for Europeans,” to imported food, since “they could not prosper on the yams and breadfruit that the locals consumed,” to clothing, since “they had to take special care with their wardrobes and change their clothes more often because they perspired more profusely than natives” (p. 90), metropolitan denigration of the local citizenry apparently knew no bounds, and the depth and scope of these attitudes alongside their conviction of their own innate superiority come across clearly in Childers’s account.

This postwar period, when France was seeking both to turn the economy of the DOMs toward tourism—with the attendant risk of increasing racial tensions—and to ward off ever-increasing signs of American domination, also features an intriguingly brief discussion of a relatively unknown entity called the Caribbean Commission. France joined this body in 1946, jockeying for supremacy even as other European powers like Britain began to abandon it in the late 1950s. But while Childers points to the advent of the West Indies Federation in 1958, followed by the appointment of Martinican Clovis Beaugard as Secretary-General of the newly renamed Caribbean Organization in 1960, we learn little of whatever interaction there might have been between these two organizations. Indeed, although she indicates that “none of the former British colonies in the Caribbean could afford to join in their own right” (p. 99), the fact that France, Britain and the United States were the principals in this organization until its collapse in 1964, two years after the demise of the Federation, deserves to be unpacked a bit further, especially given the implied judgement that this collapse put paid to “the cherished dream of Caribbean unity” (p. 100); the role here of the Caribbean states themselves, especially in view of Puerto Rico’s departure at the Americans’ behest, could certainly have been pursued further.

What Childers’s survey of the key documents of this period reveals clearly is that the pervasive racism that had historically driven the abiding sense of metropolitan superiority undergirding colonial attitudes towards France’s peripheral populations of color in no way abated in the face of departmentalization’s new legal strictures and assumptions. In fact, one might reasonably claim that the principal struggle waged by the DOMs during the departmental era was the ongoing attempt to force the powers that be in metropolitan France to live up to the implicit claims and promises of equality of access, opportunity, and benefits embodied in the departmentalization law itself. Instead, what we witness repeatedly is that, starting in December 1946, “administrative parity” is “almost immediately blocked.” Further, these convictions of peripheral underdevelopment “implied a number of substantial differences in political culture, standards of living, economic productivity, and family structure,” all of which “came to stand in for considerations of race” (p. 124). It is unsurprising, then, that the succeeding decades came to be marked by periodic uprisings centering on labor rights, economic development and parity in compensation, thereby revealing the limits of the “race-blind” national vision. And indeed, this critical conjunction of “racelessness” and its related corollaries, persistently problematizing contending perspectives on parity and history are perfectly summed up for Childers in the competing visions of French history surrounding the hundred-year commemoration of French abolition in 1848. In a very particular way, the trenchant contradictions that pervade this oppositional moment of Frenchness are in fact paradigmatic of the inconsistencies and inequities that have characterized the post-1946 era in French law, politics, and labor. As Childers rightly points out, “a chasm appeared between an Antillean version of history and the version of most metropolitan French; for metropolitans, 1848 was about the February Revolution, the June Days, and perhaps homage to Victor Schoelcher, a white abolitionist; for Antilleans, it was a living memory, a painful part of their history that found continued expression in the discrimination they experienced every day” (p. 103). As a result of such trenchantly

polarized perspectives, departmentalization ultimately meant—as I have pointed out elsewhere—that the populace of the French Caribbean became the inheritors of a double perspective, marking a transatlantic duality of location that increasingly separated them from the social and cultural materialities of the metropole, to whom they remain inexplicably linked in a complex symbiosis of contentious subordination.[3] Indeed, one might argue that this critical conflation of geographical distance, economic domination, ethnic and cultural difference and colonial history have joined over time with the political paradoxes of assimilation to make these territories more *colonies* of France rather than the equivalent political entities they theoretically are. In a key way, then, departmental assertions of their ongoing economic subordination and cultural distinctiveness amount to a strategic form of resistance and survival.

Thus the periodic outbreaks of departmental protest and violence, arguably the direct outgrowth of the cyclic ebb and flow of patience and forbearance erected to deal with such blatant discrimination, give the lie to national claims of a race-blind *égalité*, and illuminate the ongoing predicament of France's minority populations both in the departmental periphery and in the metropolitan center. Indeed, in Chapter 4, "The Struggle over History in the Antilles," Childers clearly shows that not only were these prejudicial attitudes rampant before the departmentalization law, but that they showed little change following it; here she concentrates on several key events—many linked to labor and the broad-based perception of its exploitation by the white elite—that have periodically shaped and punctuated the landscape of protest and belonging in the Antilles. From the murder of the journalist and activist André Alier in 1934, to the deaths of three demonstrators at Le Carbet in 1948 and that of the *béké* plantation owner Guy de Fabrique later that same year—in an incident that came to be known as "les 16 de Basse-Pointe"—to the riots that shook Fort-de-France in 1959 and Pointe-à-Pitre in 1967, Childers shows that the DOMs have historically been subjected to an ongoing pattern of "continuing colonial oppression" (p. 120) based on race, which acts in its turn as the driver of its implicit corollary of the inferiority of the other. Unsurprisingly, this pattern culminated in the protracted social uprising in Guadeloupe and Martinique of February and March of 2009; centering on the quotidian reality within the DOMs of "lower wages but a higher cost of living than the metropole" (p. 120) that seemed to confirm the longstanding race-based economic disparities between center and periphery, meaning that sixty years on, "Antilleans were still fighting the same battles, often with virtually the same players, as they had just after World War II," as Childers puts it (p. 121). Her historically-grounded analysis highlights the underlying logic of these practices, which "helped to destroy the economies of Martinique and Guadeloupe and transform islands with a favorable balance of trade before the war to heavily dependent consumer societies in which virtually everything had to be imported from France," providing proof positive of these discriminatory and exclusionary policies (p. 149).

Metropolitan discrimination is shown to extend even to the domain of Caribbean family life; the metropolitan proliferation of "racial tropes about Antillean men and women" fed directly into "concern expressed among legislators about whether Antilleans had proper French family customs and traditions" (p. 156). Ultimately, such inherently derogatory attitudes led to the appalling but unsurprising conclusion that "'marriage' and 'family'

just did not have the same meaning to Antilleans as they did for *real* French people, and therefore it would be unrealistic... to reward them as if they did” (p. 157; emphasis in the original), thereby cementing an unrepentant and unreconstructed racialized essentialism as the basic arbiter of an “us” versus “them” distinction within the French nation-state’s view of itself. Childers’s research rightly points to the way in which such self-serving metropolitan attitudes drove the formation and strategies of the state agency BUMIDOM (*Bureau pour le développement des migrations intéressant les départements d’outre mer*) in the post-departmental period, citing a confidential memo by the minister of social affairs from 1967 that centered on “the French economy’s need for foreign workers” through policies that would help in “mopping up... demographic excesses in the overseas departments” (p. 178). Such dichotomies engender a precipitous double bind for the Antillean departmental subject, who is simultaneously citizen and foreigner, French and West Indian, most often black and, thus, (perceptually at least) non-French.

But while migration was mediated by the fact that “Antilleans who emigrated to France were, in fact, French citizens” (p. 176), the persistence of the racial subtext continued to subvert any claims to integration and *égalité*, as David Beriss writes, “As French citizens, Antilleans are cultural insiders, but as dark-skinned postcolonials, they are visibly marked as outsiders.”[4] It is in this moment of paradoxical exile within the center, when they must first come to terms with being a minority group within a larger ethnocultural whole, that many Antilleans first learn to value and inscribe their *antillanité*. But this prejudiced French perspective toward its periphery was by no means an isolated one; indeed, as I have pointed out elsewhere, French social policy in Réunion, another DOM, was increasingly predicated on planting and spreading the notion that the *Réunionnais* were principally responsible for the underdevelopment of their island by having too many children. As a result, 1,630 children from Réunion were relocated to France between 1968 and 1982; their parents were forced to give up all rights to these children who were named wards of the state and placed in households, put up for adoption, placed in convents, or simply hired out as labor across sixty departments to combat metropolitan underpopulation in an extended undertaking finally made public in 2002.[5] The resulting tensions have arguably undergirded the heightened attention now being paid to the category of the *immigré*, particularly since in France the term is used to refer not only to those residents who have migrated from another country, but also to those who might have lived in the metropole for generations with ethnic origins in France’s ex-colonies in Africa and the overseas departments of Guadeloupe and Martinique. As Jane Freedman and Carrie Tarr put it, “The French use the term ‘*immigré*’ (immigrant) to refer... [to] ethnic minority communities in France originating from Martinique and Guadeloupe, even though these are still French territories. The choice of words to describe those of immigrant origin is a clear sign of the way in which dominant French discourses construct their post-colonial minorities as ‘Other,’ a consequence of which is their exclusion from full citizenship rights.”[6] Predictably, the previously stable nationalist categories of ‘France’ and ‘Frenchness,’ and of the term ‘postcolonial’ as it applies to the nation, its subjects *de souche* and its relationship with its others both within the hexagon and drawn from and residing overseas, continue to be subject to revision and redefinition from numerous quarters.

Childers's conclusion weighs the present condition of Martinique and Guadeloupe in the balance, pitting gains in healthcare, housing, and education against the destruction of the local economy in favor of a dependent consumer society: "There has been a general rise in well-being in the islands...Evidence would suggest that departmentalization has brought considerable benefits to Martinique and Guadeloupe...but was this the development Antilleans wanted?" (pp. 202-3). Here, the so-called '*bétonisation*' of the Antillean landscape through the constant use of concrete sums up the prevailing attitude of much of the population to their 'integration' into the metropolitan framework. But while Childers mentions the fact that a 2010 referendum on increased autonomy was rejected by nearly 80% of the population, she strangely omits to mention later, more positive developments along these lines; these include the agreement signed in Schoelcher on 4 February 2015 between Martinique, the government of the French Republic, and the Organisation of Eastern Caribbean States, laying out the procedures for admitting Martinique to Associate Membership of the OECS, a political and economic grouping of smaller Anglophone Caribbean nation-states. Martinique formally acceded to membership in April 2016, while in February 2015 Guadeloupe initiated an application for membership in CARICOM (The Caribbean Community), an umbrella organization of fifteen Caribbean nations and dependencies aimed at ensuring the equitable implementation of economic policies and development planning. The significance of such recent movement toward recognizing and making common cause with the wider Caribbean, particularly after more than three centuries of disunion and intermittent warfare, cannot be overstated.

To sum up, then, this book is a thorough and insightful account of the trajectory of the French Caribbean DOMs following departmentalization in 1946. The strength of the analysis certainly lies above all in its historical approach and perspective, in and through the materials and attitudes revealed by its thoroughgoing archival research; it will provide useful details and insights for scholars and teachers whose approach tends to draw on humanistic perspectives centering on, say, literature and culture. But it is perhaps too simple to ascribe these decades of metropolitan marginalization wholly and solely to the pervading and pervasive racism that Childers so effectively highlights. Rather, what this analysis of the French periphery paradoxically reveals is a wider portrait of the French national landscape itself, and its patterns and practices of othering and integration, as the following quote from Georges Mauco makes clear, "the influence of foreigners... manifests itself especially as the opposite of... [that] which characterises the French people."^[7] It betrays longstanding national attitudes and current and pressing debates regarding who is French and who is not, unveiling national attitudes that reinforce both the internalization of a fictionalized but essentialist ethnicity and its related conclusion that nations and peoples are constructed through the forgetting of difference and the acceptance of an exclusionary, strategically adopted sameness.

NOTES

[1] Natalie Melas, "Untimeliness, or Negritude and the Poetics of Contramodernity," *South Atlantic Quarterly* 108, no. 3 (Summer 2009): 569.

[2] “Assimilation to my mind meant alienation, a most serious matter.” Aimé Césaire, *Nègre je suis, nègre je resterai: Entretiens avec Françoise Vergès*, (Paris: Albin Michel, 2005), 28.

[3] H. Adlai Murdoch and Jane Kuntz, eds. “Departmentalization’s Continuing Conundrum: Locating the DOM-ROM between ‘Home’ and ‘Away,’” *International Journal of Francophone Studies*, special triple issue “Departmentalization at Sixty: The French DOMs and the Paradoxes of the Periphery” 11, nos. 1-2 (2008): 15-32.

[4] David Beriss, *Black Skins, French Voices: Caribbean Ethnicity and Activism in Urban France* (Boulder: Westview Press, 2004), xviii.

[5] H. Adlai Murdoch, “BUMIDOM: Internal Migration as a *lieu de mémoire*,” forthcoming in *Postcolonial Realms of Memory*, eds. Etienne Achille, Charles Forsdick and Lydie Moudileno (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2017).

[6] Jane Freedman and Carrie Tarr, “Introduction” in *Women, Immigration and Identities in France*, eds. Jane Freedman and Carrie Tarr (Oxford: Berg, 2000), 2.

[7] Georges Mauco, *Les étrangers en France* (Paris: Armand Colin, 1932), 558.

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