

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 Jennifer Anne Boittin, The Pennsylvania State University

In Fall 2016, I watched Jean-Claude Barny's 2015 film *Le Gang des Antillais* at the UGC Ciné Cité in Paris's Forum des Halles. The film opens with a sequence of archival footage. It juxtaposes President Charles de Gaulle speaking to Antilleans in 1964, when he (in)famously stated "Mon Dieu que vous êtes français!" (My God how French you are!) with images of graffiti and ransacked offices that epitomized widespread disgruntlement with the BUMIDOM (Bureau pour le développement des migrations intéressants les départements d'outre-mer). BUMIDOM was the French government's attempt to encourage migration from overseas departments to metropolitan France that landed many migrants in poorly paid, subaltern jobs. BUMIDOM did not offer migrants a return ticket, which they could usually not afford on their metropolitan paychecks. This footage anchors the film historically but is also used by the director to explain why its four Afro-Antillean protagonists chose to rob multiple post offices and one bank in Paris during the 1970s. The film is based upon an autobiographical novel by Loïc Léry, who landed in prison as a result of his role in the robberies. There he was assigned an educator by the name of Patrick Chamoiseau, now far more well known as a Prix-Goncourt-winning Martinican novelist who is also one of the co-authors of *Eloge de la créolité* (1989). Chamoiseau encouraged Léry to recount his experiences via a novel.

The film shows not only the organization and violence of the armed robberies, but also some of the links between this gang's experiences of the metropole and a more general Antillean malaise. Dancing along the edges of what is portrayed as the abysmal failure of the BUMIDOM for Antillean men are themes of Antillean nationalism (including the gang's contribution to funding some of these movements), anti-imperialism and both systemic and explicit forms of racism within the metropole. At times funny, at times more of an action film, with appropriate (given the 1970s setting) nods to the genre of Blaxploitation cinema, the director Barny and producer Sébastien Onomo are nonetheless clear. Their intent is not merely to entertain but also to challenge viewers by engaging in a "travail de mémoire" (memory work) among other things by creating a film that would be viewed by white as well as black metropolitans with only black men in the leading roles (and black men and women in most of the supporting roles as well).[1] This film was provocatively made in (overseas) France.

All this film's themes link to the raison d'être for Kristen Stromberg Childers's *Seeking Imperialism's Embrace: National Identity, Decolonization, and Assimilation in the French Caribbean*. Via extensive archival research in Paris, Aix-en-Provence, Nanterre, Pierrefitte-sur-Seine, Fontainebleau, Fort-de-France and Gourbeyre among other places, Childers's book seeks to understand why the violence more often associated with decolonization was both less present

in the assimilation of Guadeloupe and Martinique as French departments and also far more present than many non-Antilleans realize. She explores the decades from World War II through the early twenty-first century via thematic chapters, each of which blends the language of the archives with that of the novelists, poets and thinkers such as Chamoiseau who have argued so persuasively for finding creative ways to tell the region's history, especially since they do not feel that historians and other scholars have lived up to the task thus far. If the film starts with archival footage and ends with Chamoiseau's appearance, Childers's book blends the two genres throughout, to good effect.

Like Chamoiseau, many of the other historical actors present in this work are well-known figures. Childers tracks Aimé Césaire and his wife Suzanne Roussi Césaire, Frantz Fanon, André Alier (via his murder), Louis T. Achille, Félix Eboué, Edouard Glissant as well as lesser-known men and women in order to explore the reasoning that led men such as Césaire to push for departmentalization after World War II in the first place, but then also to engage in immediate and ongoing struggles for equality and against racism all the way to the present. As she states in a lovely twist of a sentence: "what they joined, however, was not the race-blind French Republic but the blindly racist Republic, undergirded with extreme continuing economic inequality" (p. 205). Throughout, Childers shows that the rights of true citizenship and departmentalization were not handed to Antilleans. Much like French women all over the empire fought long and hard before winning suffrage and civil rights after World War II, Antillean men and women's rights and status were won through a grueling struggle (p. 70).

Childers explores at various points in her text how the geographic proximity of the United States was a constant thorn in the French government's side, both helping France to seem to be a better alternative for Antilleans while segregation and the fight for civil rights were ongoing in the U.S., but also making the French government look far less universalist after African Americans gained civil rights only to find themselves continuing to confront both systemic and at times very violent racism not unlike that described by some of the Antilleans in Childers's book.

To explore the complex role of race in the Antillean experience Childers not only addresses historical tensions within the French Antilles between *nègre* and *noir* and *métis* and *Béké* and *métropolitain*, but also the racism and violence generated by more recent migrations to the islands. For example, some white French sailors during World War II brought Vichy's racism with them. Likewise, some of the CRS (Compagnies républicaines de sécurité), many of whom were *pieds noirs* recently transplanted from Algeria, viciously partook in and/or instigated occasionally deadly riots, and West African soldiers stationed in the Antilles were not known for their gentle touch either. Childers also addresses the tensions caused by Haitians whose migrant influx has more recently destabilized the islands' economies (and led to anti-Haitian sentiment). Also included within this racial entanglement is Frantz Fanon's brother, Joby Fanon, who remembered how shocked Frantz had been, even though he was a very good dancer, to find white French women refusing his invitations to dance when he was a soldier stationed in the metropole (p. 42). The refusals had an understandable impact on Frantz Fanon's reading of race. As a side note, they also appear intriguingly at odds, in ways worth exploring further, with the many examples of metropolitan women who danced with, slept with, had children with and married black African POWs and soldiers stationed in the metropole both during and after World War II and then petitioned various ministries (not without many complications, including racist

resistance) to let them join their demobilized husbands in various parts of West Africa after the war.[2]

Gender surfaces in other ways throughout *Seeking Imperialism's Embrace*, for example in Childers' discussions of the stereotypes of male chauvinism and female passivity within the Antillean domestic sphere. While acknowledging the very real problems of domestic violence, poverty, lack of access to birth control in the 1950s and 1960s, and single motherhood, Childers is also careful to reflect upon how Antilleans themselves challenged bourgeois, metropolitan and/or Catholic ideals of marriage and the family unit as not necessarily what defined a functioning and healthy family and household within the Antilles. Nor, she argues, did statistics and scholarly research bear out such stereotypes in the first place (Chapter 6). She touches in particular upon some of the women who worked with the Union des femmes françaises in Guadeloupe and the Union des femmes martiniquaises so as to help women gain access to birth control and to defend the right of single mothers to be respected as such.

In Chapter 7, Childers goes on to explore why and how the narrative of Antillean migration to the metropole should not be reduced to one of victimhood (176). For all the racism and discrimination they faced in the metropole, for example when seeking housing, they were still French citizens and Childers explores how unmarried women, in particular, took ownership of the initially rough conditions of their migration by working themselves into better and more sustainable employment (184-85). For example, women left positions of domestic service for more highly paid and stable positions in hospitals or education, therefore gaining a measure of control over their private lives that they did not have while living with their employers. Childers does not employ gender quite as explicitly when analyzing the many violent demonstrations she so vividly describes as an arc of political and social resistance from the late 1940s to 2009. Yet especially given the language used by administrators and authors alike to feminize the Antilles, rendering them "mistresses" of France, were these demonstrations not a particularly masculine and virile *bras d'honneur* to the metropole and its local representatives?

After all, by March 2017, talk first among Antilleans and Guyanese in Paris and more broadly within French media was of the growing crisis in the overseas department of Guyane (French Guiana), with a particular focus upon the collective known as the 500 Frères contre la délinquance (500 Brothers Against Crime), a group that constituted itself in February after someone was murdered for a cell phone. These balaclava-wearing black men (they have also interacted with the public and authorities while unmasked) were both extremely vocal and visible at the forefront of blockades during the demonstrations and strikes that ground business and even air travel to a halt in Guyane. These events (like *Le Gang des Antillais*) are far too recent to have figured in her book, but Childers does emphasize how demonstrations repeatedly had their place (and perhaps will again) in the French Antilles.

The reverberations among all these demonstrations past and present thus leads me to wonder how Childers might explain what sets the history of the other two DOMs, Guyane and Réunion, apart from Martinique and Guadeloupe's departmentalization. Given their historical and geographic proximity, her sole focus upon Martinique and Guadeloupe is entirely logical. Moreover Childers does occasionally reference the other two DOMs in her book. Yet she anchors her study around what she calls an "anomalous case," that of the French Caribbean, in

order to redefine what decolonization actually is” (p. 3). So, how was Martinique and Guadeloupe’s an “anomalous case” in terms of non-violent decolonization and the related struggle for assimilation vis-à-vis the other two DOMs? The question seems particularly important given that there is migration between Guyane and the French Antilles and only in 2014 was the Université des Antilles et de la Guyane split into the Université des Antilles and the Université de la Guyane. As for Réunion, it too is a Creole-speaking and occasionally demonstration-and-strike-driven island, albeit in a very different region. Similarly, I would enjoy hearing Childers expand—within the rare space for further reflection that is the very nature of this forum—upon the concluding sentence of her introduction, in which she states that among other things her book shows “the implications of [the successes and failures of integrating former colonies thousands of miles from Europe] for the creation of multiethnic communities in Europe today” (p. 11).

Although absent from the book, the Guadeloupean Gerty Archimède, who made her way as an elected representative all the way to the National Assembly, is a non-statistical example of Childers’ intimation that women may have gained, relatively speaking, a lot more social mobility than men following departmentalization, not only within Martinique and Guadeloupe but also via migration to the metropole. Childers herself remarks that in this sense her concluding chapters are provocative. After all, a growing body of work by social scientists, among others, has focused upon the endemic problem of domestic violence (unfortunately a global plague) in the Antilles as well as the ongoing racial tensions and racism both within the metropole and within (and between) the DOMs themselves.[3] These are all problems Childers’s addresses while urging us not to discount what people felt and continue to feel about their status as departments: feelings of inequality, invisibility and sometimes profound anger. After all De Gaulle’s 1964 comment, while welcome, was also immediately recognized as a backhanded compliment regarding Antilleans’ Frenchness and is still a common reaction among the unthinking (at best) and racist (at worst) metropolitans. Childers pushes us to consider what statistics show regarding what women, in particular, have gained in the midst of an embrace perhaps more akin to a tango between awkward dance partners than a languid beguine, an embrace which Childers reminds us has a history that continues to need to be brought to the fore, for the sakes of all those who have stakes in bettering future necessarily global practices of Frenchness.

As I sat, weeks after opening night, in a packed cinema watching *Le Gang des Antillais*, no one was dancing but I had the sort of rich experience one can only have in a cinema. When Creole was spoken, this particular audience reacted, laughed and sometimes repeated the line or even replied in Creole. And when the credits started to roll, the film was applauded and cheered, even though it was not a film that downplayed the political and physical violence of its protagonists (including the stark depiction of a woman being particularly brutally beaten). The extraordinary nuances inflecting a film itself both entertaining and complex will make a lot more sense to those who know little about the more recent history of the French Antilles after they read Childers’ book. But so will the reactions and applause, as much an ode to the film as it was to the history that contemporary Afrofeminists in France, bloggers such as Mrs. Roots, seek to reclaim not only for themselves but also for all French men and women, of all colors and origins, in the metropole, overseas and beyond French borders altogether.[4]

## NOTES

[1] Interview with Jean-Claude Barny and Sébastien Onomo, “‘Le Gang des Antillais’ ou l’histoire vraie d’un groupe de braqueurs des années 1970,” *Le Monde*, 30 November 2016.

[2] Sarah Zimmerman has a forthcoming book on marriage, migration and African military households in the French empire that touches upon this topic, among others. My own book-in-progress also has a section on relationships between European women and African men both in the metropole and in the colonies.

[3] See the many publications by Stéphanie Mulot and Nadine Lefaucheur on questions of masculinity and domestic violence in the Antilles. See also a forthcoming volume on black French women and the struggle for equality co-edited by Silyane Larcher and Félix Germain and of course see Félix F. Germain *Decolonizing the Republic: African and Caribbean Migrants in Postwar Paris (1946-1974)* (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 2016).

[4] Mrs. Roots argues that one must “Ecrire. Pour qu’il ne soit plus possible de dire encore une fois : Je ne savais pas.” <https://mrsroots.wordpress.com/>.

Jennifer Anne Boittin  
The Pennsylvania State University  
jboittin@psu.edu

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