

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.

Response by Kristen Stromberg Childers, Templeton Honors College at Eastern University

I wish to thank the editors of H-France for initiating this Forum on my book, *Seeking Imperialism's Embrace*, and for giving me the chance to respond to the review essays written by my distinguished colleagues. In the often lonely world of archival research and academic writing, it is a rare and welcome event when other scholars engage deeply and critically with one's work. I am honored and grateful that Jennifer Boittin, Andrew Daily, Emily Marker, and Adlai Murdoch have taken the time to write such thoughtful reviews and thank them for the insights and new perspectives they have provided on this topic, both in this forum and in previous works from which I've benefited. While I cannot address all the important points they've brought up here, I will try to respond to a number of themes or questions that arise from their commentaries and welcome an ongoing conversation.

The first of these concerns the scope of this book and whether or not other DOMs (Réunion, Guyane) or colonies (Senegal, Gorée) could or should have been part of this study on alternative paths to decolonization. The *vieilles colonies* (including Saint Pierre and Miquelon) share a special temporal relationship to France that seems to justify their grouping together on the chart of progress beyond empire. At the start of this project, I had thought Antillean departmentalization should be set within the context of American and British policy in the Caribbean, whether in Bermuda, the Cayman Islands, or Puerto Rico. After research at the British National Archives in Kew, it became clear that for all their similarities, there were many more differences between these cases that would have necessitated a great deal of justification and caveats going forward. I wanted to dig deeply into the experiences of actors on both sides of the decolonization dilemma, and it seemed impossible to imagine this when including three different colonial empires and many more distinct communities, islands, or territories seeking paths to a post-imperial future.

The decision not to include Guyane and Réunion in this study has some drawbacks. The Léon-Gontran Damas papers at the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture provides ample evidence of the importance of this author and activist for the cause of Caribbean freedom and decolonization. Yet the fact that Guyane never appeared suitable as a tourist destination in the French imagination (no doubt its history as a penal colony played a role here!) and was never cast as a demographic "problem" to be solved by French officials, meant that its experience was quite distinct from Martinique and Guadeloupe in the decades of postwar economic and social reconstruction. French administrators initially proposed that the "excessively prolific" Antilleans be relocated to the relatively unpopulated Guyane as a handy solution to two demographic concerns, but there were few takers.

Likewise, the stories of Réunionnais sent on difficult journeys to the metropole bear resemblances to those of Antilleans, and as Murdoch reminds us, the Réunionnais were subject to the same demographic stereotypes about underdevelopment and excessive fertility that plagued the Antilleans. In the archives, stories and newspaper clippings about the alienation and despair children from Réunion encountered in the metropole and their high rates of suicide were heartbreaking to read. In geopolitical terms, however, Réunion never elicited the same strategic interest from the United States nor was it of much military concern during World War II, unlike Martinique and Guadeloupe. The fact that these islands—“la France d’Amérique” played such a key role in France’s ongoing relationship with the United States was a vital part of the story that I wanted to explore. In the end, focusing on these two *vieilles colonies* maintains a central narrative about small islands at the confluence of grand events whose size belies their importance in postwar developments.

This brings up the question of whether or not the Antilleans’ sense of uniqueness and their often paradoxical status as both citizens and minorities is overstated—are they actually citizens if they don’t fully enjoy all the rights associated with that category? As Marker points out, the disjuncture between the promises made and the lived reality of departmentalization has much in common with other postwar colonial experiences. And yet French citizenship, for all of its shortcomings, did matter immensely to Antilleans, and as such it did—and continues to—set them apart from most other migrants, either in 1947 or in 2007. This citizenship was frustratingly incomplete, unequally applied and premised on continuing racism—yet it was something that the white minority *békés* on the islands didn’t want them to have. For some among the *békés*, affiliation with the Americans might even have been preferable to extending French citizenship to all Antilleans. For the people of Martinique and Guadeloupe, however, French citizenship was cast as something that would protect them from the racist and reactionary *békés* who had made life so difficult during the war and for decades before. The France that Antilleans came to know shortly after the departmentalization vote in 1946 was not the same as the welcoming France they had imagined. The Antillean situation maintains its specificity because there was a choice for citizenship on offer, one that was not extended, famously, to other members of the French Union. In 1946, citizenship appeared as a bulwark against the oppression Antilleans were all too familiar with—that it was not a guarantee against continued oppression was a harsh lesson that was learned painfully over the course of the next years. As time went on, the *békés* appeared less frequently as the targets of Antillean dissatisfaction than the metropolitan French who, whether in the Chamber of Deputies or the streets of Fort-de-France, normalized violence against people of color and elaborated new justifications for exclusion and inequality. The vote for departmentalization was a specific solution to a specific problem, and the Antilleans can be forgiven for not anticipating all the future disappointments to come.

This pattern of increasing animus toward metropolitan French and their interactions with Antilleans as the departmentalization process wore on helps explain Frantz Fanon’s scathing critique of Mayotte Capécia’s *Je Suis Martiniquaise* in his *Black Skin, White Masks*. Capécia’s crime, in Fanon’s eyes, is not simply that she pines for a white man who has abandoned her and her child, but that this man is a white French officer, symbolic of the ugly racism of Admiral Robert’s forces during the occupation of the islands during the war. Yet as feminist critics have pointed out, this framework makes women’s sexual relations with men the mainstay of their

identity and reason for being, and downplays autonomous desire for independence and economic self-sufficiency.

This masculinist interpretation has continued to shape literary and historical interpretations of departmentalization; while economic self-sufficiency can be idealized and praised in the *djobbeur*, admiration for the Martinican woman who earns a living working as a civil servant in the post office has been less forthcoming. As Boitton rightly points out, the Guadeloupean lawyer Gerty Archimède provides a pertinent non-statistical example of the social mobility women gained following departmentalization. This, however, has been one of the unsung successes of departmentalization and should receive greater acknowledgment in any attempt to tally up the gains and losses of the Antilleans' political choice. Fewer women dying in childbirth, falling infant mortality, and greater access to education and employment for women are not insignificant accomplishments. These gains for women emerge in the context of a problematic relationship where Boittin's image of "a tango between awkward dance partners" seems particularly apt, yet such progress must register and be brought to the fore in any overall assessment of departmentalization.

Fanon's criticism of Capécia's affairs points to a larger theme woven throughout much of recent Antillean history, that of favored partners and circumscribed relationships, whether intimate or geo-political. The wider Caribbean community was both a source of potential unity and an unsettling challenge to Antilleans. Projects in favor of Caribbean unity such as the Caribbean Commission were permeated with the desires of imperial powers to assert influence in the area or to discharge their responsibilities toward colonies that had become too cumbersome in the postwar world. While some Antilleans expressed a desire for greater association with other Caribbean partners, they also were anxious about such links, fearing either the encroachment of the United States or the loss of a special status that set them apart from their Caribbean neighbors. The French government certainly encouraged Antilleans to believe that impulses toward Caribbean federation essentially sprang from a cowardly British desire to shed their responsibilities toward their former colonial subjects. The trajectory of other Caribbean nations provided cautionary tales for the dangers of complete independence (Haiti) or dependence on another colonial power (Puerto Rico). Several reviewers mention that Antilleans were often sensitive to the intimation that they were not fully French but rather more like Africans or other less favored Caribbean neighbors. As Marker points out in reference to the *camps d'été colonial*, Antillean activists in metropolitan France continue to differentiate themselves from broader antiracist coalitions.

Faced with the contemporary political use of French universalism discourse and the continuing tendency of Antilleans to reject multiculturalism and insist on their undifferentiated Frenchness, Daily is skeptical that the Antillean experience offers any real alternative to French "racelessness." Indeed, we are right to be suspicious of universalist discourse and its inherent contradictions. But perhaps one of the ways forward out of the impasse is to look specifically at *how* race matters: whether in housing applications, job opportunities, food choices, or state policies, race is expressed in a variety of concrete economic, political, and social decisions that don't *have* to turn out that way. The activism of the MRAP, *Mouvement contre le Racisme, l'Antisémitisme et pour la Paix*, of which Marcel Manville was a founding member, was instrumental in passing the 1972 law outlawing racial insults, defamation, and incitement to

racial discrimination or hate, as well as racial discrimination. This doesn't mean that such insults and discrimination don't exist anymore, but it does mean that those who employ them can in some way be held accountable. While it won't solve the dilemmas of universalism at the discursive level, perhaps it will make it easier at some point for a person of color to sign a lease on an apartment.

Historians aren't very successful at predicting the future—we often don't agree on the past—and in highlighting the Antilleans' route to decolonization I am not arguing for its applicability in other contexts in the future. But in response to Boittin's fitting query as to what lessons can be learned from the Antillean experience going forward, I would suggest that if stressing *universalism* doesn't inspire optimism for a less racist future, then perhaps stressing *equality* at least shows us the next steps on the path. Inequality is a corrosive force in society, and human beings have an innate sense of fairness that when violated leads to dissatisfaction and often violence. Inequality is apparent everywhere, but when it manifests itself in concrete ways—whether in *primes d'installation* for fonctionnaires or in crumbling banlieues—there are tangible repercussions. While the Antillean experience demonstrates that universalist discourse isn't enough to bring about a truly egalitarian multi-racial society, it does provide evidence that not backing up such metaphysical claims with material improvements aimed at equality will surely be noticed and deeply resented.

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H-France Forum
Volume 12 (2017), Issue 3, # 5