

H-France Forum

Volume 12 (2017), Issue 3, # 2

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 Andrew Daily, University of Memphis

When the Martinican poet and politician Aimé Césaire died in the spring of 2008, the French political establishment, left and right, rushed to claim his legacy. Government ministers, the leaders of France's major political parties, and Nicholas Sarkozy—whom Césaire rebuffed in 2004—traveled to the Caribbean to pay their respects. Across the French political and media class Césaire received praise, and figures including Segolène Royal, Jean-Christophe Lagarde, and the Minister of Culture Christine Albanel advocated Césaire's interment in the Panthéon. Martinicans' demand that "Papa Césaire" remain in the Caribbean, and Césaire's own stated desire to be buried in his native land, quashed plans for a full *Panthéonization*. Nonetheless in 2011 a plaque to Césaire was installed not far from the resting place of Victor Schoelcher.[1] Césaire's plaque reads, in part, "tireless artisan of decolonization, architect of a 'negritude' founded in the universality of the rights of man, 'mouth of those calamities that have no mouth,' by his writings and his acts he wanted to give the world 'the strength to face tomorrow,'" and concludes with a passage from his poem, "Calendrier Lagunier." In the commemorations of Césaire's life and work, and in his official memorialization, the broad lines of the Antillean situation come into focus. While France's Caribbean citizens can be accepted, and even celebrated, as part of the French nation, their acceptance requires that their political and cultural aspirations testify to the ongoing genius of French universalism.

Kristen Stromberg Childers's *Seeking Imperialism's Embrace: National Identity, Decolonization, and Assimilation in the French Caribbean* explores "the unique and historically significant political journey of the Caribbean islands of Martinique and Guadeloupe" in the decolonizing period and their transformation into Overseas Departments of France (DOM) (p. 1). Across seven chapters, Childers traces the political and social context behind departmentalization; the debates over history and identity; France's efforts to modernize these departments, and Antilleans demands for full inclusion as French citizens; social and economic development; and migration to the metropole. Narrating a history of social reform and political disappointment, Childers concludes that attention to the Antillean case offers a pre-history of integration that has implications for the contemporary moment (p. 10). Despite the global stature of Antillean writers and intellectuals and their importance to anticolonial and postcolonial studies, decolonization in the French *vieilles colonies* (including also Guyane and Réunion) has not attracted the sustained interest of scholars; to paraphrase one observer, why should they when nothing much happened? Instead the Algerian Revolution, and to a lesser extent the Indochina War, dominate scholarly interest and shape (and arguably overdetermine) historiographies of French decolonization. Frederick Cooper's recent work on the Union Française, as well as studies by younger scholars working on French West Africa and other

geographies of the French empire, have reminded scholars of the heterogeneous complexity of the decolonizing process. Childers's book is thus a welcome addition as it questions how we define decolonization, and expands the geographical horizon of decolonization in the French empire.

The sense that decolonization never occurred in the French Antilles was articulated not just by scholars, but shared by Martinican and Guadeloupean intellectuals, who portrayed departmentalization as yet another moment in a series of missed historical opportunities. Frantz Fanon, and later Edouard Glissant and the Creolists Raphaël Confiant and Patrick Chamoiseau, criticized Césaire and his generation for choosing the security of France over the promise of independence, and they cast assimilation to France as a reflection of abjection and alienation. Childers insists that instead we understand the 1946 departmentalization law as an expression of hope and commitment to the ideals of French universalist republicanism and a demand that France be true to its purported values. Rather than a moment of deviance or divergence, for Antilleans integration *was* a type of decolonization, a political choice that followed from their history since plantation slavery and comprised a rational response to the changed national and international context. Childers suggests that arguments that assimilation expressed a fundamental Antillean weakness were based in an emphasis on cultural nationalism over social transformation. Antillean intellectuals, and the scholars that study them, prioritized thinking about identity and mostly neglected the concrete social and economic benefits that departmentalization brought to the Antilles.

Childers attends to the particular context in which Antilleans demanded full incorporation into the French nation by reconstructing how the national, regional, and international context of the immediate postwar moment drove their demand to integrate and convinced the French state to grant it. On the one hand, the demand for full citizenship and departmental status was an old one, stretching back to the 1848 emancipation. Radical abolitionists and republicans like Schoelcher argued for the transformation of France's former slave colonies into departments, a demand repeated in 1870-1871 and again in the 1930s.[2]

Colonial interests ultimately blocked assimilation and exploited the Antilles' administrative ambiguity—Antilleans retained their citizenship but the Ministry of the Colonies administered the islands through a colonial governor—to keep social and political power in the hands of the white elite. Amending their colonial status seemed to promise an end to their second-class status.[3]

World War II and the Vichy occupation, Childers argues, marked a turning point. Martinicans and Guadeloupeans were subject to a Vichy occupation that denied their citizenship and subordinated political and social life to Vichy's racial hierarchies. The ease with which Admiral Robert empowered local whites and stripped away their rights as French citizens convinced Antilleans that their paradoxical dual status as citizens and colonial subjects threatened their liberties. At the same time, the Anglo-American blockade and perceived danger of an American occupation of the islands convinced French administrators that without a change in status, American hegemony threatened their Caribbean possessions. Further, the France that Antilleans hoped to join was much changed from the interwar period. The war galvanized colonial deputies and social movements to press for democratic reforms to the French empire, and it empowered

the French Communists and Socialists to propose a welfare state based in social solidarity and economic democracy. In 1946 Antilleans believed that they were choosing to integrate into a multiethnic and multiracial social republic. Assimilation was also the popular choice. When Césaire and his colleague Léopold Bissol returned to Martinique following the passage of the 19 March 1946 *loi de départementalisation*, massive crowds met them at the docks and led an impromptu celebratory march through the streets of Fort-de-France. Despite subsequent frustration with the pace of reform, average Antilleans have remained steadfast in their support for a political and economic relationship with France, though the terms of that relationship have shifted over time.

Consistent with her argument that scholarship has privileged a search for identity over the material effects of departmentalization, Childers devotes the bulk of Chapters 3 through 7 to the political and economic debates over social benefits and economic development in Guadeloupe and Martinique after 1946. Despite fierce opposition from Caribbean deputies, the constitution of the Fourth Republic included a clause that allowed the Ministry for Overseas France to delay implementing laws in the DOMs. Prefects in the Caribbean and the Overseas Ministry exploited this statute to delay the extension of social legislation, maintain the minimum wage and family benefits at a rate lower than in the metropole, establish higher pay for metropolitan civil servants, and in myriad ways preserve the inequality of France's overseas citizens. Antilleans, in particular the Communist Party and the CGT, as well as Césaire and his Progressive Party, opposed these policies and organized in the National Assembly and in the streets to force the government to uphold the equality of all French citizens. As Childers shows, while reform moved slowly in the Caribbean and the stubborn racism of administrators and lawmakers hampered full equality, by the 1960s assimilation began to deliver concrete and meaningful economic and social reforms to the DOMs. Hospitals and medical facilities were improved, a network of schools organized and staffed, social housing built, and efforts to expand the tourist sector planned and expanded. Inequalities persisted between the DOMs and the metropole, but Childers gathers metrics that range from literacy rates to natal mortality rates to show how social conditions improved steadily throughout the decades following departmentalization (pp. 155-61).

Integration to France also enabled Martinicans and Guadeloupeans to emigrate to the metropole, and despite criticism from Antillean politicians and political activists, thousands moved to Paris and other cities for work. In part they were encouraged to do so by BUMIDOM (Bureau pour le développement des migrations intéressants les départements d'outre-mer), which the influential Gaullist deputy from Réunion Michel Debré set up to simultaneously solve unemployment in the DOM and metropolitan labor shortages. Antilleans emigrated looking for a better life and expanded opportunities, but BUMIDOM officials marked them as racial and civilizational others, and steered them into menial and low-wage jobs. Racism and discrimination in the metropole also meant it was difficult for Antilleans to find housing, and many were effectively ghettoized in Paris' northern suburbs. Despite the indifference and even hostility of metropolitan life, emigrants interviewed in the 1960s and decades later still judged life in the metropole, despite its difficulties and disappointments, superior to the Caribbean. As Childers shows in a particularly cogent chapter, the metropole proved particularly attractive to Antillean women, who left the Caribbean to escape everything from arranged marriages to domestic abuse. They were free to work and to socialize as they saw fit. For them France represented freedom and opportunity rather than repression and exploitation (pp. 187-89).

Women's experiences and a gendered analysis represent important optics for Childers's later chapters. Most histories of the French Caribbean were written by men, often directly involved in the events they described, and women's voices for the most part have been absent from histories of Martinique and Guadeloupe.[4] Shifting focus from men's political activism and nationalism (which she frames as "masculine") to women's organizing, Childers reveals a different history of assimilation and that suggests promising future lines of research. In particular, her focus on the UFF (Union des femmes françaises) and UFM (Union des femmes martiniquaises) and her emphasis on women's experiences of emigration and work counter psychoanalytic and nationalist readings of assimilation as "feminine" and deviant and illuminate the ambivalences of integration and citizenship. Framed from women's perspectives, assimilation to France appears to be a rational compromise rather than an abject surrender.

Childers concludes *Seeking Imperialism's Embrace* with a restatement of her central argument that integration was not "deviance and deficiency," but a historically logical and contextually strategic choice. She also suggests what lessons the integration of Antilleans might offer for contemporary France and its strained relationship to postcolonial immigrants. She critiques France's insistence on "race blindness" and argues that one lesson from Antillean history is that France must discard "raceless" policies and politics for explicitly antiracist programs. She concludes that French Antilleans "are in fact leading the way in shaping new forms of global citizenship, multiple identities, and national allegiances," and argues that there is much to emulate, for France and for Europe, in "this attractive universal civilization," which "will show the world a new way to navigate national identity, decolonization, and assimilation in the twenty-first century" (p. 207).

Childers's hope is compelling, and one that aligns—somewhat ironically given her criticism of his theses—with the Martinican writer Edouard Glissant's later work, in particular *Poétique de la Relation* (1990) and *Traité du Tout-Monde* (1997). Echoing postcolonial critics like David Scott, Childers questions whether the nation-state should define decolonization and suggests that the Antillean experience demonstrates the efficacy of non-national anticolonial movements. Historical tradition and context, she argues, explain why Antilleans chose in 1946 to remain part of France. However, one of the points that Scott makes in *Conscripts of Modernity* is that we must attend to how context *changes*, how in "new historical conditions old questions may lose their salience," and how projects for liberation change to account for transformations in local and global political contexts. As Scott carefully shows, using the 1938 and 1962 prefaces to C.L.R. James's *The Black Jacobins* as his example, critical and anticolonial discourses and movements shifted—and shift—in response to colonial projects. Childers is right to insist that we grasp the particular context of 1946, but I would extend her point to argue that we must also address how that context changed across the 1950s and 1960s. To understand why figures like Aimé Césaire or organizations like the Communist Party became critics of assimilation, we need to look at how they reconceived what it meant to be Antillean in response to internal political developments within France, and to international developments in both the Caribbean and the wider world. We must, as Scott phrases it, reconstruct the "problem space," the "ensemble of questions and answers around which a horizon of identifiable stakes (conceptual as well as ideological) hangs." [5]

Viewed from our present, the Guadeloupean and Martinican decision in 1946 to pursue closer ties seems rational, even wise. Postcolonial disappointment has given way to postcolonial melancholia, and small states seem anachronistic and isolated in the current global conjuncture. And, understood in the context of 1946, departmentalization expressed the political and cultural preferences of the majority of Antilleans. But if we view the nationalists' criticisms of assimilation and their insistence on the decolonization of Antillean culture and society within the problem space of 1960 or 1980, their critiques were not just rigidly dogmatic but complex responses to local and international events and forces. Further, nationalist and autonomist movements were not just the purview of elite intellectuals, but involved thousands of ordinary men and women in the French DOMs.

The response to the December 1959 riots in Fort-de-France, which Childers discusses briefly in Chapter 5, offers an illustrative example. A traffic accident in downtown Fort-de-France led to days of rioting that left three dead and dozens more injured. Instead of investigating the social causes of the unrest, the French state cracked down on Antillean political activists. Dozens were arrested for their part in the riots; the Vice-Chancellor of the Antillean school system was expelled from Martinique and barred from returning; several members of the Communist Party were arrested and indicted for slander; the Communist Party newspaper *Justice* was confiscated repeatedly by the prefect's office; and, on October 15, 1960, the President's office issued a decree that allowed prefects to fire civil servants from their jobs and expel individuals from the DOMs for advocating for autonomy or independence. Subsequent political unrest in 1960, 1962, 1963, and 1967 left dozens dead and dozens more imprisoned on charges of sedition. Observing the unprecedented wave of repression that met their demands for economic and political equality, nationalists and their metropolitan allies doubted France's commitment to liberty and equality in the Caribbean. Jean-Marie Domenach, introducing a collection of essays submitted by the leaders of the *Front Antillo-Guyanais pour l'autonomie*, was moved to ask whether the Antilles would, due to France's "obstinate will," go the same way as Algeria.[6]

Further, national and international contexts changed dramatically in the fifteen years since departmentalization. The Algerian War hobbled the Union Française as France rushed to divest itself of its colonies, while the exclusion of the Communist Party from government weakened postwar social reform and diminished Antillean political influence.[7] Across the globe, the old colonial empires were collapsing and new transnational solidarities, from Pan-Africanism to the Bandung Movement, took their place. Regionally, the British West Indies achieved self-rule in 1958 and independence in 1962; and on New Year's Day, 1959, Castro's forces entered Havana and launched the Cuban Revolution. Antilleans followed these developments closely and many saw in Third World and anticolonial movements possible new futures that would overcome their disappointments by linking their struggles to global movements for liberation.

Likewise, the question of identity in the French Caribbean is an extremely complex problem. As Childers shows in her book, the French recognize minority identities as a threat to the (purported) universalism of Frenchness. Programs by BUMIDOM to train Antilleans to be properly French and contemporary resistance to historical commemorations of slavery, emancipation, and local historical memory speak to France's investment in universalism. Childers criticizes a monolithic focus on authentic identity, but for the most incisive Antilleans thinkers, the question they posed was about subjectivity and not identity. The critique leveled by

Glissant, the Creolists, and a number of Antillean Marxists goes beyond questions of commemoration and frames the question of culture as a social and political one: was an Antillean culture and self possible in a society dependant on the metropole for its economic survival and inundated with metropolitan culture? While it is hard to dispute that political integration ameliorated the worst of the Antilles' poverty through social programs and investments in civil infrastructure, such development hollowed out Antillean economic life. The descendants of the white slave-owning plantocracy still control much of the land and industry; domestic chains replaced local business; and the islands were transformed into consumer societies but without an industrial base. Unemployment and underemployment are permanent facts of life in the Caribbean (statistics are hard to pin down but the rate hovers stubbornly above 25% and is likely much higher), and the islands depend on social transfers from France. The nightmare world of madness and "disequilibrium" that Glissant described in his 1975 *Malemort* lamented the violence done to culture, but also the violence done to society. One key scene describes the destruction of a collective farm in order to build a Carrefour parking lot. Glissant's critique of post-departmental Martinique rests on his observation that Antillean social and cultural life lacked a material basis. The question that Edouard Glissant in *Le Discours antillais*, René Ménéil in his essays in *Action* in the 1960s, and Césaire in his proposals for Martinican autonomy asked was: how can there be an Antillean culture without a material base? What culture could exist without control of either the means of production or the political apparatus? And what had that lack done to the Antillean people?[8]

Childers suggests that Antilleans put their faith in French universalism, and the French state repeatedly failed to live up to the promise of its universalist values. As she writes in her conclusion, "It is hard to blame Martinicans and Guadeloupeans for a 'deficient' or 'pathological' choice in 1946 when it was their partners who reneged on the deal" (201). But what if it is not the betrayal of universalism, but universalism itself that constitutes the problem? Critics from Joan Scott to Étienne Balibar have argued that universalism and particularism constitute two sides of the same coin.[9] Universalism opposes irreconcilable difference, but it requires difference to delineate and legitimate its philosophical and political concepts and practices. In the French colonial context, Gary Wilder argued that debates about assimilation versus association, or *la mission civilisatrice* against colonial exploitation, missed the fact that citizenship, and its (limited) extension to the empire, "functioned as a 'particular equivalent'—a universalizing or abstracting category that depended on and produced historical particularity." [10] Stated less abstractly, the extension of citizenship and rights requires the inclusion of some particular subjects and the concomitant exclusion of others deemed incapable. In an historical pattern Silyane Larcher has called "the alterization of equals," Antillean juridical equality produces recurrent and obdurate racialization.[11] Legally and politically equal yet cast as civically and racially inferior, proof of the validity of the French universalist project but always already not quite French, the Antillean relationship to French citizenship reflects the inherent contradictions of French universalism. It is not so much that the French continue to betray their side of the bargain struck with its Caribbean citizens; it is that France requires Antilleans' "commensurable difference" as proof of the universality of Frenchness.[12]

The contemporary political use of French universalist discourse to condemn immigrants, Muslims, and black political and cultural organization leaves me skeptical that the Antillean experience might furnish an alternative to French racelessness. If anything, France's current

impasse has pushed Antilleans (particularly those resident in the metropole) to reject multiculturalism and insist on their undifferentiated Frenchness, a choice reinforced by right-wing intellectuals like Éric Zemmour who portray them as a successful and proper example of integration. As Audrey Celestine and Crystal Fleming have observed, Antilleans strenuously differentiate themselves and their history from the African and Maghrebi experience, to the point of attenuating, if not outright rejecting, any association with blackness.[13] While individual Antilleans like Césaire can be assimilated to national greatness despite their criticisms of France's history and culture, the substantive acceptance and celebration of Caribbean difference – even by Antilleans themselves – seems still remote and difficult to imagine.

NOTES

[1] The Panthéon now features a veritable “colonial section,” which includes the tombs of Schoelcher and Félix Éboué, and memorial plaques for Césaire, Toussaint Louverture, and Louis Delgrès.

[2] While Minister of the Colonies for the Popular Front government, Marius Moutet convened a panel to study the question of departmentalization for Guadeloupe, Guyane, Martinique, and Réunion. On Moutet: James I. Lewis, “The Tragic Career of Marius Moutet,” *European History Quarterly* 38, no. 1 (January 2008): 66-92.

[3] Richard Price, *The Convict and the Colonel: A Story of Colonialism and Resistance in the Caribbean* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1998).

[4] The first histories of the French Caribbean were written by participant-observers, most of whom were Communists and almost all of whom were men. The first comprehensive histories of Martinique and Guadeloupe were written by Armand Nicholas and Henri Bangou respectively; Nicholas and Bangou were both key figures in the postwar Communist Party.

[5] David Scott, *Conscripts of Modernity: The Tragedy of Colonial Enlightenment* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004), 4.

[6] Jean-Marie Domenach, “Les Antilles avant qu’il soit trop tard,” *Esprit* 305 (April 1962): 1.

[7] Until Césaire's 1956 resignation from the PCF, Martinique and Guadeloupe returned at least one, often more than one, Communist deputy to the National Assembly.

[8] One does not have to accept their Marxist precepts to acknowledge that culture requires a material base.

[9] Joan Scott argues that, “individuality required the very difference that the idea of the prototypical human individual was meant to deny,” while Étienne Balibar suggests that “universalism and racism are indeed (determinate) contraries, and this is why each of them has the other one inside itself—or is bound to affect the other *from the inside*.” Joan Scott, *Only Paradoxes to Offer: French Feminists and the Rights of Man* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard

University Press, 1997), 7; Étienne Balibar, “Racism as Universalism,” in *Masses, Classes, Ideas: Studies on Politics and Philosophy Before and After Marx* (London: Routledge, 1994), 198.

[10] Gary Wilder, *The French Imperial Nation-State: Negritude and Colonial Humanism between the Two World Wars* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 16.

[11] Silyane Larcher, *L’Autre Citoyen: L’idéal républicain et les Antilles après l’esclavage* (Paris: Armand Colin, 2014), 25.

[12] I borrow “commensurable difference” from Mayanthi Fernando’s penetrating genealogy of French secularism. Mayanthi Fernando, *The Republic Unsettled: Muslim French and the Contradictions of Secularism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2014), 192.

[13] Audrey Celestine, “French Caribbean organizations and the ‘Black question’ in France,” *African and Black Diaspora* 4, no. 2 (Summer 2011): 131-44; Crystal Fleming, *Resurrecting Slavery: Racial Legacies and White Supremacy in France* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2017).

Andrew Daily
University of Memphis
amdaily@memphis.edu

Copyright © 2017 by H-France, all rights reserved. H-France permits the electronic distribution of individual reviews for nonprofit educational purposes, provided that full and accurate credit is given to the author, the date of publication, and the location of the review on the H-France website. H-France reserves the right to withdraw the license for redistribution/republication of individual reviews at any time and for any specific case. Neither bulk redistribution/republication in electronic form of more than five percent of the contents of *H-France Forum* nor republication of any amount in print form will be permitted without permission.

H-France Forum
Volume 12 (2017), Issue 3, # 2