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Lorelle Semley, *To Be Free and French: Citizenship in France's Atlantic Empire*. Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2017. xxi + 362 pp. Maps, tables, figures, notes, bibliography, and index. \$94.99 U.S. (hb). ISBN: 9781107101142; \$32.99 U.S. (pb). ISBN: 9781107498471; \$26.00 U.S. (eb). Adobe e-book ISBN: 9781108294768

Review by Kelly M. Duke Bryant, Rowan University.

*To Be Free and French* is an engrossing study of how Africans and people of African descent across France's Atlantic empire embraced multiple and overlapping identities, imagined an expansive French citizenship that could include people of color and residents of the colonies, and engaged in political action to secure rights or promote their interests. It is an ambitious project, not only in the themes it addresses, but also in its periodization and geographic scope. Indeed, taking on the period from the late eighteenth to the mid-twentieth century, Lorelle Semley explores the lived experiences of a wide variety of people, ranging from enslaved workers to political elites; describes a series of events—some apparently local and others more obviously international—that unfolded in various sites across the French empire; and connects political communities to the geographies and built environments of six cities in the Antilles, West Africa, and France. Focusing on moments in which people of color across the French Atlantic empire debated or claimed French citizenship, Semley makes the case that even as they imagined themselves as “rightfully belonging to a French nation” (p. xv), they did not reject other identities related to race, religion, or place of origin. Indeed, “women and men of color,” she argues, “often suggested that they could be French and something more at the same time, redefining the meanings of citizenship in relation to their local circumstances and a wider world” (p. 14). Their efforts to enlarge the definition of citizenship, Semley contends, continue to resonate in France today.

Thoroughly researched, richly documented, and cogently argued, *To Be Free and French* engages with other recent studies of citizenship in the French empire, most notably those by Frederick Cooper and Gary Wilder, and expands upon their insights by showing how Africans and people of African descent debated and claimed citizenship at a much earlier date and in a wider variety of places. Furthermore, when addressing the interwar and postwar periods that Cooper and Wilder have explored, Semley shifts the focus away from Negritude intellectuals and the most prominent politicians, choosing instead to explore approaches to citizenship taken by lesser-known leaders from Dahomey (Benin) and Guadeloupe.[1] The book also contributes to scholarship on the African diaspora in the Atlantic, which has focused predominantly on the British empire and sphere of influence, and which has been shaped by Paul Gilroy's much debated concept of the “Black Atlantic.”[2]. Unlike Gilroy, Semley derives

much of her argument from an analysis of historical episodes in Africa. Indeed, Africa is central to Semley's narrative, yet she also emphasizes its connections to other places, showing how ideas and individuals moved between the African continent, the French Caribbean, and metropolitan France.

The book is comprised of a prologue, six chapters, and an epilogue, divided into three parts. Each chapter explores a specific historical moment and place, and the chapters are arranged, more or less, in chronological order. Semley has expertly constructed her narrative, beginning each chapter with a vignette, usually about a specific person, that relates both to the case study explored in the chapter and to the overarching themes of the book. In addition, she uses these vignettes—and the mobility of the historical personages they highlight—to emphasize the interconnectedness of the French Atlantic world. For example, Anne Rossignol, whose story opens the chapter on Le Cap, Saint-Domingue, in the era of the Haitian Revolution, had emigrated to that Antillean town from Senegal. Rossignol, a woman of color of some means, reappears briefly in the chapter on political community among Senegalese *signares*. By following Rossignol and other individuals through multiple chapters, readers gain an appreciation for the mobility and multiple identities that shaped such figures' understandings of citizenship.

Part one, "Revolutionary Foundations," consists of the prologue and first two chapters, and focuses on the eighteenth and early nineteenth century. In the prologue, Semley introduces the main themes and arguments of the book and briefly surveys its content and scope, discussing the importance of space, the urban environment, and gender to her exploration of citizenship. She also offers an extended analysis of a mid-nineteenth-century image, entitled "Signare et négresse en toilette" using this drawing of a well-dressed woman of color from Gorée, Senegal, and of a black woman who was her slave, as an entry point into the themes of race, gender, and citizenship in the French empire. Significantly, the image is not just an illustration, but rather a primary source that Semley offers as evidence for some of her conclusions. Indeed, she relies extensively on visual sources—the book includes nearly twenty images—and her sophisticated analysis of these sources propels her narrative.

The first chapter explores how race and gender shaped debates about citizenship in Saint-Domingue in the context of the French and Haitian Revolutions. Focusing in particular on Le Cap, which was burned in 1793, Semley shows how military service and work shaped gendered notions of "emancipation and citizenship" among people of color in late eighteenth-century Saint-Domingue (p. 38). She also explores Toussaint Louverture's changing politics, contending that he "contributed to the idea of a revolutionary citizenship when he put forth a vision of an Atlantic world where people could be defined by their blackness, their Frenchness, and a gendered sense of self" (p. 54). The second chapter moves to West Africa, focusing on the cultural practices and political engagement of the women of color known as *signares* in Gorée, Senegal in the late eighteenth century, and showing how their household routines and relationships "reinforced what it meant to be enslaved or free, a 'lady' or not, and, eventually, French" (p. 77). Gorée, like Saint-Domingue, was a slave society, and Semley devotes some attention to enslaved and free blacks, showing how social relationships cut across gender, race, and status. By emphasizing social relationships and *signares*' efforts to claim belonging through cultural practice, Semley complicates standard narratives of Senegalese political history.[3]

Part two, “Colonial Constructions,” begins with a chapter on nineteenth-century Martinique, which focuses on debates about the political rights of people of color and blacks and explores several rebellions or protests including the 1848 uprising that brought about emancipation in Martinique before the metropolitan emancipation decree took effect. Showing how these processes in Martinique raised questions about French citizenship, Semley also plays with the idea of “the carnivalesque,” pointing out that the “idea of being free, black, and French was, like Carnival, an inversion, taboo, and often a fleeting pleasure” (p. 117).

Chapters four and five address Dahomey or Dahomeans abroad. First, Semley brings readers to the multicultural city of Porto-Novo (Dahomey/Benin) in the early twentieth century. Exploring a rift within the city’s Muslim community, which pitted a descendant of Brazilian returnees against several other Muslim leaders, Semley shows how people on both sides of the debate used the language of republicanism and citizenship to advance their positions. She uses this case study of mobile Africans with complex, layered identities as an example of a phenomenon she calls “trans-African,” a term that describes the “physical and social mobility of people of African descent both within and beyond the African continent” and also their ability to construct identity and belonging from multiple sources (pp. 161-2). Then in chapter five, she examines the life, writing, and political activism of Marc Kojo Houénou, a Dahomean who lived much of his life in France, whose (ultimately successful) petition to obtain French citizenship led to the passage of a new citizenship law in 1915, and who embraced his multiple identities as “French, African, black, and *évolué*” (p. 203). Through Houénou’s story and complicated legacy, Semley explores the limited citizenship made available to people of color in (or from) the colonies, potential tensions between French citizenship and African cultural practice, and the activism of Africans and Antilleans in Paris in the interwar period.

In part three, “Planning after Empire,” Semley explores the politics of black Antilleans and West Africans from 1946 to 1966. In chapter five, she offers an account of the Fourth Republic and the development of the French Union from a refreshingly different perspective. Instead of focusing on party leaders and prominent political and intellectual figures like Léopold Senghor or Félix Houphouët-Boigny, she explores the contributions of Gerty Archimède, a deputy from Guadeloupe; Eugénie Éboué-Tell, who represented Guadeloupe in the Senate; and Louis Ignacio-Pinto, who served in the Senate for Dahomey. In discussing the issues that each of these politicians held dear and the influence of gender, race, and life experience on their positions, Semley helps us better understand postwar debates about the meaning of French citizenship to the Antilleans and Africans who had recently become citizens. And finally, in the epilogue, Semley examines debates among participants in the First World Festival of the Negro Arts, held in Dakar, Senegal, in 1966 about “whether they wanted to define themselves as black citizens of the world or citizens of the black world” (p. 301) and reiterates some of the main conclusions of the book.

This book has many strengths: the depth and quality of its research, its lively narrative style, its conceptual work on ideas like “cultural citizenship” and “trans-African” processes, its sustained attention to place and the built environment, and its important insights into the deeper and wider history of debates about citizenship among people of color across the French empire, to name a few. Yet, it does have some limitations as well. Although Semley indicates in the prologue that gender animates all of her case studies, she glosses over this dynamic in chapters four and five, which focus almost exclusively on Dahomean men. More discussion of women, or a more explicit focus on masculinity, might have been warranted in these chapters.

She does provide sophisticated analysis of gender in the rest of the book, however. Secondly, in the early chapters of the book, I would have liked to see a more sustained account of the goals, motivations, and achievements of enslaved people. Enslaved persons are certainly not absent from Semley's account—to the contrary, they are significant participants in her narrative. However, discussion of the cultural and political work of *signares* or free people of color tends to take precedence, an imbalance that may well have resulted from unevenness in sources.

Despite these limitations, however, this book is an important contribution to the scholarship on citizenship and the French empire, on race, on gender, and on the political work of colonized persons. Semley accomplished her goal of expanding the time frame, geography, and populations involved in debates about the nature of French citizenship and empire. Her book is accessible for undergraduate students and essential reading for specialists of French colonial history and comparative colonialism. Historians of Africa or the Caribbean will also find this book useful. Indeed, the book's central finding, that "there have long been different ways to understand what it means to be French, to be a person of color, to be a citizen; what it means or should mean to be free" (p. xv) might be a useful reminder to us all.

#### NOTES

[1] Frederick Cooper, *Citizenship between Empire and Nation: Remaking France and French Africa, 1945-1960* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2014); Gary Wilder, *Freedom Time: Negritude, Decolonization, and the Future of the World* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2015).

[2] Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1992).

[3] G. Wesley Johnson, Jr., *The Emergence of Black Politics in Senegal: The Struggle for Power in the Four Communes, 1900-1920* (Stanford, Cal.: Stanford University Press, 1971); Hilary Jones, *The Métis of Senegal: Urban Life and Politics in French West Africa* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2013).

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