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Colonizing Paris: Black Migrants, White Women and the "Specter of Empire"

One of the most significant recent trends in French historical scholarship has been the increased interest in the French overseas empire. This has led to important new work on the processes whereby France won, governed, and lost its empire as well as on how those processes were experienced by colonized peoples.[1] Most importantly, for the work under review, it has also resulted in a growing recognition that metropolitan France has itself been deeply affected by its involvement in the colonial enterprise. A colonial history once deemed of marginal relevance to or at least a separate aspect of French history is coming to be perceived as intrinsic to and inseparable from that history.[2] Jennifer Anne Boittin's *Colonial Metropolis* represents a bold assertion of the centrality of colonial relationships to the political and cultural history of interwar Paris. Other scholars, even as they have pointed to the myriad colonial references in Paris streetscapes, have noted the tendency for the French capital to push the colonies off to the margins, both imaginatively and physically.[3] The location of the Colonial Exposition of 1931 on the eastern fringe of the city, in the Bois de Vincennes, was only one symbol of this marginalization. Undeterred by such perceptions, Boittin insists that Paris between the wars was in essence a "colonial space," transforming and transformed by the communities that came to inhabit it and the relationships that developed between them. It is possible that she overstates the case, overestimating the capacity for the encounters she describes between black and white men and women to transform the "visual, acoustic, and affective topography of Paris" (p. 38) as well as to alter the self-identification of both black colonial migrants and white metropolitans. Nevertheless, her interpretation of those encounters is both sophisticated and compelling; it offers important insights into the personal, political, and ideological exchanges that helped shape the anti-imperialist and feminist movements of interwar Paris. The book is informed by an imaginative awareness of the creative potential of the urban metropolis as a crucible for cultural and political innovation. Above all, it evokes the vitality of individuals–some well known, like Josephine Baker; others rescued from virtual anonymity, like the police spy Edmond Thomas Ramananjato, otherwise known as "Agent Joé"–who occupied and animated the diverse spaces of interwar Paris.

Boittin's description of Paris as a "colonial metropolis" provides a memorable term to define what is ultimately revealed to be a surprisingly complex reality. Most simply, the term defines Paris as the administrative hub of the French overseas empire, the central locus for the organs of state power dispatching their minions for the governance of distant colonies. But, as Boittin demonstrates, colonial relationships are anything but simple. The French capital did not just project metropolitan influence outwards; it also served as a pole of attraction, drawing colonized people inwards. Provocatively inverting the conventional understanding of colonial relationships, Boittin argues that Paris itself was colonized by migrant communities and that their occupation of the city's spaces, both physical and cultural, provided a locus of power for interest groups linked to those communities, notably black anti-imperialist and white feminist organizations. Paris became a colonial space in which the "specter of empire" (p. xiv) shaped its inhabitants' sense of themselves and their relationships with one another.

It was, indeed, the ability of anti-imperialist and feminist organizations to subvert official discourses and to turn mainstream cultural trends to their own advantage which made them effective. According to this dialectic, even an event as controlled and sanitized as the Colonial Exposition stimulated the expression of dissident ideas and values. Not only did it prompt the organization of an "Anti-colonial Exposition" on the other side of Paris, but it also provided the venue for the third Estates-General of Feminism and an opportunity for women both to demand the vote and, albeit hesitantly, to critique the colonial enterprise. Similarly, it was by exploiting the contemporary craze for all things black–particularly for black dances or *bals nègres*–that black anti-imperialists, through a strategy of "reverse exoticism," (p. 111) found a medium for delivering their message: usually in the form of speeches delivered between entertainments.

The complexity of the currents and cross-currents that swirled around contemporary representations of colonialism is effectively illustrated by Boittin's chapter on Josephine Baker. The phenomenal success of this African American performer, whose image was used to sell the liquor Pernod and whose slicked-down hair-style–to be emulated through liberal application of "Bakerfix"–was for a time *à la mode*, depended upon her ability to cast herself, in response to the demand of Parisian audiences, as "Colonial Woman." Baker's performances of this role on the stage and its subsequent replication in movies, memoirs, and novels, resonated with Parisian audiences and critics. For some, Baker's subtle transformation, as her highly sexualized, "black" image gave way to a more sophisticated, lighter-skinned representation, offered reassurance in the French civilizing mission. For others, however, including the graphic artist Jean Colin and the surrealists, the initial fascination for Baker's primitive and exotic allure gave way to serious criticism of the inequities and violence implicit in French colonialism. Black anti-imperialists were increasingly ambivalent toward Baker, put off by her increasing self-identification as French and by her unfortunate political statements in support of Mussolini's war in Ethiopia. Josephine Baker thus became an iconic figure whose image seemed to encapsulate all the contradictory hopes and fears of a society seeking to come to terms with colonialism.

It was, of course, the presence of unprecedented numbers of colonial migrants in the French capital that generated such angst about empire. Most of them had been drawn there in the first place by the Great War and the demand it generated for soldiers and laborers. In absolute terms, however, their numbers remained small in the 1920s and 30s. Boittin's study is focused on the black community in Paris, comprised largely of migrants from sub-Saharan Africa, the Antilles, and Madagascar, but also including African Americans. Precise figures do not exist, but it is unlikely that this community consisted of more than a few thousand persons, predominantly male. By any calculation, the population of North African migrants was much greater, probably over 100,000.[4] Boittin insists that despite its focus on black colonial migrants, the book is also about North African and Indo-Chinese migrants, but this statement would seem to be true only in general terms, as the affirmation of a method for understanding these communities and the "imperial nation-state" (p. xxi) to which they belonged. In fact, the infrequency of references to these other migrant communities is striking, particularly given Boittin's sensitivity to local encounters and to connections that transcended the boundaries of class, race, and gender. It is true that she demonstrates the determination of black anti-imperialist organizations to protect their autonomy by defining themselves in terms of race–the League for the Defence of the *Nègre* Race, for example–and by gendering themselves as male. This would seem to have discouraged the forging of ties with other anti-imperialist groups. Nevertheless, the reader is left to wonder about the nature and extent of encounters between different communities of colonial migrants and how their experiences of the capital compared. Similarly, while recognizing the uniqueness of the cultural vogue of *le tumulte noir* and contemporary negrophilia, as well as the ways these trends offered a field of action to anti-imperialists keen to subvert the limiting stereotypes imposed upon black men and women, Boittin might have pointed to the contrast with the much more negative response of white Parisians to North African or Indo-Chinese migrants. The prevailing stereotype of the lazy Algerian worker was no doubt even more limiting than that of the smiling Senegalese *tirailleur* in the Banania advertisements. And the elaboration of an administrative and police machinery specifically for the repression of North African migrants was surely as significant an aspect of Paris's identity as a colonial metropolis in the interwar years as the passion for *bals nègres* and jazz.[5] The members of the tiny black community were not always embraced by white Parisians, but neither did they endure the systematic hostility projected against the much larger, and therefore more feared, community of Algerian migrants.

This does not diminish the value of Boittin's diligent

pursuit of her subjects' itineraries as they negotiated the spaces of interwar Paris or her imaginative use of a wide range of sources to reconstruct those itineraries. In particular, she demonstrates how black women writers, such as the Nardal sisters, were able to overcome barriers of gender, class, and race in finding new venues for the expression of anti-imperialist ideas. Her exploration of the histories and writings of white women writers also shows how their encounters with colonialism, both at the center and the peripheries of the empire, informed the development of feminist ideas. Some feminists, at least, came to see the struggle by black colonial migrants for enfranchisement and civil rights as the counterpart of their own struggle. Their capacity to see Paris in a new light, refracted through the prism of colonialism, is revealed in their own words. "His presence amplified me," wrote Lucie Cousturier of a black *tirailleur* whom she accompanied to Paris in 1919: "I walked alone, as usual, but as though wearing a pretty new dress, and with new strokes and gazes for all the objects" (p. 198). It is Boittin's achievement to enable us, too, to see Paris anew, as colonial metropolis.

Notes

[1]. These include Gilles Manceron, *Marianne et les colonies: Une introduction à l'histoire coloniale de la France* (Paris: Editions La Découverte, 2003); Robert Aldrich, *Greater France: A History of French Overseas Expansion* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 1996); C. R. Ageron et al., *Histoire de la France coloniale, des origines à 1914*, vol. 1 (Paris: Armand Colin, 1990); C. R. Ageron et al., *Histoire de la France coloniale, de 1914 à 1990*, vol. 2 (Paris: Armand Colin, 1990); Alice Conklin, *Mission to Civilize: the Republican Idea of Empire in France and West Africa, 1895-1930* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997); and Ruth Ginio, *French Colonialism Unmasked: The Vichy Years in French West Africa, 1940-1943* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2006).

[2]. For this historiographical trend, see Alice L. Conklin and Julia Clancy-Smith, "Introduction: Writing Colonial Histories," in *French Historical Studies* 27, no. 3 (2004): 497-505, as well as the other articles in this special issue. See also Pascal Blanchard et al., *La fracture coloniale: La société française au prisme de l'héritage colonial* (Paris: Editions La Découverte, 2005).

[3]. See, for example, Neil MacMaster, "Imperial Façades: Muslim Institutions and Propaganda in Inter-War Paris," in *Promoting the Colonial Idea: Propaganda and Visions of Empire in France*, ed. Tony Chafer and Amanda Sackur (London: Palgrave, 2002), 71-81; and Robert Aldrich, "Putting the Colonies on the Map: Colonial Names in Paris Streets," in *Promoting the Colonial Idea*, 211-223.

[4]. Pascal Blanchard et al., *Le Paris Arabe* (Paris: Editions de la Découverte, 2003), 101.

[5]. On this theme, see Pascal Blanchard and Eric Deroo, "Contrôler: Paris, capitale coloniale (1931-1939)," in *Culture coloniale en France: De la Révolution française à nos jours*, ed. Pascal Blanchard et al. (Paris: CNRS Editions, 2008), 355-367.

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