Review Article

Haitian Migrants in the French Overseas Territories of the Caribbean

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Migrants en Guyane. Frédéric Piantoni. Arles, France: Actes Sud/Musée des cultures guyanaises, 2011. 174 pp. (Paper € 22.00)

Être migrant et Haïtien en Guyane. Maud Laëthier. Paris: Éditions du CTHS, 2010. 319 pp. (Paper € 26.00)

Saint-Martin. Déstabilisation sociétale dans la Caraïbe française. Danielle Jeffry. Paris: L'Harmattan, 2010. 249 pp. (Paper € 24.50)

L'immigration haïtienne dans la Caraïbe: Quel défi pour l'unité des peuples? Louis-Auguste Joint & Julien Méron (eds.). Gourbeyre, Guadeloupe: Éditions Nestor, 2011. 335 pp. (Paper € 28.00)

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Migrations are an essential dimension of the Caribbean region, and this was already the case before the European conquest of the Americas. The region has been an important site for the development and enrichment of anthropological concepts, such as transnationalism and diaspora, related to the movement of people. Numerous studies dealing with the international migrations of Caribbean people to North America or Europe have been conducted, but the study of internal migrations within the region, in

particular to the French territories, has so far been largely neglected. The few articles that have been published have concerned the discriminatory treatment of foreigners, in particular Haitians and Dominicans, in Guadeloupe. This gap has now been filled with the recent publication of several works by geographers, anthropologists, sociologists, or residents of these territories, contributing to a new field of research in France. Lately, several history and anthropology Ph.D. dissertations have been defended and several calls for proposals by the main research funding agencies such as the ACSE (Agence nationale pour l'égalité des chances et la cohésion sociale) and the ANR (Agence nationale de recherche) have sponsored research projects on migrations.

The volumes under review here concern the French territories of the Americas where the percentage of foreigners is the greatest—both the departments of French Guiana (Guyane) and Guadeloupe, and the overseas collectivity (*collectivité d'outre-mer*, or COM) of Saint-Martin. The presence of foreigners in these territories is larger than in mainland France. In 2008, according to official statistics (INSEE 2008), it was 5.8 percent in France, compared to 37.2 percent in Guyane and 30 percent in Saint-Martin, but only 4.2 percent in Guadeloupe. Migrations have economic or political origins. The standard of living is much higher in the French Caribbean than anywhere else in the region, which makes these territories attractive to poorer people. Political conflicts such as the civil war in Suriname and political instability in Haiti have devastated the region, drawing the populations of these two countries to other territories. Migrations take different shapes. In French Guiana, they can involve movement back and forth across the Maroni and Oyapock Rivers; elsewhere they can be temporary or definitive. The books under review here belong to an anthropology of space and migrations that can be seen to involve France's definition of its overseas borders, the migrants' experience of these territories, and the hosting population's perspectives on the movement of people.

Migrants en Guyane, by Frédéric Piantoni, Associate Professor of Geography at the University of Reims, is a beautiful book of photographs showing foreigners living in Guyane as well as some views of neighborhoods and landscapes. Black and white or in color, shot between 2006 and 2010, the photos were the focus of an itinerant exhibition seen in France, Guyane, Suriname, and Brazil in 2011, the year that the French government dedicated to the celebration of its overseas territories. The book, organized in

terms of the themes of routes, districts, and borders, is much more than an exhibit catalog. The text of some eighty pages, together with impressively detailed maps, relates the history of people of Haitian, Brazilian, and Surinamese origin living in Guyane. Piantoni stresses the different political contexts and the modalities of settling down and reception for each of the three populations, and describes their different legal statuses as documented, undocumented, or involved in back-and-forth migrations.

The book also contextualizes this history of migrations in a geopolitical and historical analysis of the borders, drawing on Piantoni's voluminous 2009 work, *L'enjeu migratoire en Guyane: Une géographie politique*, and reflecting innovatively about the construction of the territory and therefore the borders of Overseas France in South America. Guyane has three types of physical borders, all quite recent: national boundaries with Brazil and Suriname established at the beginning of the twentieth century along the Maroni and Oyapock Rivers and cutting through the Amazonian forest; borders circumscribing municipalities, established in 1969 after the abolition of the territory of Inini (an internal territory of Guyane which had a separate administrative status until that year); and more recent internal borders—two customs, antiterrorist, and immigration checkpoints at Iracoubo and Belizon. There are also institutional border controls made by the recent visa requirements for certain foreign nationals. For example, Brazilian nationals cannot enter Guyane without a tourist visa although they can still go to France itself without one. These requirements are fluid—opened or closed by the French state according to the political context of the region.

Être migrant et Haïtien en Guyane, by Maud Laëthier, offers thorough coverage of the Haitian presence in the Cayenne region. It recounts the historical and contemporary origins of the Haitian migration before going into a detailed account of the migrants' experience of their new environment. Its chapters introduce an ethnography of the living space, analyze economic activities as translating social relationships, chronicle the development of cultural activism through a highly developed network of associations, and describe the religious affiliations to Vodou or Protestant churches—all of which shows the intensity of social networks in the Haitian community. One of the main strengths of the book is its proposal for a local ethnography in relation to the regional and national immigration policies of the French state. The Haitian community is never essentialized or described outside

of a historical framework. For example, Laëthier analyzes Vodou as it is practiced by believers and religious leaders of both Haitian and Guyanais origins, who go back and forth between Haiti and Guyane. She shows brilliantly how Vodou cannot be analyzed outside of its diasporic dimension, whether it is studied in the diaspora or in Haiti.

The goal of her book is to ascertain the identity formation processes of Haitian migrants, both as individuals and as members of a group. Laëthier argues that three complementary processes are at work. The first, a collective process that can be summed up as “I am the Other” (*Je suis l'autre*), refers to the host society's expectations. The second process is individual—“I am the similar Other” (*Je suis l'autre semblable*)—and refers to a quest for acceptance, as Haitians are culturally close to Guyanais. The third is both individual and collective—“I am a genuine Other” (*Je suis un autre authentique*)—and is accomplished when claiming Haitian traditions and history. Identity formation processes cannot be reified; identity is developed in relation to specific social and historical contexts. The main theoretical contribution of the book resides in its approach to the definition of the black diaspora in relation to the question of territoriality, which has often been denied to the black diaspora and to immigrants in general. In an outstanding chapter, Laëthier reviews social science theories regarding migration issues and the definition of the black diaspora. She argues both against Arjun Appadurai's claim (1996) that in an increasingly mobile world contemporary subjects are not involved in the construction of any territory and against Stuart Hall's claim (1989) that the black diaspora is so creative that it does not need to refer to a territory as a founding symbol for a collective identity. Laëthier's book shows how the production of a territory, hence “territorialization,” at an individual or collective level is essential in the development of one's subjectivity and a community, even in a transnational and global context. The study of the living space, of a specific neighborhood in Cayenne, or of the affiliation to Vodou or Protestant churches demonstrates the development of one's subjectivity anchored in a territory far from Haiti but in relation to the country of origin, which still operates as a major point of reference. Because of colonial history, the diasporic subjects are not lost in an absence of spatial references as Édouard Glissant argued in *Le discours antillais* (1981). Rather, Laëthier proposes (p. 292), social relations are constructed in reference to a *réseau territorialisé* (territorialized network) extending from Haiti to Guyane, made up of political, religious, economic, and dwelling branches.

The other two books under review are written from the viewpoint of citizens and researchers of the host societies. In *Saint-Martin, déstabilisation sociétale dans la Caraïbe française*, Daniella Jeffry, an English teacher and public policy expert, continues the critical approach to the island's economic development that she initiated in *Le scandale statutaire sur l'île de Saint-Martin* (2006). At that time she was opposed to the political change of Saint-Martin, a former Guadeloupean commune, into a more autonomous overseas collectivity (COM). In her new book, Jeffry analyzes the economic, demographic, and cultural history of the island since the emergence in the 1970s of an economic upturn based on tourism and supported by tax breaks. She demonstrates how the inhabitants of Saint-Martin were left by the wayside for the benefit of newcomers, whether French metropolitans, French Guadeloupeans, or foreigners from other Caribbean territories. Between 1970 and 2010 the population of Saint-Martin increased sevenfold due to the arrival of foreigners and newcomers from France, making the native population of Saint-Martin less than 20 percent of the total.

To qualify and analyze the consequences of such a demographic change, Jeffry develops the concept of silent genocide. She argues that Saint-Martin is not an ethnically and culturally integrated society but a segregated (*communautariste*) society in which every ethnic group fights for its own interests. The first part of the book, on post-1946 French Caribbean society, consists of three chapters in which she develops this key concept under the headings "Anatomy of a silent genocide," "Mental structure of the assimilated subject," and "Strategy of population displacement." She defines the silent genocide as a "quiet, cunning, bloodless [genocide], which is unnoticed, though it may go on for decades," adding that "In this study we do not take into account genocide based on killing people; instead we focus on the kind that destroys souls, spirits, and initiative, and generates discrimination to rule out the Other. This type of genocide is much more pernicious than the one that is usually acknowledged" (p. 27). Silent genocide can take different forms depending on whether people are displaced by substitution, dilution, or intermarriage. When people are displaced to a new territory, the original population becomes a minority group and this facilitates the exploitation of the place. Though Jeffry does not refer to Aimé Césaire, the concept of silent genocide owes much to the notion of "genocide by substitution" that Césaire developed in a speech in 1975 at the National Assembly to characterize the French plan to transfer 30,000 metropolitan French workers to Guyane where only 50,000 people were

living at the time. Césaire's concept is now used both by Antillean activists to object to the presence of French metropolitans in the French Caribbean and by the French far right to object to the presence of foreigners in continental France. Indeed, Jeffry's analysis comes close to the far right as she considers, on the basis of false and manipulated data as well as stereotypes, that the presence of foreigners in Saint-Martin is a threat to the society's equilibrium.

There follows an anthology of impressions regarding foreigners—more precisely though not clearly stated, those of Haitian origin. Jeffry argues that the granting of social benefits to foreigners has generated social and ethnic divisions and antagonisms at both individual and “clan” levels (p. 186), that foreign single mothers do not want to get married and have too many children to be granted more benefits (p. 186), and that there are too many undocumented workers who steal work from the native population (p. 51). These clichés are amplified in a chapter that Jeffry contributed to the final book under review, *L'immigration haïtienne dans la Caraïbe*, in which she asserts that with one thousand births a month (though note that INSEE documents between 721 and 915 births a year for the years 2000–2008), the number of foreigners is growing intrusively, despite the assertion of another contributor to the volume that many migrants actually live in Miami and show up in Saint-Martin a few days a month to collect their benefits (Jeffry in Joint & Méron, p. 176). In fact, “this is in their history, in their mentality” to “make money out of any situation and to get whatever they [Haitians] want” (Jeffry in Joint & Méron, p. 180).

L'immigration haïtienne dans la Caraïbe: Quel défi pour l'unité des peuples, edited by Louis-Auguste Joint, a teacher and sociologist, and Julien Merion, a political scientist affiliated with the Université des Antilles-Guyane, is an embarrassing book to review. It consists of three parts. “Haïti au carrefour de la Caraïbe” provides a historical and legal introduction to the history of Haitian migration; “Haïtiens d'île en île: Quelle intégration?” offers case studies of several Caribbean territories as well as analysis of the impact of U.S. deportations; and “Paroles d'Haïtiens, quelles interpellations?” brings together research notes on the life of immigrants, which are very questionable as the immigrants tend to embellish their experiences. A bibliography of Francophone citations concludes the book. The intention was to assemble a series of papers written by academics, citizens, and migrants in order to “put side by side experiences and perspectives on a common

phenomenon" (p. 230). Nevertheless, due to a lack of editorial care in terms of spelling, grammar, and (more importantly) content, the entire book falls apart. The variety of styles in the writing of the articles and in the level of analysis makes reading this book very difficult if not impossible, and it is hard to avoid being deeply upset by the shameless repetition of the worst clichés about Haitians. The book was designed to propose recommendations to contribute to the development of migration policies in the Caribbean region to favor the "integration of the peoples" beyond the usual discrimination against foreigners. I fear that the opposite will happen, as the book provides fuel for those who reject Haitians by claiming that they have an immeasurably different history and culture from the rest of the region. (In this context, I would mention René Belenus's splendid essay, "Saint-Domingue et la Guadeloupe en 1802: Destins croisés," which demonstrates how the rebellions cannot be dissociated when in both islands enslaved Africans took the Declaration of Human Rights at its word and made it apply to the Caribbean.)

Although migrations have always been part of Caribbean history, the gap in analyses produced on the one hand by academics and on the other by Antillean residents reveals the tension in addressing such a source of conflict. We can only hope that academics will feel responsible for making their work available outside of academic circles by engaging politicians and larger audiences in a public debate.

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