Gérard Noiriel

Chocolat: La véritable histoire d'un homme sans nom. Paris: Bayard, 2016. 535 pp.
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How is one to write the biography of a Cuban slave turned circus clown in the Paris of the Belle Époque, when no last name is confirmed and no written records can be found either in Cuba or in France? The French historian of immigration Gérard Noiriel confronted this task with admirable resourcefulness. He tells the story of Rafael Padilla, alias Chocolat, based on a popular biography published in 1907, complemented by extensive archival and online research. It is a story not only of Chocolat, but of a lively circus industry in Paris between 1880 and 1914 coexisting with cabarets and popular theaters. Noiriel's interest in Chocolat dates from 2009, when he began to work with the collective DAJA (Des Acteurs culturels Jusqu'aux chercheurs et aux Artistes) on a project presenting the Cuban clown to popular audiences as the first black performing star in France. A film proposal followed, for which Noiriel seriously investigated the life and work of Chocolat and his partner, the English clown Foottit. The film came out in 2015, and Noiriel's book a year later, accompanied by a touring exhibit.

Chocolat's story is indeed a fascinating one: born a slave in 1866 in Havana, he was sold at age six to a Spanish merchant who took him to live with his family in the Basque town Sopuerta where he was mistreated. He fled to Bilbao and worked in the quarries there, until he met the English clown Tony Grice, who engaged him as a servant and sometime partner. They made their way to Paris and quickly became successful at Joseph Oller's Nouveau Cirque, an upscale establishment founded in 1886 in the heart of *rive droite* Paris. Chocolat became famous there when he was featured as the star of a nautical pantomime, *Les Noces de Chocolat*. But he reached the height of his fame performing as a clumsy Auguste and side-kick of the white-faced British clown Foottit. After 1905, the circus business began to decline, and new fads such as the African-American inspired cake-walk and boxing, as well as a nascent cinema industry made their entry in Paris. Foottit and Chocolat parted ways, and Chocolat continued to perform at various locations, notably children's hospitals where he received an award for his work with ill and disabled children. He died in poverty during a tour to Bordeaux in 1917.

Much has been written in recent years about the French fascination with black or African culture reaching a high point in the 1920s with Josephine Baker's performances at the Folies Bergères. Notably, Petrine Archer-Straw's book *Negrophilia* (2000) describes the primitive allure lent to Blacks in paintings, the popular press, advertising, photography, theater and literature, and in

colonial fair exhibits, supported by popular scientific theories on the inequality of the races and by colonialist practices. In contrast, Noiriél attempts to represent the point of view of a black performer himself, drawing on a variety of literary registers: a travelog in the first chapter (where he travels to Havana in search of traces of his protagonist), comments in the running text on the historical sources he has found, or else fictitious diary entries and even letters, inserted in italics into the narrative, soliciting information from Rafael and reflecting on recent findings. We get from this method astonishing insights into the little researched world of circus life in Paris and the multiple ways in which black performers were able to maneuver to carve out a space for themselves. We find out, for example, that Rafael formed a family with a white French woman, raising her two sons from an earlier marriage, all of whom adopted “Chocolat” as their last name. Noiriél’s book is situated somewhere between a biography, a historian’s research diary, and an almost fairy-tale account of the ascent and decline of an Afro-Cuban “hero” in the strange world of Belle Époque Paris.

Unlike Jill Lane’s *Blackface Cuba* (2005), Noiriél’s book does not engage with postcolonial studies; Lane examines notions of race and racism in Cuba during the same period through the analysis of minstrel shows and popular theater in Cuba. Noiriél is less interested in studying ideas on race per se than he is in portraying the everyday life of someone who despite his slave origins rose to fame and established a new type of pantomime performance. This rich portrait will be an indispensable work of reference for those looking to write the history of popular spectacle in turn-of-the-century Paris. It also shows how interconnected black popular arts, literature, and music were across the Atlantic. Indeed, Chocolat’s circus career (as well as the boxing success of Jack Johnson in the United States and Paris) must be seen as the unlikely trailblazers for the rise of Josephine Baker and the Harlem Renaissance writers in the 1920s.

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