Félix F. Germain

Decolonizing the Republic: African and Caribbean Migrants in Postwar Paris (1946–1974). Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 2016. ix + 232 pp. (Paper US\$ 39.95)

Decolonizing the Republic is part of a growing body of work reminding us that the dismantling of empire is not a story defined solely by political transformations affecting the colonies. Instead, Félix Germain shows how the imperial metropolis of Paris proved to be a critical front of decolonization where the racial politics of empire were confronted, challenged, and reconfigured. He focuses on the three decades following World War II often described by French historians as the “Glorious Thirty.” But for whom? With Caribbean and African migrants at the center of analysis, the book offers an alternative vantage point and notes that these decades of economic growth also corresponded to a period of demographic transition when France’s black population became the largest in Europe. As part of this transition, Germain makes connections between black internationalist activism, popular representations of blackness, and the ways that African and Caribbean migrants compelled white French coworkers, employers, landlords, government officials, and everyday citizens to rethink their ideas about and interactions with a growing black population.

Culling an array of sources including documentary film, music, oral histories, and ethnographies, this study builds on work on the metropolitan vectors of decolonization and anticolonial politics in France by scholars including Kristin Ross, Todd Shepard, and Jennifer Boittin. Moreover, it offers an alternative periodization that extends well beyond World War II for understanding how the political relations of the African Diaspora shaped anticolonial politics in France. Most important, by centering the aspirations and material realities of working-class African and Caribbean migrants, Germain challenges historical narratives about black life in twentieth-century France that have largely focused on male intellectuals associated with black internationalist projects including the various permutations of the Negritude movement. Through stories about rent strikes, shifting immigration policies that tied border crossing to work prospects, and attempts to professionalize domestic labor, he underscores the idea that the process of racial formation and the political expressions that it produces are tethered to class, status, and gender.

Germain shows how differences in citizenship status profoundly shaped the experience of settlement and possibilities for effectively practicing decolonial politics for African and Caribbean migrants. Whereas Caribbean migrants from French overseas departments possessed citizenship, Africans lacked this legal standing and thus encountered greater scrutiny by customs officials, targeted policing, threats of deportation, and popular anti-African sentiment fomented

at times by public health officials, all of which affected the strategies that African migrants employed to express “oppositional identities” (p. 57). For instance, rather than directly confront employers about undesirable work conditions, African migrants often retaliated by abandoning their positions, which indirectly created incentives for employers to raise minimum wage standards to reduce turnover.

Two chapters on working-class Caribbean women and men examine the way gender and sexuality informed popular representations of black migrants to different political ends. Germain discusses how French officials invoked ideas about the supposed hypersexuality and overfecundity of Caribbean women to argue that they taxed the colonial economy, proffering migration schemes as a means of population control in the Caribbean. Conversely, for Caribbean nationalists, narratives about the sexual victimization of migrant women supported a type of hypermasculinity by depicting nationalist men as the rightful protectors of Caribbean women in France as part of a larger challenge to colonial power. In discussing some of the experiences of Caribbean men, Germain shows the “heterogeneous characteristics of the Caribbean male migration” (p. 112) through useful life narratives that depict how the limitations of French republicanism, attachments to home, and ideas about respectability created different relationships between migrants and French society.

As Germain examines moments of political activism he is at his best in distinguishing how different histories of decolonization in the Caribbean and Africa shaped political agendas among black migrants from these regions in France. Although African informants viewed the popular uprisings in Paris in May 1968 as a “French affair, not an African one” (p. 145), Germain explains that Caribbean students seized the moment to link campaigns for workers’ rights with a broader anticolonial challenge that pushed an economic agenda for black migrants in France and development in the French departments. He argues that aside from the risk of deportation, African migrants’ exclusion from labor unions, coupled with an understanding that the demonstrations did not speak to their specific experiences within the French labor market, provided little incentive to join the protests. Overall, *Decolonizing the Republic* offers a much needed intervention in scholarship on the African Diaspora in France during the twentieth century. While it leaves some questions about how the colonial context shaped Caribbean and African expectations of life in the (post)imperial metropolis, it offers a fresh angle to understand how people of African descent contested the racial legacies of French imperialism.

Kennetta Hammond Perry

Department of History, East Carolina University

perryk@ecu.edu