

BOOK REVIEW

Sylvain Pattieu, Emmanuelle Sibead, and Tyler Stovall. *The Black Populations of France: Histories from Metropole to Colony*. Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 2021. 236 pp. 5 charts. Index. \$30. Paper. ISBN: 978-1-4962-2899-4.

The study of race in France is still a burgeoning field that scholars are beginning to explore. The authors of this edited volume delve into the historical and contemporary contexts of France and its colonies to shed light on how Black populations have existed within and helped to shape the French nation. The book addresses the dearth of literature on race in France that considers race as a social rather than a biological fact by drawing from historical research to expand historical understandings of Blacks in France. The volume consists of three parts: “Colonial France in Africa,” “Blacks in Metropolitan France,” and “The Politics of Race in France Today.”

Part One is made up of three chapters. Chapter One looks at how the residents of Sainte-Marie, Madagascar made claims for citizenship in France. Chapter Two examines images and representations of women in French colonial Africa. Author Sarah Zimmerman writes that a wide range of assumptions about race, gender, and power shape complicated representations of *mesdames tirailleurs* around sub-Saharan Africa. Images of these women became constructed as both the cause of relational conflict as well as the solution to that conflict. Chapter Three examines how African soldiers in World War II experienced conditional belonging within the metropole, which led to contested racial categorization upon their return to French West Africa.

The four chapters in Part Two examine the movement of Blacks in the metropole from the 1700s to the mid-1900s. Chapter Four investigates Black families in France, and the effects of both legal and religious norms and laws preventing interracial couples and even some Black couples from marrying. Chapter Five emphasizes the racist assumptions in maritime labor that insisted African sailors were better able to tolerate the extreme temperatures of 140 degrees Fahrenheit in the stokehold than European sailors. This assumption disproportionately exposed Black sailors to dangerous working conditions.

Other than bringing light to such atrocities, Chapter Five illuminates how colonial sailors of color “engaged with and circumvented imperial regimes that monitored and employed them” (98) by buying and trading papers to shift their perceived nationalities to optimize their chances of finding good work and decent treatment. The next chapter, Chapter Six, takes an interesting, gendered perspective of Black women at this time and how they communicated about sex and sensuality. Black women travelled from one end of the French empire to another, sharing their intimate stories both by written and spoken word. In the

process, they shared their own ideas about gender, race, and sexuality across space and place.

Lastly, Chapter Seven examines the creation of BUMIDOM (Bureau des migrations d’Outre-mer, or Overseas Migration office), a part of the governmental structure of France that was tasked with overseeing migration flows from Réunion and the French Caribbean isles to mainland France. This chapter highlights the intersection of immigration, labor, gender, class, and race (138).


The chapters in Part Three and Part Four look at different discourses of race in light of contemporary politics in France. Chapter Eight engages with French Caribbean politics. The author, Audrey Célestine, details a number of agencies related to France’s overseas populations, ending with the creation of DIECFOM (Déléguée interministérielle pour l’égalité des chances des Français d’Outre-Mer) in 2007 as Nicolas Sarkozy assumed the presidency. The author, however, repeatedly refers to “the hexagon” of overseas France without defining the term, potentially leaving readers lacking that prior knowledge without the tools necessary to understand her contribution fully.

Chapter Nine calls into question “What is the Black Body? How can it be considered per se not as a ‘scene of display’ or stereotypes and counterimages but as a site of Black experiences” (158)? The author, Sarah Fila-Bakabadio, looks at Black feminine press in contemporary France, arguing that though the feminine press may initially seem superficial with its emphasis on physical appearances, the act of centering attention on the Black body in and of itself is important and meaningful.

Chapter Ten looks at the history of the words “noir” and “Black” in France, tracing the usage of these words in French colonies and the United States (175).

Chapter Eleven, the final substantive chapter—and written by Tyler Stovall, one of the editors of the volume—examines how African Americans, especially African American expats, shape and fit into French debates about Blackness. Stovall drives home the fact that Black people have been in France since the Roman Gaul. The colonial history of France instigated the modern trouble of integrating Blacks into France, but when thinking of the problem of race in France, American expats are typically excluded as separate from French-speaking Blacks.

Overall, this edited volume is an excellent addition to the limited existing literature on race in France. While at times uneven in terms of the level of engagement each chapter elicits, this fact reflects the range of expertise and experience of the various authors. That unevenness of the chapters also allows this volume to examine a diversity of topics and ultimately lead to the production of this intellectually valuable compilation.

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