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Lorelle SEMLEY, *To Be Free and French: Citizenship in France's Atlantic Empire*

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Lorelle SEMLEY, *To Be Free and French: Citizenship in France's Atlantic Empire*, Cambridge University Press, 2017, coll. « Critical Perspectives on Empire », xxii-362 p., ISBN : 9781107498471 (paper), 24,99 £.

- 1 Lorelle Semley's *To Be Free and French* is a fresh, surprising, and de-centering approach to questions of citizenship in France's colonial spaces and the metropole, from the late eighteenth through the twenty-first centuries. Semley, a historian of Africa by training, has coined the term "trans-African" to describe the themes that tie this work together. By "trans-African," she invokes overlapping networks of people, products, and ideas, as well as multi-faceted images of African identity (162–3). *To Be Free and French* braids a series of carefully constructed biographical portraits of people of African descent through a sequence of chronological chapters, each sited in a particular city within the wider French empire: Gorée, Cap-Français, Saint-Pierre, Porto-Novo, Paris, and Dakar. From the vantage points of these individuals and cities, Semley demonstrates a deep history of people claiming French citizenship, with its attendant universal rights, alongside identities of difference: gender, culture, and local histories. A work of subtle craft, Semley's achievement is not so much a scientific analysis or theory of citizenship as an invitation to see the history of French citizenship from new perspectives.
- 2 The most creative intervention of Semley's book is her choice to foreground highly mobile Africans in the parts of the Atlantic world touched by French colonialism. Through more than a dozen protagonists, the reader's view shifts from the traditional imperial gaze—from Paris outward—to the stories and perspectives of Africans and their descendants of color. The *signares* Anne Rossignol and her daughter Marie-Adélaïde migrated from their home in Gorée, Senegal, to Cap-Français, and then to

Charleston, South Carolina, where they apparently managed to hide all traces of their African ancestry. Cyrille Bissette, the wealthy Martinican free man of color exiled to Paris for his activism for equal rights, became a prolific and radical abolitionist in Paris, only to ally with the planter faction when he ran for legislative office after the abolition of 1848. Ignacio Souleymane Paraiso transcended his Nigerian father's enslavement to a Brazilian master in Bahia, and, through loyal service to the king of Porto Novo, gained wealth and status in West Africa, eventually converting to Islam, only to become enmeshed in a political fracas over the site and leadership of a local mosque. The marriage of Clothilde Marie Louise Bertraud and Victor Patterson joined families with roots in Dahomey, France, Senegal, Martinique, and Brazil. Semley's most extensive biographical portrait is that of Marc Kojo Tovalou Houénou, who fused his Dahomeyan origins and French citizenship, but struggled with members of his birth family, French authorities, and Marcus Garvey (among others) to assert his leadership. Finally, the stories of three black politicians of the Fourth Republic, Gerty Archimède, Eugénie Éboué-Tell, and Louis Ignacio-Pinto, carry forward the analysis of French citizenship policy toward blacks into the post-war period. Semley's close analysis of their stories reveals how elite blacks' transnational networks and multivalent identities provoked anxiety in French officialdom when they made claims to French citizenship.

- 3 One of the strengths of *To Be Free and French* is the way that it foregrounds gendered analysis of citizenship over more than two centuries of French empire. Analysis of Louverture's 1801 Saint-Domingue constitution shows the highly gendered citizenship policies based in the patriarchal family, similar to those of the metropole. Later chapters explore the roles of *patronés*, *porteuses*, and carnivalesque cross-dressing in colonial Saint-Pierre. Chapter 6 explores how Eugénie Éboué-Tell and Gerty Archimède fashioned political careers during the Fourth Republic. In each case, Semley suggests how citizenship offered differently for women until the establishment of equal political rights in 1946.
- 4 Another important hallmark of *To Be Free and French* is Semley's careful attention to language, as, for example, in Semley's analysis of the terms chosen by free blacks in their petition of November 1789 (34–5) or her comparison of two versions of Louverture's 1801 Constitution (46). Her exploration of these nuances suggests the subtle shades of meaning implicit in terms of identity, whether racial or status-based. Throughout the book, Semley analyzes how specific terms migrated across linguistic boundaries, such as *morne/marron* (27), *grumet* (74–5), and *agudá* (160–1), illustrating the hybridity of language and the concepts these words embody. Her analysis of the activist Houénou's 1924 speech criticizing France's policies toward colonial subjects captures the political context, his wordplay on the term *évolué*, and his "violent, suggestive [metaphorical] imagery" (203–4, 230). Central to her analysis are the debates over how *égalité* (universalism) and *équivalence* (respect for particular gender, racial, or cultural differences) came to be resolved by some black French intellectuals as "equality *in* equivalence" (262–5).
- 5 Several limitations in Semley's approach are nevertheless apparent. The book's fluid organization alternates between lyricism and the occasional awkward aside. Each chapter focuses primarily on a particular city and advances its story through time, with many of the historical personages weaving in and out of different chapters, as the chronology backtracks and then moves forward. In most cases the effect is poetic, like a river with eddies, but at other times an inelegant "As discussed in the previous

chapter” breaks the flow. Cambridge University Press also let down this project with insufficient copy-editing and the decision to run long captions, which take up too much space, and reduce the visibility of Semley’s fascinating and important images and maps.

- 6 Legal historians and social theorists looking for an over-arching analytical argument about the evolution of French citizenship *vis-à-vis* Africans and their descendants will likely be disappointed. By shifting the sites of analysis from French legislation and administrative policy to site-specific claims to citizenship by particular individuals of color, Semley offers no fully realized theory, nor satisfying explanations, for why French approaches to citizenship changed over time. Even on a smaller scale, the description of historical change sometimes begs causal analysis. For example, in Chapter 2 (90–3, 98), how did the *signares* achieve their economic force in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries? What labor did their slaves perform that produced such wealth for their mistresses? In Chapter 5, why did the “most restrictive accession law” of 1939 cause the number of African applications for French citizenship to triple? Semley claims that “there was nothing unusual to explain the sudden jump in applications other than more familiarity with and knowledge of the process” (217–18), but such an explanation is unsatisfying. However, analyzing the historical development of the French state’s policy toward black people is not the fundamental aim of her project. Rather, Semley’s approach leaves us with a vivid sense of the broad, transatlantic networks formed and maintained by African and Afro-descended women and men over more than two centuries. Its cumulative effect is suggestive and associative, rather than the demonstration of a proof.
- 7 *To Be Free and French* offers an unparalleled synthesis of scholarship on Afro-descended peoples throughout the French Atlantic, especially regarding the changing definitions of citizenship. By virtue of its wide-ranging chronological and geographical scope, readers are introduced to extensive site-specific scholarship. The writing style is relaxed and engaging. As such, it will be suitable for advanced undergraduate and graduate students, and for scholars seeking to stretch beyond their narrow areas of expertise.

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