

# Joseph-Gabriel, Annette K. Reimagining Liberation: How Black Women Transformed Citizenship in the French Empire

Anna Rocca

Number 120, Winter 2022

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1089987ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/1089987ar>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

Department of French, Dalhousie University

ISSN

0711-8813 (print)

2562-8704 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this review

Rocca, A. (2022). Review of [Joseph-Gabriel, Annette K. Reimagining Liberation: How Black Women Transformed Citizenship in the French Empire]. *Dalhousie French Studies*, (120), 152–154. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1089987ar>

vivante et morte à la fois de l'écriture », un concept séduisant qui encourage certainement à envisager l'œuvre de Chateaubriand comme un tout.

Dans le dernier chapitre (intitulé « Œuvres complètes et identité »), on explique le bien-fondé et les défis d'une publication des œuvres complètes de Chateaubriand au XXI<sup>e</sup> siècle, tout en comparant l'édition Champion avec les entreprises analogues conçues par l'éditeur Ladvocat (1826-1831) et par Sainte-Beuve (1859-1861). Didier souligne entre autres qu'« une œuvre à être replacée dans l'ensemble d'une création prend une autre valeur, un autre sens » (p. 102-103) et que « [l']incomplétude est le signe d'une richesse toujours renouvelée, inépuisable » (p. 103) pour établir la pertinence de ce projet, qui arrive sans aucun doute à point nommé étant donné l'absence d'une édition savante de l'intégralité des écrits de Chateaubriand. Si l'on peut regretter l'allure de document publicitaire que prend parfois ce chapitre, il n'en demeure pas moins que Didier y montre de façon assez concluante que Chateaubriand lui-même, en publiant l'ensemble de son œuvre chez Ladvocat, a cherché à produire un type d'autobiographie dans laquelle le « moi tripartite » est mis en avant. La nouvelle édition des œuvres complètes chez Champion fait valoir le « Chateaubriand autobiographe » (p. 123) au même titre que le voyageur, l'écrivain et le politicien, alors que « la veine autobiographique donne à la trinité Chateaubriand une profondeur, un recul qui n'était pas possible dans la jeunesse et la maturité » (*id.*) et que « [c]ette quatrième dimension scelle la vérité et l'unicité du triangle » (*id.*) Quoiqu'elle paraisse hétéroclite pour bien des lecteur.trice.s, l'œuvre de l'Enchanteur serait donc le lieu d'impulsions contradictoires qui favoriserait la construction d'une identité évoluant sans cesse mais qui tend simultanément vers la conciliation et l'harmonie.

En somme, Béatrice Didier propose des arguments persuasifs non seulement pour illustrer l'aspect ternaire de la carrière de Chateaubriand et de l'homme lui-même, mais pour envisager son œuvre comme un tout harmonieux, dont la visée autobiographique en assurerait la dimension unitaire. Malgré la brièveté de l'étude, celle-ci offre des perspectives engageantes sur l'appréciation et l'analyse des écrits de cette figure essentielle du XIX<sup>e</sup> siècle littéraire. L'on est néanmoins surpris par l'absence d'une conclusion synthétique et par la bibliographie assez sélective du volume. Du reste, il aurait convenu que l'éditeur procède à une révision plus rigoureuse du texte afin d'y corriger les coquilles. Tout bien considéré, *Chateaubriand : une identité trinitaire* a le mérite d'orienter la compréhension d'une œuvre fondamentale dans le but d'y dégager cette multiplicité cohérente qui la singularise.

Daniel Long

Université Sainte-Anne

\*\*\*

Joseph-Gabriel, Annette K. *Reimagining Liberation: How Black Women Transformed Citizenship in the French Empire*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2020. 243 p.

In the mid-twentieth century, when people living under French colonial rule began claiming the civil liberties granted them as citizens of the empire, France enacted legislation that relegated these populations to the rank of second-class citizens, thus rendering questions of citizenry and national belonging increasingly racialized.

Against this backdrop, focusing on the notions and practices of alternative ways of understanding citizenship, in *Reimagining Liberation: How Black Women Transformed Citizenship in the French Empire*, Annette K. Joseph-Gabriel sheds light on the overlooked transnational and anticolonial political actions and literary productions of seven Black women. Coming from Africa (Jane Vialle, Andrée Blouin, and Aoua Kéita), Martinique (Suzanne Césaire and Paulette Nardal), the French Guyana (Eugénie Éboué-

Tell), and the United States (Eslanda Robeson), these women played strategic and critical roles in the political and literary arena of the time. Because of their social engagement and public activism, Joseph-Gabriel maintains, their work must be understood as “integral to the genealogy of thinkers and practitioners in liberation movements in the African diaspora” (12). The seven Black women risked their lives to fight against colonial power structures. They challenged the boundaries of Frenchness and claimed a plurality of belonging. They reinterpreted the understanding and the practice of citizenship and they fostered women’s global alliances as a necessary tool to dismantle interconnected systems of racial, gendered, patriarchal, and nationalist oppression. Their anticolonial perspectives and political actions preeminently engaged with the notions of civic participation and belonging, both intended as realities experienced beyond national borders. Their new stands delineated a vision of what Joseph-Gabriel describes as a “decolonial citizenship,” that is one that: challenges the colonial components embedded into the notion of citizenry; disentangles citizenship from the national borders, thus promoting a shift towards plural forms of belonging; and, most importantly, redefines “the very terms on which collective identity and belonging can be imagined” (11, 12).

The work comprises six chapters detailing the difficult life paths and groundbreaking initiatives of the seven Black women. In chapter 1 dedicated to Suzanne Césaire, in addition to Césaire’s published work, Joseph-Gabriel delves into her largely unexplored private letters to better situate “her dissident thinking” towards fascism and the racist policies of the Vichy’s regime (33). Césaire’s articulations of decolonial citizenship and Antillean belonging bypass the binary opposition between Martinique and France to depict the Caribbean archipelago as a fertile space of political practices and artistic creations. Césaire’s project of a Pan-Caribbean belonging generated by artistic creation is envisioned as the onset of a decolonized society. In chapter 2, Joseph-Gabriel follows the evolution of Paulette Nardal’s woman-centered project of political self-definition for Antillean women. Nardal’s attention to Black women’s intersecting forms of oppression that she witnessed while in Paris laid the foundation to her understanding of Martinican women as the political spur to transforming Martinique into a decolonized space. Going beyond *Negritude*, Joseph-Gabriel argues, Nardal envisions a composite French-Antillean citizenship in which “black women colonized subjects” would increasingly participate in French politics all the while refusing French cultural assimilation (60). Chapter 3 brings to life the incredible stories of Eugénie Éboué-Tell and Jane Vialle, both decorated members of the French Resistance and elected to the French Senate after World War II. They articulated their feminist politics across Central Africa, France, the Antilles, French Guyana, and the United States. Reversing the French colonial discourse of bringing civilization, Éboué-Tell and Vialle underlined the debt that France had towards the colonies for having been liberated from Nazi occupation. By placing Black women at the center of their demands, the two women claimed the full status of French citizenship and advocated for concrete equal rights between the metropole and the overseas territories. In chapter 4, Joseph-Gabriel stresses the complexity of Andrée Blouin’s positioning as a French, African, and *métisse* woman in colonial Central Africa at the approach of independence. Starting her grassroots women movement in the Belgian Congo, Blouin was later appointed as chief of protocol in Patrice Lumumba’s cabinet. Her personal experiences of racial discrimination, as well as her political influence and anticolonial activism, framed her Pan-African citizenship vision that would privilege multiplicity over blackness, in response to European colonialism. In chapter 5, while carrying on a feminist political perspective of women as catalyst of democratic change, Aoua Kéita aimed attention at rural women’s voices. Pivotal figure in the French Sudan’s anticolonial battles, she was “the political protagonist par excellence” (26). Her definition of citizenship, Joseph-Gabriel contends,

is rooted in the reality of African rural women, and is informed by a feminist praxis that is in constant negotiation with different notions of belonging. In chapter 6, Eslanda Robeson brought together all the aforementioned articulations of citizenship to craft her own vision of transnational feminist Global South solidarity and resistance. Having visited more than forty countries, Robeson interpreted mobility as resistance to imperialist surveillance and advanced a broad definition of citizenship for African Americans that acknowledged both geographical belonging to the Global North and "solidarity with, or even belonging to, the Global South" (174). Finally, the epilogue looks at a later generation of women writing on the journal *Awa: La revue de la femme noire* to attest to the continuation of Black women's critical commitment to citizenship in the francophone world in the 1960s and '70s.

Selected as the 2019 *Cite Black Women* top non-fictional book and the 2020 *Black Perspectives* best black history book, *Reimagining Liberation: How Black Women Transformed Citizenship in the French Empire* is an exhaustively researched, groundbreaking, and unique must-read for academics and enthusiasts alike. By casting a light on the mostly unexplored lives, writings, and political actions of seven Black women, Joseph-Gabriel celebrates the achievements of these extraordinary activists and intellectuals while inspiring readers to persist in their efforts to envision, and potentially realize, a decolonized world.

Anna Rocca

Salem State University

\*\*\*

Elizabeth Sabiston. *Transcultural Migration in the Novels of Hédi Bouraoui. A New Ulysses*. Leiden-Boston: Brill-Rodopi. Francopolophonies, Vol.30, 2021. 216 p.

Following *The Muse strikes back: Female Narratology in the Novels of Hédi Bouraoui* (2005), Elizabeth Sabiston analyzes Bouraoui's novels from a geopolitical and historical perspective. Sabiston points out that while migrants mobility, a postmodern avatar of Odysseus' journeys, bear their language expression, thus, the creation of a new mythology of the poor immigrant implies also a linguistic experimentation in which, from "word-concepts" to lyricism, poetry becomes a "quintessential language".

"*Cap Nord: Mythopoeia and the Quest for Language*", describes the search of identity of the modern Hannibal whose origins as the same as the author, while he speaks better French than Arabic. The reincarnation of Du Bellay's Ulysses, Omer-Homer, who is driven by his love-hate towards his father, is a stranger in his native Maghreb where he abandoned his wife and child. The search becomes an oedipal quest. (→p.15)

The next chapter, "Penelope Liberated: the Female Quest in *Les Aléas d'une Odyssée*", is devoted to the double search for the mother and the fiancée, who are both poets. Laura is not a passive muse as in Pétrarque, but the female incarnation of unchained Odysseus. She represents the immigrant from the Maghreb, the "anti-hero" of "The primordial adventure of our time". While reversing the Odysseus structure, Penelope/Laura's return to the origins of Western civilization which means for her Syracuse and Sicily, is inspired by "the man of [her] heart," a male muse.

"Adventures of a Young Man: the Initiation of Télémaque in *Méditerranée à voile toute*", is dedicated to the intertwining of the past, present and future. Télémaque is represented as a postmodern Don Quixote, and his virtual reality. Supposedly born in Majorca or Malta, Télé and Hannibal, are both European and African. Hannibal, a Maghreb native who doesn't like couscous, is not only "the immigrant looking for work, but the alien in search of his "first strangeness", echoing Albert Camus. However, his, positive, solitude, encourages him, like the doves, "to shine (his) feathers so to fly with