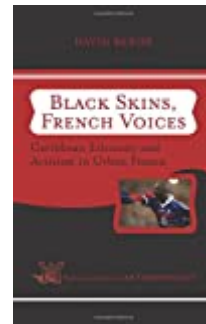




David Beriss. *Black Skins, French Voices: Caribbean Ethnicity and Activism in Urban France.* Boulder: Westview Press, 2004. xx + 156 pp. \$19.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8133-4254-2.



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Published on H-Caribbean (August, 2006)

Créolité

David Beriss's *Black Skins, French Voices* is a brief but rich book, and I will certainly use it in my undergraduate teaching this year. It offers a freeze frame, or case study, of activist and culturally active Antilleans in Paris, as gleaned from interviews, speeches, and observation. Beriss focuses on Antillean migrants from Martinique and Guadeloupe who are caught in a tight web of relations, including French social-class policy, universalist notions of citizenship, Euro-racism, diasporic nostalgia and diverse cultural energy. Beriss notes that since the early 1980s this population, which is scattered across Paris, has been gathering in clubs, cultural groups, churches, sports clubs, social work offices, and other venues, with a view to performing their culture and, simultaneously, challenging dominant and exclusionary practices. The thrust of these social reformers is to make *le cultural* as significant as *le social* in shaping French social policy. Beriss believes that their collective efforts and increasing visibility is significantly *creolizing* France, albeit very slowly.

Beginning in Martinique and Guadeloupe, *Black Skins, French Voices* traces the subsumption of the An-

tilles into the French empire, first as a colony and then as a department. Beriss outlines the goal of *assimilation* as undergirding this development, but highlights the ambivalent experiences of migrants to France in relation to French identity and citizenship. Noting that there are multiple local points of view on the Antilles' political and legal status, he suggests that Antillean migration to the French colonial center has revealed the fault lines in the assimilation project. In particular, he notes how social tensions are being challenged and resolved in the cultural arena with the idea of Créolité. Its proponents argue that "Antilleans are the product of a constant interaction of ideas and people from all over the world, not some hermetically sealed local culture" (p. 70). Beriss believes the impact of ideas such as Créolité among the Antilleans in France could, along with the cultural impact of the much larger African immigrant populations, transform France towards a more genuinely multi-cultural state.

This process is, obviously, marked by contention, refusal, denial and challenge, issues grounded in the French political and cultural leadership's refusal to acknowledge

the existence of racism in France. Racism in France is usually expressed as the inability of culture groups to fully mix. In this regard, the examination of Cr  olit   reveals the actual dynamism of cultural forces in France. Beriss uses multiple examples, such as the French national celebrations of Bastille Day; the bicentennial of the French Revolution; the ban on headscarves in schools; and the 1998 World Cup soccer victory of France, to highlight both the conflicts and occasional moments where differences are transcended.

Unfortunately, Beriss does not explore the relationships between Antilleans and other immigrants. It would be interesting to know, for instance, Antilleans' views on the headscarf debate or African perspectives on the failure of French Republican sentiment to acknowledge its debt to former slaves. Does French social policy guarantee the segregation of immigrants from each other? Do they all only orient themselves to the hegemonic cultural and political organizations, to the French conception of itself as a unified national culture? Beriss observes pointedly that Antilleans tend to see themselves as a "culture group," not a race, which is in conformity with French social scientific literature that avoids discussion of race relations. In this respect, we could see the cultural work of

Cr  olit   as a distinctively "French" practice. Cultural activism, moreover, is deeply uneven. The large Antillean Seventh Day Adventist populations, for example, are not particularly interested in social challenge, but rather in their own universalisms. Martinicians and Guadeloupeans, on the other hand, have been more concerned with constructing themselves as "cultural citizens."

The examples provided by Beriss give us glimpses into these debates—on culture (whose culture, what culture), and on French nationalism. However, he seems to reject a single argument, with the result that the text reads more as a set of keen thoughts on the topics raised. There are many fascinating but too brief discussions that leave the reader wanting. For instance, the discussion of social workers grappling with Caribbean spiritualist practices could have been developed into a book on its own. A greater historical elaboration would have been valuable for enabling readers to make sense of their own observations, such as the striking composition of the French soccer team in 2006, its origins and cultural and political significance. Overall, however, the book's approach reflects the community's multiple venues and voices—of change and reflection, some strong and some as yet uncertain.

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Citation: Sara Abraham. Review of Beriss, David, *Black Skins, French Voices: Caribbean Ethnicity and Activism in Urban France*. H-Caribbean, H-Net Reviews. August, 2006.

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