

Garnett on Church (2017)

Church, Christopher M. *Paradise Destroyed: Catastrophe and Citizenship in the French Caribbean*. U of Nebraska P, 2017, pp. 342, ISBN 978-0-8032-9099-0

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Christopher M. Church brings his expertise as both a cultural and digital historian to this groundbreaking study of how the multiple natural disasters that afflicted Martinique and Guadeloupe during the first four decades of the Third Republic challenged the French conception of what it meant to be a citizen and the ideal of cultural assimilation. Belonging to old colonies that were part of France's first colonial empire, the black and mixed-race inhabitants of Martinique and Guadeloupe were granted full citizenship by the Constitution of 1875, even as France was expanding its second colonial empire in West Africa and Indochina. In light of this, Church's study seeks to answer two questions: "How did modern France reconcile its liberal convictions with its imperial ambitions? And how did a colonial citizenry transform the Republic and its concomitant definition of citizenship?" (236).

In his first chapter, "French Race, Tropical Space: The French Caribbean during the Third Republic," Church examines the place of the two old colonies within the French imagination as opposed to their reality. Considered colonies of settlement when in fact they remained colonies of exploitation, Martinique and Guadeloupe "held a peculiar place within the French empire" at the close of the nineteenth century (21). Viewed as "civilized" spaces continually threatened by an exotic and hostile nature, they became the sites of "an intense struggle over French identity and nationality" involving race, politics and socioeconomics (19). Response to disasters, Church contends, exposed the racial and social tensions that underlaid a "republican myth of assimilation" (21).

The issue of "national integration" is one of the themes running through *Paradise Destroyed* as Church compares the status of the "colonial citizens" of the Antilles to that of disenfranchised "metropolitan colonials" seeking a political voice and social welfare within the mother country itself (97). Thus, he concludes his second chapter, "The Language of Citizenship: Compatriotism and the Great Antillean Fires of 1890," with a comparison to the French response to the Saint-Étienne mine collapse of 1889, showing how depictions of the miners were racialized and "blackened" in the press (99). Likewise, in his third chapter, "The Calculus of Disaster: Sugar and the Hurricane of 18 August 1891," Church contrasts the insufficiency of financial relief awarded to Martinique to the aid accorded the department of Alpes-Maritimes in the wake of an 1887 earthquake. He explores how the response to the widespread devastation to Martinique by the storm was viewed by French officials primarily in economic rather than humanitarian terms as "disaster fatigue" set in (12).

One of Church's objectives in *Paradise Destroyed* is to convince other historians of the need "to attend to the colonies in discussing historical developments within metropolitan France" by showing that events like labor unrest were "not simply influenced by the colonies; rather, the colonies themselves were part and parcel of them" (190). This is one of the focuses of his fourth chapter, "The Political Summation: Incendiarism, Civil Unrest, and Legislative Catastrophe at the Turn of the Century," that concludes with a discussion of the political repercussions of the 1890 general strike in Martinique that almost led to the fall of Waldeck-Rousseau's moderate coalition ministry.

The horrific destruction of Saint-Pierre and its ramifications are the subject of the penultimate chapter, "Marianne Decapitated: The 1902 Eruption of Mount Pelée." Church shows how this event "became the prevailing leitmotif for Martinique in the French imaginary, dwarfing all other associations" (216). Church finds the popular imagery of Martinique as a suffering "mulatto Marianne" succored by the white French Republic Marianne to be the very embodiment of the "colonial relationship of the island to the metropole," representing both solidarity and subservience. An epilogue, "National Identity and Integration after the First World War," does not break new critical ground but does highlight how the integration of black Antilleans into the army solidified their identity as French citizens while the very barbarity of the war undermined for them the concept of France's "so-called civilizing mission" (246).

One of the outstanding features of Church's book is his use of software programs to provide graphic illustrations drawn from the multitude of data he has collected. These range from LOESS curves tracing Antillean sugar production over time (29) and the yearly budgets for the French Antilles (227) to maps and graphs showing which regions and departments donated the most to relief efforts in 1890 (85–89). However, he goes beyond economic statistics to analyze other forms of revealing data such as the percentage of French books discussing compatriotism and victimhood between 1880 and 1910 (219). The book and its arguments are also enriched by images from the popular press, such as those of the mulatto Marianne mentioned

above. *Paradise Destroyed* earned Church the French Colonial History Society's Heggoy Book Prize in 2017, an award well merited.

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