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Abstract This article demonstrates that in the post–World War II period the bodies of Guadeloupean and Martinican women served as a tool to implement new French "development" policies affecting Guadeloupe and Martinique. Immigration officials hoped to improve the women's socioeconomic conditions by encouraging them to migrate to France where they could earn higher wages. By contrast, the women's bodies became a battlefield for Caribbean male nationalists, who appropriated their experiences for political reasons. On both sides, however, the paradoxes were striking. French officials treated Antillean women in a manner that contradicted the national republican values of universal equality, and the Antillean nationalists politicized the migration of Antillean women to France as a way of dealing with the emasculating effects of neocolonial relations.

Françoise Ega, a Martinican woman writer who lived in France during the postwar period, affirms that "the French government and society perceives all Poles as agricultural workers, all Algerians as unskilled construction workers, and all Antillean women as maids."¹ This article builds on the work of Ega and a few Antillean women novelists, who, pondering the themes of alienation, education, romantic relation, work, and sexual exploitation, are among the few intellectuals manifesting a genuine interest in the lives of Antillean women in postwar France.²

The present article demonstrates how representations of black


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women from Guadeloupe and Martinique as sexual victims and as Jezebels, sexually and morally unrestrained women, became entangled with French immigration policies and Antillean nationalism. In the postwar period the French perceived Antillean women as overly fertile and therefore responsible for overpopulating the islands and creating the conditions for perpetual underdevelopment. As a result, to alleviate demographic pressure, provide the women with employment, and improve their morality by inserting them into superior French culture, French officials affiliated with the Institut National de la Statistique et des Etudes Economiques (INSEE) suggested organizing the migration of Antillean women to France. At the same time, the women’s bodies became a battlefield for Antillean male nationalists, who appropriated the women’s experiences in Paris to satisfy their own political agenda. For the nationalists, the organized migration, and especially the fate of Antillean women in France, symbolized the continuation of French hegemony under the new political status of departmentalization, which Martinique, Guadeloupe, and French Guiana acquired in 1946.

As racialized working-class women migrants, Antillean women faced the hard task of adapting to a new society with limited professional opportunities, a situation that Antillean men, particularly the nationalists, failed to evaluate objectively. Yet I shall demonstrate that Antillean women migrants of the 1960s sought to break the mold that limited their professional opportunities in France by working hard and, especially, by constructing new identities that transcended notions describing them as victims, Jezebels, or maids—the roles government officials believed most suited their capabilities.

Although Antillean women were full French citizens, French officials perceived them as “a colonial other.” Additionally, patriarchy within the Antillean “community” affected the women, since it led to the Antillean male nationalists’ perception of the migration overshadowing the actual and multiple experiences of Antillean women. In other words, the intersection of antiblack racism and patriarchal rela-

3 In the context of the French Antilles, I refer to nationalism as the various political movements and organizations that sprouted in the 1950s and 1960s and advocated for independence from France.

4 For a discussion on how officials from the INSEE viewed the Antillean women’s fertility rate, see Le monde, Sept. 18, 1971. Additionally, Jill Leonard’s dissertation discusses the French stereotypes of Antillean women as they relate to their sexuality and fertility rate (“Martinican Women and the French State: Race and Gender in the Construction of the Colonial Relation” [PhD diss., University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, 1997]).

tions marginalized Antillean women, putting into question the French republican notion of “sameness” and universal equality.

The Jezebel and Migration

France emerged from World War II as a devastated winner, suffering from a crippled industrial sector and the memory of the collaborationist Vichy regime. In light of stagnating population growth, French officials argued that additional hands, immigrants, were necessary to rebuild the country and thus created the Office National d’Immigration, which became the organ responsible for recruiting, inserting into France, and even repatriating labor migrants back to their homeland. But not all immigrants were welcomed; only those whose culture mirrored that of the French were deemed desirable. Advised by his demographers, the prime minister, Robert Debré, candidly suggested that northern and southern Europeans—in other words, whites—would receive the greatest welcome.

The demographers also suggested increasing the national birthrate, thereby giving French women a particular role in the process of national growth. This focus on women’s fertility was not new to France, which had been “suffering” from low birthrates since the Franco-Prussian War (1870–71). Stagnating population growth had often resulted in draconian measures such as suppressing abortion and means of contraception to increase the country’s population. In the Fourth Republic (1946–58), the idea that French women should be good, educated mothers was widespread among government officials; Charles de Gaulle as early as 1945 echoed the demographers and social scientists: “French citizens needed to have twelve million beautiful babies within the next ten years.”

But the script differed in Guadeloupe and Martinique. The idea that these islands should invite neighboring Antilleans such as Saint Lucians, Dominicans, or Haitians who shared a similar “Creole culture” to help develop the new departments seemed unthinkable. Most important, unlike the metropole, which needed more “beautiful babies,”

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7 See Karen Adler, Jews and Gender in Liberation France (Cambridge, 2003); and Weil, La France et ses étrangers.
8 For government policies affecting French women, see William Schneider, Quantity and Quality: The Quest for Biological Regeneration in Twentieth-Century France (New York, 1990); Anne Carol, Histoire de l’eugenisme en France: Les médecins et la procréation, XIXe–XXe siècles (Paris, 1995); and Adler, Jews and Gender in Liberation France.
Guadeloupe and Martinique needed fewer, for French officials firmly believed that Guadeloupeans and Martinicans were already making too many babies and claimed that in the overseas departments the birthrate surpassed the islands’ production capabilities and contributed to chronic underdevelopment and dependency on France. As in the metropole, the birthrate and women’s fertility became government obsessions, yet in the French West Indies officials emphasized finding a way to keep women from having too many children.

The above argument is related to how the French have perceived Antillean women throughout history. Indeed, for centuries Antillean women were misrepresented as both sexually accessible and hypersexed individuals. In the late eighteenth century, according to Doris Garraway, “colonial writers sensationalized mulatto women as icons of sensual pleasure and sexual excess, figures both loved and blamed for the luxury, indebtedness and moral laxity of the colony.” Bernard Moitt also reveals that throughout the era of plantation slavery enslaved women were frequently expected to extend sexual favors to both black and French men. As regulations and laws limiting men’s control over the black female body were enacted during the colonial era, new stereotypes hinting that black women were born to appease men’s sexual desires emerged. Négripub, a collaborative study on the representation of black identities in French culture, shows that in the post-emancipation era the mere sight of a Frenchman supposedly turned a seemingly docile Antillean maid or blanchisseuse (laundress) into an aggressive “sexual beast.”

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11 In her insightful dissertation Leonard contends that the Martinican birthrate and matri-focal family structure was “of particular concern to French policy makers.” She also observes that in the late 1960s family planning and birth control clinics were established in Martinique, contributing to a decline in the birthrate from 5.6 to 3.9 children per woman between 1960–64 and 1970–74 (“Martinican Women and the French State,” 88–89). For documentation related to a decline in birthrate via migration, see “Rapport d’activité 1962 perspective programme 1963,” available in ANIP; and Pellier, Nécessité et possibilité.


15 Négripub, 10.
Antillean women’s sexuality remained a subject of obsession during the interwar period, as movies, songs, and literature continuously depicted the *Antillaise* as an exotic and sensuous being. The *Antillaise* was not a thinker; she acted out of basic instinct and desire. As the song below illustrates, she fulfilled sexual fantasies even when she was cleaning and cooking for French households as a maid:

Moi tout faire pour te plaire . . . toujours  
La cuisine, la vaisselle . . . l’amour  
Moi savoir repasser plein de mouchoirs  
Et chasser et pousser les idées noires.  
Moi faire bons petits plats  
Retourner matelas . . .  
Moi savoir taper tapis  
Moi savoir bien cracher sur chaussures  
Moi bien faire la tambouille  
Les chatteries, les chatouilles  
Les parquets, les bafouilles  
Moi avoir petits mollets pas laids  
Et beaux ptits [sic] macarons tout ronds  
Moi chanter la chansonnette  
Souffler dans clarinette  
Et claquer castagnettes

[Me do everything to please you . . . always  
Cooking, dishes . . . love  
Me iron many handkerchiefs  
And chase away gloominess  
Me make nice little dish  
Turn mattress over  
Me know beating rugs  
Me know spitting on shoes  
Me play fun  
Hug and tickle  
Floors and gossip  
Me has cute legs  
And nice round macaroons  
Me sing *chansonnette*  
Blow clarinet  
And play castanets].  

After World War II the French officials in charge of planning a better future for the *vieilles colonies* firmly believed that Antillean women were

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16 Throughout the first half of the twentieth century, French composers and musicians were highly inspired by the French colonies. This song, from *Toi et moi*, a popular operetta in Paris, features a female voice accompanied by a conga beat emulating the French Antillean biguine music. Simone Simon, *Moi tout faire pour te plaire*, Columbia DF 1607 (CL 5043-1), recorded Oct. 10, 1934.
Jezebels overpopulating the islands, and they thus suggested developing puériculture programs to teach young women about domestic responsibilities and proper moral behavior. These proposed programs differed sharply from those previously introduced in France, for instead of aiming to improve women’s health and child-rearing practices, they intended to decrease the women’s fertility rate. In a nutshell, the proposed social programs sought to promote the French nuclear family, reduce the number of children born out of wedlock, and increase awareness of the difficulties caused by rapid demographic growth in underdeveloped countries. However, officials quickly found puériculture programs too “soft” and inefficient, consequently arguing that something more radical had to be done.

After careful planning, the INSEE believed that organizing a labor migration to France represented a rational plan for improving the French Antilles’ socioeconomic condition. Whereas most young men were destined to military service, young women would be channeled to Paris, where there was a surplus of low-skilled jobs. According to the experts, the migration would alleviate the strain on the labor market and improve Antillean women’s social behavior by exposing them to a higher French culture emphasizing marriage and domesticity. Migration was thus conceived as a form of demographic control, but also as a tool that regulated women’s sexuality and fertility because it supposedly decreased women’s propensity to become mothers out of wedlock.

By 1962, following the recommendations of INSEE experts, a state-sponsored agency, the Bureau pour le Développement des Migrations Intéressant les Départements d’Outre-Mer (BUMIDOM), was created to oversee the organized migration. Operating under the auspices of the Ministry of the Overseas Departments and the Ministry of Finance, and chaired by Valéry Giscard d’Estaing, BUMIDOM initiated the annual migration of about five thousand young Antilleans to France. Considering that each island comprised about a quarter million people, the migration was unmistakably massive, leading schol-

\[\text{17 In the 1950s puériculture was considered a “science” that improved child rearing, women’s morality, and physical and psychological health.}\]
\[\text{18 Pellier, Nécessité et possibilité.}\]
\[\text{19 Bureau pour le Développement des Migrations Intéressant les Départements d’Outre-Mer (hereafter BUMIDOM), “Migration intéressant les Départements Insulaires d’Outre-Mer,” available in ANIP.}\]
\[\text{20 Ibid.}\]
\[\text{21 For a complete description of the origins and structure of the BUMIDOM, see Marie-Luce, “L’émigration.” Pap N’Diaye briefly discusses the Antillean migration of the 1950s and 1960s in La condition noire: Essai sur une minorité française (Paris, 2008), esp. 161–66.}\]
\[\text{22 From the mid-1950s to the late 1970s about the same number of Antilleans migrated to Paris each year, seeking a better life, without the BUMIDOM’s supervision. See Claude-Valentin Marie, Les populations des DOM-TOM nées et originaires, résidant en France métropolitaine (Paris, 1990).}\]
ars and Antillean migrants to refer to Paris as la troisième île (the third island).  

**The Jezebel in France**

The stereotype of the Antillean Jezebel played an important role in making thousands of women cross the Atlantic. It affected their experiences in Paris, preceding them at work, school, and throughout the streets. The stereotypes that Antillean women are promiscuous and make good maids also influenced the BUMIDOM officials in charge of inserting the women into Paris (at least throughout the 1950s and 1960s).

Nearly a dozen white French administrators without many academic credentials (in the 1960s only the director and the vice director may have had the baccalauréat) but with substantial experience as colonial administrators in sub-Saharan Africa managed the BUMIDOM.  

These officials played a pivotal role in the women’s lives: they connected them to diverse social and educational institutions, conveyed important information about life in Paris, and sometimes offered women in distress a place to sleep in a foyer of thirty-two beds that catered exclusively to the Antillaises.  

But for the most part the BUMIDOM officials guided the migrants toward potential jobs, and as a general rule they believed that domestic labor was most appropriate for the Antillaises. Claiming that the Parisian domestic industry was in “crisis,” the BUMIDOM argued that Antillean women could perfectly substitute for the Portuguese and Spanish women increasingly deserting these low-wage positions. Although it cautioned that French families were willing to pay only according to the migrant’s skill level, the agency held the firm conviction that the métropolitains “wish[ed] to hire young and qualified women” and that they preferred “young French candidates, particularly Antillean women.”

Thus, acting as a placement agency, the BUMIDOM screened the women to place them in French households seeking live-in domestics. It quickly established a reputation as a provider of trained and reliable workers, and similar to contemporary domestic agencies, it manufactured greater demand for household workers by impressing on potential clients the need for professional screening. As it channeled the


24 Marie-Luce, “L’émigration.”

25 “Compte rendu d’activités, décembre 1967,” available in ANIP.


27 Ibid.

28 Daiva Stasiulis argues that in major Western cities, domestic staffing agencies increase the demand for household workers (*Negotiating Citizenship: Migrant Women in Canada and the Global System* [New York, 2003]).
women into live-in domestic positions, the BUMIDOM also avoided finding housing for the migrants, a daunting task due to the repatriation of hundreds of thousands of pieds-noirs, which created a housing shortage in the largest cities (this held particularly true for Marseille, but Paris also felt the impact of the “return migration”).

Thus working-class Antillean women migrants were a hit in post-war Paris. Their arrival in the French capital coincided with an increasing number of middle- and upper-class French women in the labor market, women who needed another female body to run their household. As French citizens from the former colonies with a reputation as natural domestics and mothers, Antillean women represented the ideal candidates. According to Bridget Anderson, it is likely that “privileged” Parisian women placed a premium on having an Antillean maid, for “the domestic worker, whether ‘cleaner,’ ‘nanny’ or ‘servant,’ is fulfilling a role, and crucial to that role is her reproduction of the female employer’s status (middle-class, non-labourer, clean) in contrast to herself (worker, degraded, dirty).” Indeed, Anderson maintains that “it is the worker’s ‘personhood,’ rather than her labour power, which the employer is attempting to buy,” which “helps explain why domestic work is so often undertaken by racialised groups, whether citizens of the state . . . or migrant workers.”

As the employment agency, the BUMIDOM outlined the rules and regulations determining the workers and employers’ rights. For the sake of formality and to avoid judicial pitfalls, the agency provided a labor contract, which stated that the workers were “responsible for fulfilling all of the wife’s household tasks, including shopping, washing the children, making the beds, cleaning and maintaining the house, cooking, serving dinner to the family, washing the dishes, doing the laundry, etc.” The contract also highlighted that workers should accomplish their duties with moral integrity and should “at all times remain clean, discreet, well-meaning, and honest and constantly display an air of happiness.”

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31 Bridget Anderson, Doing the Dirty Work? The Global Politics of Domestic Labour (London, 2000), 2. Richard Jobs also notes that by 1960 Travailleuses Familiales, a program encouraging young women to serve temporarily as household domestics, had undergone “a broad professionalization as a social service that would lead, in 1974, to the recognition” of its employees “as career social workers.” Accordingly, this evolution further rationalized the “need” for Antillean women domestics (Riding the New Wave: Youth and the Rejuvenation of France after the Second World War [Stanford, CA, 2007], 82).
32 BUMIDOM, “Migration en métropole de travailleurs des départements d’Outre-Mer et de leurs familles, février 1964,” available in ANIP.
33 Ibid.
the employers but it also reinforced the patriarchal characteristics of household labor and dismissed the psychological challenge of living in someone else’s space. Indeed, as Ega notes, “the odor of other people’s lives is perhaps the most difficult part of the job.”

While offering a “good and stable” job with a housing bonus seemed like a great idea to the BUMIDOM officials, for Antillean women, it was a setback. The women equated migration with social uplift, intending to stay away from this type of work, which their mothers, grandmothers, and aunts had often performed for the islands’ privileged mulattoes and békés (white Creoles). Consequently, the immigration officials who invited them to France under the pretense that they could find a brighter future faced a quandary: how could they package domestic work to these young women who aspired to do something else?

As a response to the migrants’ lack of enthusiasm, in March 1965 French officials created a professional school for Antillean women migrants, whose main goal consisted of packaging domestic work as an honorable and financially rewarding profession. In the spirit of Napoléon, who used medals and ribbons to attract soldiers into the ranks of his army, French officials believed that granting a certificate on completion of a two- to five-week program would both generate the desire to become domestics and secure competent candidates for the potential employers.

The school was established in Crouy-sur-Ourcq, a small village located two hours from Paris. Crouyciens conceivably saw the opening of the school as the most important event since the Armistice, as their village is located in la France profonde, neither on the cultural nor on the tourist map. Yet perhaps due to the isolation and “remote” location, a few villagers believed the sudden “diversity spike” to be too abrupt a change. In her thesis Nadia Kergoat, a white French woman working as the school’s receptionist, recalls how “the villagers are cold, often hostile, and most certainly unprepared.” She admits that “for the villageois, the women are blacks, and sometimes nègresses.”

Aside from a white male security guard, all of the school’s administra-

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34 Ega, Lettre à une noire, 17.
35 During the interwar period Antillean women willingly responded to job ads seeking domestics in Paris. Hundreds of women traveled to become maids in the City of Light. After departmentalization expectations changed, however, Antillean women were more educated and sought to receive jobs deemed more modern. See “France Has New Rage in Dark Maid,” Chicago Defender, Apr. 7, 1923.
36 BUMIDOM, Bulletin d’information.
tors and teachers were white French women. The rules were strict: students were forbidden to leave the premises during the week, and visits to friends and family were permitted only on weekends.

The workload was also challenging. Emphasizing discipline, the academic program at Crouy-sur-Ourcq sought to create the perfect domestics—students were encouraged to abide by the school’s slogan, “Maintenir de l’ordre sur soi et autour de soi” (Maintain order on you and around you).38 While the students enjoyed a break around mid-afternoon, the workday was relatively long, beginning at 8:30 a.m. and finishing at 7:00 p.m.39 The women attended cooking and cleaning classes, as well as classes on l’entretiens du linge. They learned bed-making techniques and different ways to wash, iron, and sew clothes. They also learned the service de table, consisting of arranging tableware with each of the four-course meals served daily, and they memorized an extensive list of wine, cheese, and desserts, which confirms that the school catered to middle- and upper-class French families that performed these rituals religiously.40

Catering almost exclusively to Antillean women (although there were also a few Réunionaises), the school was an anomaly in French republican design, which rejected special treatment based on differences of race and gender, because the republic supposedly provided the necessary ingredients to achieve equality for everyone. While this “anomaly” received little attention from the mainstream French press, the Antillean students’ press, which had been politically engaged since the interwar period, considered the subject worthy of discussion. Le patriote guadeloupéen, a Guadeloupean student newspaper, investigated the school and published an article focusing on its pedagogy. It suggested that in theory, the curriculum emphasized three types of specializations: domestic worker, fille de salle (nurse’s aide), and administrative officer. In practice, however, the school trained women to become maids.41

Each of the offered specializations corresponded to the growing need for unskilled and semiskilled labor in Paris. The fille de salle training aimed to channel Antillean women into the Parisian public health sector, which suffered from a shortage of unskilled workers because judicial barriers prevented the hiring of illegal immigrants, who typically performed these tasks.42 The emphasis on administration cor-

38 Ibid.
40 Ibid.
41 Le patriote guadeloupéen, in Université de Nanterre, Bibliothèque de Documentation Internationale Contemporaine, box F 3825.
responded to the increasing number of administrative opportunities for women. Ideally, the training in office work would allow Antillean women to compete with other working-class French women for the modest clerical positions readily available in the growing public and private sectors. However, after interviewing the students and the school officials, the Guadeloupean university students concluded that making the women office workers was not part of the agenda, for the administration vigorously promoted the domestic training track:

There is a huge propaganda to influence the students. The director and the other administrators argue that it is easier for the students to find employment as domestics and that it drastically reduces the cost of living. The propaganda for *filles de salle* is as intense. However, they discourage administrative training, because they claim that it leads to longer job searches and unemployment. Thus, even if some students previously worked in an administrative setting, the school officials direct them into the domestic track.43

In many ways, the school at Crouy-sur-Ourcq expanded its mission beyond training the *Antillaises*. Uniting French educators and the migrants under the same roof in a faraway village, the school provided a space for intervening in the private lives of the *Antillaises*. In other words, as inferred by the proponents of the migration, the French educators were also expected to improve the lives of their “colonial sisters,” who supposedly lacked savoir faire and proper moral behavior. Exemplifying the continuing colonial hierarchies between the *métropolitaines* and the *Antillaises*, in a report outlining her professional experiences at the school, a twenty-two-year-old French administrator reveals that her colleagues interacted with the students as if they were still children. She claims that she “felt uncomfortable relating to these older women like a mother, since many of them are mothers themselves, with a lifetime of rich experiences . . . [and she] tried to understand their compliance and longing for affection, as well as [her] colleagues’ overprotective behavior.”44 For the administrator, the unequal relation between the migrants and the school officials was embedded in the national structure and related to the process of migrating from the global undevel-

44 Geneviève Rouquié, “*Y sa va ou*,” mémoire promotion Infac (BUMIDOM, 1980), 31, available in ANIP. The trope of the *grand enfant* has traditionally been used in relation to the *tirailleurs sénégalais* (a term encompassing all sub-Saharan African soldiers who served in the French army during the Great War). According to Brett Berliner, the French painted the African soldiers as children to lessen the anxiety that their imagined masculinity generated in relation to white French women (*Ambivalent Desire: The Exotic Black Other in Jazz-Age France* [Amherst, MA, 2002]). However, because of the Antillean women’s colonial and humble educational background, the French officials of the BUMIDOM and the Crouy-sur-Ourcq teachers and administrators also treated the women like children. In many ways, the officials imagined themselves as “parents,” whose duties were to educate “migrants/children” and guide them into adulthood.
oped south to the industrialized developed north. Indeed, she affirms that when

they arrive they immediately realize that they don’t know much about life in France, and consequently, they surrender their lives to the monitors, who offer the knowledge that allows them to work. From the start, the relation between the monitors and the students is “they know everything and I don’t,” which is amplified by the fact that they receive free room and board. They receive everything without giving anything. In fact, we only ask them to be on time and participate in the housework. They have to eat, they may not skip meals, and must obey the rules.45

Although Antillean women were treated as grands enfants, a stereotype that limited their professional potential, they attempted (with some success) to obtain employment that yielded more prestige and personal freedom than being a maid. A year and a half after its opening in 1965, the school at Crouy-sur-Ourcq had admitted over a thousand women who overwhelmingly desired to become administrative workers. That this dream came true for only twenty-five women does not mean that the others failed to achieve their goals. Indeed, unable to attain their first objective, many women gravitated toward becoming filles de salle, their second wish. By 1967 more than one-third of the students graduated as filles de salle, thereby securing a position offering more job security and personal freedom than a typical household placement.46

Nevertheless, during the postwar period there was only a thin line between being a fille de salle and being a household worker, as the former was also responsible for preparing meals; serving, feeding, carrying, and bathing patients; making beds; folding linens; cleaning floors; washing dishes; and performing various other menial tasks.47 One Antillean woman claims that cleaning was an important part of her daily tasks: “In those days it was difficult. We did not know anyone, and we had to work very hard. We cleaned a lot. . . . They would give us bars of soap rather than liquid soap, and we often had to scrub the floor on our bare knees.”48

Despite the hard work, the Antillean women who became filles de salle felt enthusiastic about the possibility of climbing up the social ladder. The BUMIDOM had outlined a cycle de promotion sociale (plan for social promotion) for the women who chose a career in the medical field, and the Antillaises often viewed being a fille de salle as a stepping-stone toward becoming a nurse. But in actuality this cycle de promotion

45 Quoted in Berliner, Ambivalent Desire, 32.
46 BUMIDOM, Bulletin d’information.
47 Ibid.
sociale was almost impossible to accomplish. The women had to work long hours and remained under probation for more than a year, during which they were evaluated and screened. They subsequently became nurse’s aides and often worked nights. As the detail of the program outlines below, the cycle de promotion sociale promoted stress, social stagnation, and exploitation:

In the first phase the candidate works in a hospital and is responsible for general maintenance and cleaning the patients’ rooms. Eventually she will also be responsible for cleaning the patients. This first phase, which is generally extremely demanding, is designed to test the candidate’s tolerance of hard work. The women who pass the fifteen-month probationary period take an exam to determine if they qualify to enroll in nurse’s aide classes. The candidates who have passed the exam may enroll in either nurse’s aide or assistante hospitalière [ orderly ] classes, which last one year. The following year the nurse’s aide or assistante hospitalière prepares for the entrance exam to the nursing school. The student must prepare for the exam after work. Additionally, while preparing for the exam, the student must work numerous night shifts. After this preparatory year, the student can finally take the exam. If she passes, she will continue taking nursing classes while receiving the equivalent salary of an aide hospitalier.49

As the Crouy-sur-Ourcq experiment indicates, the experiences of Antillean women are unique, different from those of white French women and Antillean men. The latter migrated to diverse geographic areas, where they served in the military or worked in factories, the construction industry, and hospitals or as low-skilled civil servants. In its first year of operation the BUMIDOM placed 58 percent of women in the Paris region but only 11 percent of the men.50 Nora Absalon claims that, as a result of their concentration in this region, Antillean women played a special role in developing the community in Paris. By providing housing and information to friends and family, they facilitated the insertion of other Antilleans into the city, which subsequently attracted more Antillean migrants.51

While these women played a crucial role in cementing the Antillean community of Paris, as pioneers they faced unprecedented challenges in the housing and labor markets. Women without the privilege of having a host house for an extended period were often forced to

49 Quoted in BUMIDOM, “Migration en métropole”; my translation.
50 BUMIDOM, “Rapport d’activité, 1962,” available in ANIP.
51 From 1962 to about 1975, about five thousand Antilleans migrated to France yearly via the BUMIDOM, and the same number migrated without state assistance. Men and women were equally represented in both the state and the self-sponsored migrations. See Nora Absalon, “Le personnel hospitalier originaire des DOM à l’Assistance Publique de Paris, 1967–1987” (mémoire de maîtrise d’histoire contemporaine, Université de Paris I, 2001), 41.
settle for undesired employment. For instance, a Martinican woman remembers that her adventure to Paris proved successful only because she first lived with her older sister in a very small apartment, which allowed her to conduct a nine-month job search and finally obtain a position as the first black clerk in a mutual fund company. However, another woman from Guadeloupe who worked in a factory claims that her working conditions were intolerable: she received low wages and was routinely harassed by her supervisor, a severe Frenchman who only reluctantly gave her a bathroom break. When asked why she had taken the job and stayed for five years, she replied, “It was that or the street.” Having a friend or a family member in the city was thus crucial to the women’s professional success and quality of life, especially in cases in which the women had migrated on their own, without any assistance from the BUMIDOM. Yet for many women dependence on kin and social networks for housing was a precarious matter, for if the family member or the friend married, or if conflicts occurred, they could suddenly become homeless.

Indeed, the new and often hostile environment that women confronted, the burgeoning but fragile Antillean network in the Paris region, low wages, and the fact that many Parisian social institutions failed to acknowledge the importance of additional public assistance for working-class Antillean women migrants (i.e., housing subsidies, financial compensation) led many women to the street, and for many Antillaises, the street was a metaphor for prostitution. As early as 1966 Alizé, an Antillean religious magazine based in Paris, reported that Antillean women were disproportionately represented in Le Nids (The Nest), a Catholic institution founded in 1946 to shelter prostitutes while trying to reform their lives through religious teaching. Although Alizé did not depict migration as a phenomenon leading to the systematic sexual exploitation of women, it feared that prostitution was nonetheless becoming a mode of social insertion that could continue to affect a small percentage of women, especially single women and single working mothers. The question is, why did Alizé highlight that unfortunate mode of social insertion, while the pundits, the INSEE and BUMIDOM officials, seemed unaware of it? Were they really oblivious, or did they remain silent because they believed that Antillean women were simply prone to such behavior? However, one group that was certainly conscious of Antillean prostitution in Paris, and was determined to condemn and change this phenomenon via radical politics, was the Antillean nationalists.

Nationalism and the Victimization of Women

Until 1946 “assimilationism,” or the quest for full French citizenship, was the dominant political ideology of Guadeloupe, Martinique, and French Guiana. As the 1935 festivities commemorating three hundred years of attachment with France suggest, the interwar period witnessed intense manifestations of admiration and devotion to the metropole, only to be surpassed by those during the Vichy period, when young Antillean patriots risked their lives on yoles (small fishing boats) to escape the islands’ Vichy representatives and reach neighboring Dominica, where they could enlist with the British forces to fight against “Misié Itlé” (Hitler).55 As an ideology influencing the political landscape, nationalism surged after departmentalization in 1946, when diverse groups of Antilleans created associations in the 1950s and 1960s, and political parties from the 1970s on, to advocate for independence or more political autonomy from France.56

Antillean nationalism was the product of unfulfilled expectations and stagnant economic growth. Few changes had occurred after ten years of departmentalization. Poverty remained rampant, unemployment high; the agricultural sector offered the only available jobs, namely, picking bananas and cutting sugarcane. But the youth of the rural communes, who had been educated in the schools of the republic, refused to pick up the machete to cut the bébé’s sugarcane, which their great-grandparents, the emancipated slaves, had cut under the blazing sun.57 Moreover, the number of high-ranking French administrators on the islands was also increasing, sparking anger and resentment from the Antillais, who felt cheated because thousands of locals were formally and properly educated to fill these positions and the rate of children attending school in the Antilles surpassed France’s.58 Such factors led many Antilleans to believe that the French presence was preventing them from managing local affairs and robbing them of opportunities. By the mid-1950s, fueled by young intellectuals and students who aban-


58 For the number of children attending school, see “Une île au soleil,” Cinq colonnes à la une, Apr. 6, 1960.
doned reading Baudelaire for Fanon and Césaire, popular disenchantment had become widespread, and a number of nationalist movements began to emerge.

The nationalists wanted to invent a new political, social, and cultural identity for Guadeloupe and Martinique. They believed that colonial hierarchies continued to structure Franco-Antillean relations in the administrative, educational, and cultural sphere and that departmentalization could not solve the high unemployment problem. They desired faster economic growth and control over their own destiny. In 1963, capturing the general mood of thousands of nationalists in Guadeloupe and Martinique, the Organisation de la Jeunesse Anticolonialiste de la Martinique (OJAM), Martinique’s largest nationalist organization, comprising at least ten thousand people, declared:

Beneath the hypocritical mask of departmentalization, Martinique is the Algeria of the past. France economically, socially, politically, and culturally dominates it. . . . We proclaim that the status of overseas department clashes with Antillean interests and makes sustainable economic growth impossible. We want the right to industrialize and exploit the island’s resources. . . . we want the right to redistribute the land and to restructure the sugar and rum factories into cooperative enterprises.

Thus in Guadeloupe and Martinique during the late 1950s and the 1960s, nationalism was a potent ideology and, as Antilleans migrated to France, an increasingly important aspect of diasporic politics. Like their counterparts in Martinique and Guadeloupe, the nationalist organizations of Paris wanted moderate political changes or, in some cases, advocated for taking revolutionary steps toward obtaining independence. Created in 1963 by Guadeloupean students, the Groupe d’Organisation Nationale des Guadeloupéens (GONG) seems to have been the most “revolutionary”, one flyer it regularly circulated asserted that “our organization refuses all compromise and negotiation with France, vows to organize the masses, will use violence when necessary, and will neutralize the opportunists and traitors.” But the Front Antillo-Guyanais, founded in 1961 by Marcel Manville, Paul Niger, Marie-Joseph Cosnay, and Edouard Glissant, was by far the largest organization. These organizations had three factors in com-

59 See Gesner Mence, L’affaire de l’O.J.A.M. (Fort-de-France, 2001).
61 Most of the GONG’s founders were Guadeloupean male students.
63 The Front Antillo-Guyanais advocated for political autonomy on the basis of French cul-
mon: first, as stated above, they wanted to reconfigure the islands’ and French Guiana’s political status; second, their leadership was entirely male; and third, they all agreed that the organized migration to France was highly detrimental to Antilleans. In fact, they equated France to exile, viewing the Hexagon as a series of gulags, where exploited colonial workers labored their lives away. According to the nationalists’ rhetoric, the migration most victimized women, because in France they became the colonizer’s “comfort women.”

For the nationalists, the prostitution of Antillean women in the diaspora symbolized the continuation of colonialism, albeit with the colonial subjects now living in the metropole. Unlike Fanon, who depicted colonial societies as spaces outside France in which “the foreigner comes from another country [and] imposes his rules by means of guns and machines . . . [and where] the governing race is first and foremost those who come from elsewhere, those who are unlike the original inhabitants, ‘the others,’” Antillean nationalists strongly believed that colonial relations also occurred in the metropole, where people from the former colonies, the “wretched of the earth,” were marginalized for being unlike the “original” inhabitants. Evidently, the nationalists exaggerated. Although no one spread rose petals in the migrants’ path, France was not the Antilleans’ gulags, and prostitution was not as widespread as they contended.

Yet, as a controversial and sensational topic, the prostitution of Antillean women in Paris became an avenue for discussing and promoting the idea of political sovereignty. Feminist scholars have shed light on the politics of gender and nationalism, especially as it occurred in the Antillean diaspora of Paris. They suggest that the nationalists’ defense of exploited women was a process entangled with the emasculating effects of colonization. According to Cynthia Enloe, male activists, intellectuals, and nationalists from colonized and subjugated spaces highlight the plight of colonized women and present themselves as their “savior knight[s]” not only to antagonize the colonizer but also to reclaim their masculinity, which is obliterated by colonization.

Male political resistance through the woman’s body thus constitutes a

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66 See Manville, *Les Antilles sans fards*.
self-reflective process and the expression of hypermasculinity; it is an attitude not necessarily linked to the woman’s condition.

Published in 1975, *Confessions d’une prostituée antillaise à Paris*, a novel by the Martinican Roland Laouchez, exemplifies how Antillean male nationalists reinvented and appropriated the struggle of Antillean women sex workers in Paris to advance their own political agenda. Laouchez’s self-proclaimed *roman vérité* tells the story of a young Martinican woman who is lured into going to France, where the BUMIDOM finds her a receptionist position in a doctor’s office. After a series of unfortunate events the protagonist meets Monique, a twenty-six-year-old French woman from Alsace with whom she develops a romantic relationship. She then quits her job and moves in with Monique, who offers her a luxurious lifestyle. However, Monique deceives the protagonist and draws her into an underworld of violence and forced prostitution. Despite the danger, the protagonist refuses to return to Martinique, as she has become dependent on the superficiality of material wealth.68

In spite of its emphasis on Antillean sex workers in Paris, Laouchez’s *roman vérité* reflects his concern with French political hegemony. His voice (the narrator’s) dominates, and throughout the novel the characters often question if departmentalization works for the Antilles. For instance, describing a Corsican man soliciting an Antillean prostitute, he writes:

> For a couple of years he observed that Antillean prostitutes were slowly taking over his neighborhood. At first they annoyed him. But then he talked to them, asked them questions, and began to understand them. Perhaps being from the island of Corsica helped him comprehend these women. He knew that any effort to dismantle this modern slave trade would be in vain. He was convinced that the solution to this problem was in the Antilles, not in France. These women should have the means to earn a living in their islands, or at least they should receive professional training in Paris. All these things troubled his mind as he solicited the services of a young prostitute.69

Generally, solicitors of sexual services tend to have something else in mind than politics, but for Laouchez, the novel’s message is not the prostitute’s *confessions* but the structural inequalities between France and the Antilles, which he uncovers and analyzes through the protagonist’s body and experiences.

The Martinican woman migrant, the disillusioned protagonist,

68 Roland Laouchez, *Confessions d’une prostituée antillaise à Paris* (Fort-de-France, 1975). Because it was published by Le Naïf, a leftist publishing house, the novel mostly circulated in Martinican nationalist and communist circles.

69 Ibid., 125.
embodies the nationalists’ perception of the Franco-Antillean relation. Her story is a metaphor for what is happening to the author’s beloved Iles aux Fleurs (Martinique), the victim, which is repeatedly raped by France, the “pimp” and colonizer whose subjects, blinded by material desires, become subversive accomplices. Yet by interweaving his political ideology and the experiences of migrant women, the author perpetuates the notion that the prostitution of Antillean women in Paris was widespread. He produces a myth that brutalizes the history of the women’s migration, for, according to the Antillean students monitoring the development of their community, the few prostitutes were in fact young single mothers who already had jobs but struggled to make ends meet. They were women readjusting their lives to a foreign environment and, in many cases, resembled their working-class counterparts in the French Antilles: women raising their children without help from the fathers. Additionally, many Antillean prostitutes in Paris probably migrated without the BUMIDOM’s encadrement and thus lacked access to the services it offered. As a former activist and nationalist confesses, “Despite our deep resentment for the BUMIDOM, it did provide a cushion for the displaced.”

While the nationalists invented a narrative of female migration that suited their own reality, painting Antillean women as victims of the state, they failed to acknowledge how gender relations within the Antillean community victimized women. Domestic violence found a niche in postemancipation Antillean society, giving men carte blanche to abuse their partners. Moreover, many Antillean scholars demonstrate that the matrifocal dimension of the French Antillean family has historically placed a greater strain on women, who, along with their extended relations (mothers, sisters, cousins), become responsible for supporting their families. But whereas the women of Guadeloupe and Martinique used the kin structure to support and raise their children, in the diaspora, where fathers remained orbiting figures and kin were scarce, these women looked to other alternatives for survival. Thus, while racism influenced how the French state inserted Antillean women into the labor market, gender relations in the Antillean community also erected barriers, burdening women with greater responsibilities, forcing them to live with limited resources, and sometimes channeling single and young mothers into the sexual economy.

La Femme Matador: Une Citoyenne Pas Comme les Autres

While the nationalists depicted Antillean women as virtuous and exploited subjects, French government officials viewed them as Jezebels responsible for the islands’ uncontrolled demographic growth. These perceptions corresponded to two competing ideologies, namely, the French government’s politics of development in the Antilles and the nationalists’ quest for independence. However, they both framed the identity of working-class Antillean women narrowly, failing to acknowledge how patriarchy, colonialism, and racism intersected and influenced women’s lives (the nationalists emphasized only colonialism and racism). They also dismissed the role of women as chef de famille.

By focusing on preconceived and imagined notions, the French officials and the Antillean nationalists dismissed an important aspect of the Antillean women’s experience at home and in the diaspora. They failed to view the Antillaise as une femme matador, an Antillean term referring to a fighting woman who, evolving in a patriarchal society, courageously resists life’s trials and assumes the role of the poto mitan (pivot of the family) despite the obstacles. From the onset of plantation slavery to the times of la grande migration, Antillean women have based their lives on this paradigm.

Historically, women have had the dual responsibility of managing and providing for the household while contributing to the formal labor market. In fact, in the French Antilles’ plantation society more women than men performed harsh agricultural labor such as cutting sugar-cane and carrying the bundles to be processed at the rum distilleries or sugar factories. In addition to working hard, these women, often slaves, served as the family’s main protectors. Indeed, whereas the French nuclear family model encouraged men to protect and provide, the matrifocal dimension of the Antillean family imparted women with this primordial responsibility. Simultaneously, as Moitt illustrates, they struggled against patriarchy and abuse in their own communities, for the institution of slavery gave men, both white and black, carte blanche to terrorize them.

74 Although a matador is a bullfighter, the term has an entirely different meaning in the French Antilles.
76 See Moitt, Women and Slavery in the French Antilles.
78 For instance, in a study analyzing the role, contribution, and condition of Antillean women in slavery, Moitt observes that the fear of being raped by other slaves and by white men...
Similar to the métropolitaines, Antillean women evolved (and continue to do so) in a patriarchal society. They were and are considered less intellectual than their male counterparts; they obtained the right to vote only after World War II; they managed and manage the domestic sphere; and until the cultural revolution of the late 1960s, they routinely met with stiff resistance when they expressed their sexuality and political opinions. Like white French women of the postwar period, Antillean women in Paris sought to reconfigure their position in the French patriarchal system by seeking jobs that better matched their professional aspirations.\textsuperscript{79} Despite the challenges, Antillean women have participated in a number of political activities to obtain freedom for themselves and their children.\textsuperscript{80}

This article contends that the intersection of race, gender, patriarchy, and citizenship inscribes Antillean women into French history in a manner that differs from how Antillean men and white French women have been inscribed into that history. The article suggests that historians, when examining French women's history through the lens of their “darker” sisters from the overseas departments, need to expand their conceptual framework to include the experiences of, in Pap N'Diaye’s words, \textit{une minorité française}. In other words, for French women in particular, the 1950s is not only a period during which nationalism fueled pronatalist movements and conservative ideologies of women, and the 1960s is not only a period of generational conflict and of increased liberty for women. For the women and French citizens of Martinique and Guadeloupe, nationalism emerged from an Antillean context and generated other ideas of womanhood. As the experiences of Antillean women in Paris during the postwar period indicate, the history of French women should also reflect these women's struggles to adapt to a new society, transcend racism and the invisible ceiling of the labor market, and provide for their families despite limited resources.
