

Caroline Rolland-Diamond, *Black America. Une Histoire des luttes pour l'égalité et la justice*

Paris, Éditions La Découverte, 2016, 615 p.

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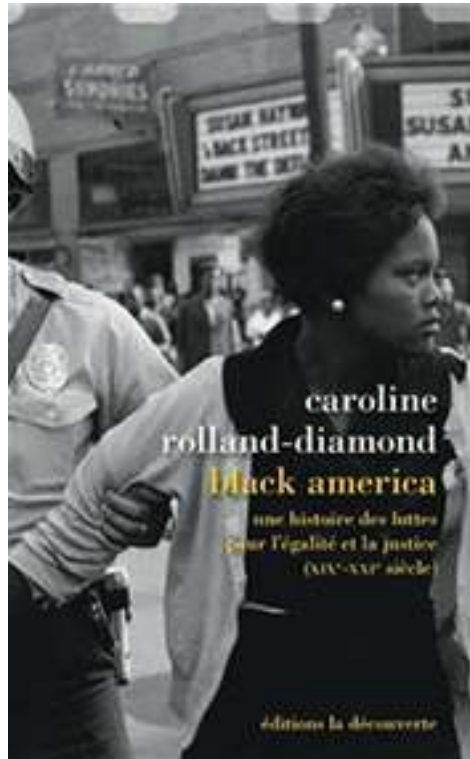
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1 A couple of years back I taught American History at the Université Bordeaux III (Michel Montaigne) as a visiting professor. Among other things I taught a lecture class on African American History in French (not an easy task for someone who is used to speaking and writing in English) and I realized that there was, at the time, no comprehensive French text on the subject matter at hand. As a consequence, I had to translate my own, co-authored book into a stumbling French.¹ In 2013, this lacuna was closed by the publication of a book by Anne Méténier, constituting the very first wide-ranging approach to African American history.² Today we look at another attempt to summarize the history of Black Americans, this time focusing not their resistance under the conditions of Chattel Slavery, but on their general struggle from the 19th to the 21st centuries. In a way, this book is the perfect successor to Anne Météniers work. It is comprehensive, well written, contains just enough details and focusses on the main actors and events of the period under consideration.



- 2 Professor Rolland-Diamond's work is divided into seven major chapters, ranging from the era of Jim Crow (1865-1915), the "new Negro" (1915-1929), the mobilization on all fronts (1930-1945), the period of the post-WWII-struggles (1945-1960), the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s (1960-1965), Black Power (1965-1975), to the post-Civil-Rights struggle after 1975, stretching all the way to the Obama administrations and the "post-racial" myth. A short introduction that focuses on the necessity to employ a longue durée-approach and a concise epilogue, which extends the narrative to police brutality and "Black lives Matter" frame the major chapters. Most space is given to the 20th century; the 19th century only pops up in the first chapter, while the 21st century is contained by the seventh chapter. The book is clearly organized as a straight-forward linear narrative; any post-structuralist reflections on master narratives and their function are absent. Methodologically, the opposition between series of progress and backlash create the momentum of the narrative.
- 3 It is obvious that a book with 491 pages of text (bibliography and endnotes not included) cannot cover everything, especially if it tells the story of 200 years of Black struggles. The author hastens to emphasize that this is not only a history of oppression and African-American reactions to it but that the ingenuity and inventiveness of Blacks also will be discussed and analyzed (p. 18). On top, she promises to deal with the different and diverse roles of Black women within these struggles, a welcomed position that reflects the changes in the American historiography after 1990. However, these promises notwithstanding, women are left out too often in the book. The sheer amount of male personalities in the index is overwhelming and one looks in vain for

outstanding women like the writer Nella Larsen, the educator, and civil rights activist Louise Thompson Patterson, Black Panther Party activists like Assata Shakur and Akua Njere or the sculptress Meta Vaux Warrick Fuller, a pre-cursor of the Harlem Renaissance. The list of women, who contributed to the struggles of two centuries and are left out, is extended. After Darlene Clark Hine *et al.* put together a two-volume encyclopedia of Black women in America in 1993 already, these omissions are particularly regrettable.³

- 4 The narrative does not follow “a road not taken” hitherto. Human actors, places mentioned and event characterized do not show up as a surprise. It is the popular history of “successes” in 1963 like the Cambridge Movement against segregation and racist oppression and the “backlashes” that followed, best exemplified in the fifth and sixth chapters which are entitled “*Liberté et justice maintenant*” and “*À la conquête du pouvoir noir*” respectively. It would have been interesting for instance to understand the involvement of the “white working class” in the aftermath of the Cambridge Treaty that brought about desegregation. However, the author simply states the racist activities of “*la classe ouvrière blanche*.” (p. 289).
- 5 There is another lament by the reviewer. The most important factor in the discrimination and repression of African Americans is racism. The book gives us ample examples of the struggles against exploitation, oppression, ignorance and poverty, but it lacks a coherent presentation of the various racisms that emerged during the 200 years under discussion. We are left baffled when we ask how important racism was as an independent variable or whether racism was just a function of the desire to control African Americans economically, socially, culturally and sexually. How did racism play into the hands of sexism, classism, homophobia and bigotry? How did different forms of resistance and struggles influence the hegemonic form of racism in its respective period?
- 6 To believe, on the other hand, that the rise of fascism in Europe contributed to the discreditation of racism in the US is questionable (p. 146). Racism, if at all, was not discredited by science. To the contrary, the 1920s and 1930s saw the rise of the racist “science” of eugenics with implications that reached as far as forced sterilization of so-called “feeble-minded.” Racism just changed its façade in the years after 1930 and developed from a murderous, eliminatory variation to a contemptuous patriarchal variety, based on the “knowledge” that the white race, after all, still was the carrier of progress and civilization. The slow demise of lynching cannot be explained by a waning racism. It has to be put into perspective by looking at its functional equivalent, the hyper-incarceration of African American men. Already in 1904, African American prison inmates made up 32 percent of the prison population, more than threefold their number in the general population.⁴ This cannot be attributed to the War on Drugs since this development lay still decades in the future. Rolland-Diamond mentions incarceration and places of horror like the Parchman Farm, but she fails to put them into a *longue durée*-perspective.
- 7 There are few errors in this book. The author knows the secondary literature well. Here and there there are a few factual slips, like the claim that the Women’s Army Corps accepted African American women only in 1944 (p. 167).⁵ In contradiction to the text on the jacket, no new archival sources have been mobilized in the writing of this book. However, the author is well aware of the published source material, and she uses it impressively. If I had to teach African American History in a French environment again,

I would therefore refrain from translating my own book and use Caroline Rolland-Diamonds text in conjunction with the book by Anne Méténier. The students would profit enormously from this up-to-date book, despite a few quisquillious remarks by a reviewer.

NOTES

1. Norbert Finzsch, Horton, James Horton, Lois E. Horton, *Von Benin nach Baltimore: Die Geschichte der African Americans*, Hamburg: Hamburger Edition, 1999.
2. Anne Méténier, *Liberté pour les Noirs ! La résistance des Africains-Américains à la ségrégation et à l'esclavage (1619-1865)*, Paris: L'Harmattan, 2013.
3. Darlene Clark Hine, Elsa Barkley Brown and Rosalyn Terborg-Penn, *Black Women in America: An Historical Encyclopedia*, Brooklyn, NY: Carlson Pub, 1993, 2 vols.
4. Prison and Crime Records by Race: <http://theinjusticefile.blogspot.de/2011/08/prison-and-crime-records-by-race-black.html> (accessed November 16th, 2016).
5. Michaela Hampf, *Release a Man for Combat: The Women's Army Corps during World War II*, Köln, Wien: Böhlau, 2010.