

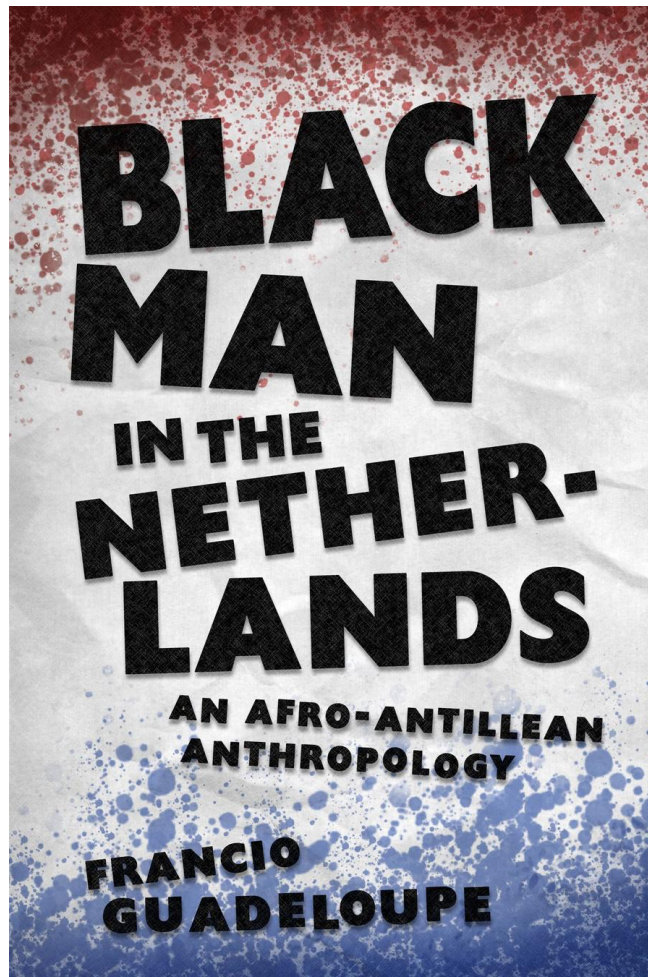
**Review**

**Francio Guadeloupe:**

***Black man in the Netherlands: An Afro-Antillean  
anthropology***

Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi, 2022. 226 p.  
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Growing up in a Western society has been difficult for me. As a child, I could not put a finger on what it was that bothered me, but I knew that it was how others treated me that contributed to continued discomfort and feelings of isolation. I would not learn that what I was experiencing was racism until I became a young adult, initially unaware that what I experienced was as much an individual pain as it was a collective one. In Francio Guadeloupe's work *Black man in the Netherlands: An Afro-Antillean anthropology*, there is a parallel experience that exists, that unless I traveled to the Netherlands to experience it for myself, would be lost to me.

In the opening sentence of the preface of his book, Guadeloupe suggests imagining for a moment writing from a different place in the world, tapping into a point of view shared with other people of color: "If I had been born and currently lived in a country that needed academic odes to remind its complacent inhabitants of the racial oppression of people who look like me, this essay would have been a Negro spiritual" (xiii). Thus, aligning himself to African Americans, to me. He goes on to reference "Jim Crow, the new Jim Crow, and post 1960's forms of White Supremacy, this essay would have been a blues" (xiii).

While exploring Guadeloupe's world, I could not help but notice my own. I too grappled with the question of who I was in the context of where I was born. I too found wisdom in the lyrics of KRS One, but never thought that hip-hop, as big as it was, reached the listening ears of our brothers and sisters across the world. I found striking similarities to how Guadeloupe's friends showed love to one another. I recognized it immediately. "The practice of artistically code switching, as we imitated urban pop icons' way of dressing and carrying themselves while we also played 'the dozens' with our ethnic inheritance, is the wider point of connection between the clip I am watching, the wisdom of my grandmother, and my teenage years" (15-16). Code switching is a way of life for many (dare I say all) minority groups, especially those of African descent. We find ourselves, like Francio Guadeloupe, walking the line, trying to appease our masters.

The sad reality is that, like him, I too live and survive in a hostile world, most people of color do. And when he remarks on the multicultural nature of the Netherlands, I envision the same melting pot of the United States that is always ready to serve its citizens with rhetoric in place of action. Sure, there have been gains in race relations, but the legacy of colonialism and slavery are ever-present. The evergreens in the forest of possibility.

Guadeloupe anchors his theoretical framework with the words of W.E.B. DuBois: "To the real question, How does it feel to be a problem? I answer seldom a word" (Du Bois [1903] 2007,1). In this, DuBois has opened up about the line he walks as those around him, in a matter-of-fact sort of way, try and ease the

obvious tension in the room (albeit because of him) and even though he did nothing to cause the tension, nothing other than be there.

Guadeloupe goes on to compare the ideologies of W.E.B. DuBois with C.L.R. James and his experience living in a Europe, which is still decolonizing. America is a young country and, in many ways, stands in the shadow of England as both grapple with their colonial pasts. But scholars like Guadeloupe, DuBois, James, and others, were people of color first. The choice to tackle racism is one that I would argue none of these scholars wanted to make, but better to have the oppressed to speak for themselves than someone speaking for them. Their works live on as testimonies to how one analyzes marginalization.

To quell the feeling of isolation, Guadeloupe is in conversation with DuBois, James, Fanon, and others, and there is power in those conversations. Guadeloupe articulates how easy it can be for racists to dismantle self-efficacy, as he quotes Fanon, who expresses vividly how it feels to be dehumanized: “My body given back to me sprawled out, distorted...clad in mourning” (Fanon 1967,112, cited in Guadeloupe 2022, xxi).

One of my obsessions while living as a Black man in a post-colonial context is the notion of home. On this, Guadeloupe's opinion of home is both refreshing and challenging. For Guadeloupe, the Netherlands is home. And his rebuttal is complex when he says “I startle them when I push back that Netherlands is my home, for it is a Dutch Caribbean Island...And even if they think of the Netherlands as European, they must reckon with the fact that “Europe is no longer white and never will be again...All of us are faced with a stark choice: we can rail against European evolution, or we can help to smooth its process” (xxix). I have yet to iron those wrinkles out for myself but have at least considered thinking differently about where home is and where it can and should be. One of the challenges that comes along with this concept is the idea of dual consciences.

Guadeloupe interprets W.E.B. DuBois' idea of a dual consciences as a more creole experience, leaning more towards James's view when Guadeloupe states in the introduction: “I tell my academic peers that I am beginning to realize that this way of claiming the kingdom and the wider North Atlantic is one of the under acknowledged visions that luminaries like the political theorist C.L.R. James hinted at, when he provocatively called himself a black European” (xxvii).

He understands that DuBois was trying to make sense of the liminal ways in which members of the African Diaspora have often struggled with identity and feels that his theory of a duo consciousness needs to be revised or at revisited in a modern context. He frames *Blackness* and *Whiteness* conceptually around access and influence. Guadeloupe contends: “To repeat, in my Marxist way of thinking, Black and White are concepts I employ to hierarchically categorize a person's station in the capitalist order. Skin complexion is of little relevance here.

I categorize wealthy blacks like Jay-Z or Oprah Winfrey as White, while pink-skinned Poles who migrate to the Netherlands to work for next to nothing are best described as Black" (xxxii). While I do not agree with the logic, from a Marxist or capitalist point of view it makes perfect sense. Be that as it may, neither Jay-Z nor Winfrey were born billionaires. In fact, based on what I know of Jay-Z from his music and commentary, he was born in the projects and sold drugs. For her part, Winfrey was raised on the South Side of Chicago, in an impoverished area reserved for black people and other minorities. I would not go so far as to categorize them as white, even though they are billionaires, for the simple reason that I am sure their contemporaries never let them forget that they are Black.

Also interesting to me is the alignment with how the notion of Tarzan has made a mockery of our *nativeness*. I love how Guadeloupe addresses that: "What got to me was being implicitly likened to Tarzan by locating me in de tropen, a Dutch translation for the tropics, which carries with it exotic racialism" (40). In many cases, Western civilization validates the idea of a Tarzan while invalidating our Africanness. It reminds me of a poem I wrote in which I share Guadeloupe's disdain for that mockery:

#### King of the Jungle

I don't know what to make of Tarzan,  
as I type it – its underlined red to capitalize his name,  
but Elong is nowhere in the dictionary.

I don't know what to make of Tarzan,  
swinging from vine to vine, beating his chest  
and I surmise for the same reason  
I am glad to have never been a Rhodes Scholar,  
as prestigious as it may seem –

I take the A train back and forth to Aethiopia,  
back and forth through Ithaca,  
back and forth to the Nile valley and Kemet  
and the mastabas in the courtyard.

I don't know what to make of Tarzan,  
who would suspect that there is danger  
in a screaming white man in the trees?  
and the world accepts this motif,  
accepts his apeish manner  
of knuckling the ground when he walks  
but I am the monkey, the signifying monkey

Jack Johnson, the first heavyweight champ of color  
 The Big Smoke who was made to be a giant Gorilla  
 Black Animal in the heart of New York City,  
 A King Kong or Homo giganthropithicus  
 somewhere getting studied  
 in Tuskegee.

I don't know what to make of Tarzan  
 I don't buy the brand of the English  
 wearing the mask of the African  
 that can be removed  
 and then that same mask,  
 my face,

is the subject of internet bravado and minstrel  
 and that I can only be black and American  
 and hip hop and jazz and pop  
 and dancing around all cool like  
 and smooth and hip and eating chicken and drinking Hen  
 and the moment I confess that I am African –  
 there is an explanation as to why I am not

I am put back in the box, back in the chicken yard  
 back in the plastic – how does one reconcile  
 how does one wrestle with being wild  
 how does one cope with value bestowed  
 like I am some actor in a play portraying the role of the primitive  
 while there is some white man in the jungle  
 or some white woman playing Cleopatra;  
 when will it be ok for me to swing from trees  
 to beat my chest and not get shot.  
 (Vasser-Elong 2018, 111)

Whether it's about a billionaire or a person living in the projects, Western society maintains a hierarchy that places people of color at the bottom, leaving little room to view those of us who do make it out of poverty as anomalies, and that is a shame, especially considering that the Western world's economy was built on the backs of enslaved Africans. Moreover, beyond the division of class, what spoke the loudest to me from Guadeloupe's beautiful work was that our experiences growing up, trying to survive the European spaces in which we lived, were hauntingly similar; almost mirror images of one another. The lesson underneath the scholarship was that we are not alone, not any one of us. The experience of marginalization is not unique to the Netherlands any more than it is

unique to the United States, and those who find themselves on the margin, walking in the middle, do so in community with others.

This book addresses the notion of race in a visceral, personal way. For me, it is like looking into an orange mirror, undergoing someone else's experience of being Black in a different part of the world. It is unique in its honesty and rawness. Guadeloupe opens the door to his world and invites the reader in, offering personal accounts of lived experience that is also supported by scholarship. This book fits in the centre of the literature on race and decolonization because it is in conversation with scholars like Fanon and DuBois, as well as those of us who may never be considered scholars but have a similar experience all the same.

## References

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## About the reviewer

Jason Vasser-Elong is an assistant teaching professor of English and African American Studies in the Pierre Laclède Honors College at the University of Missouri, St. Louis (US), and a doctoral student in its College of Education. There, he also received a Master of Fine Arts in creative writing and studied cultural anthropology, as well as African Diaspora studies. He is the author of *Shrimp* (2Leaf Press, 2018), a collection of poetry that analyzes identity in a post-colonial context. His articles "Perfect water" (2021) and "Treading the Atlantic" (2016) were published in the *Canadian Journal of Netherlandic Studies*. For an academic presentation of the latter article at the American Anthropological Association's 2021 annual meeting, he received a General Anthropology Division travel award. He has also contributed articles to *The St. Louis Post-Dispatch* and *The Saint Louis American* newspapers. His poetry has been included in various anthologies and most recently in the *New Square* literary journal and in *SAPIENS*, an online anthropology magazine, for which he serves as a poet-in-residence for the year 2022.