The city of Paris has served as a melting pot in which Breton identity is no longer denigrated. This history of “national assimilation,” to use the words of Gérard Noiriel, is the work of a state that has privileged its own citizens, but also of the ups and downs of the urban economy, of changing immigrant groups, and of the Bretons themselves, who in many cases chose to make their most intimate life outside their compatriot group. The sort of life trajectories visible in marriage records reveal the complex and multifaceted choices grasped by newcomers in their twenties and thirties. These contradict an image of smooth integration, the stereotype of a community apart, and the “black legend” of wholesale migrant failure.

As the twentieth century drew to a close, Breton culture and Bretons experienced a certain visibility in greater Paris. Saint-Denis elected a mayor of Breton descent named Patrick Braouezec in 1991, a communist who well remembered family stories of prejudicial treatment toward Bretons. Braouezec skillfully negotiated with the conservative national government to bring about the destruction of the huge gas structures in Saint-Denis and their replacement with a great soccer stadium, the Stade de France, built in time for the World Cup of 1998. Two important studies of Bretons in Paris appeared in the 1990s. The first, by the Paris-born author Armel Calvé, *Histoire des Bretons de Paris*, emphasizes Breton associational and commercial life. The second, by Didier Violain, a Nantais who had lived in Paris for over fifteen years, was *Bretons de Paris: Des exilés en capitale*, which presents a selection of interviews and memoirs interlaced with lavish photographs that illustrate the joys and heartbreaks of moving to and living in Paris. This book proved so popular that it was published twice, the second time by the French book-of-the-month club.
Fiction, memoirs, and histories of the present century demonstrate a positive and accessible approach to Bretons. After taking on the history of Auvergnats in Paris in 2001, the prolific author Marc Tardieu published in 2002 a novel joining sweethearts from Brittany and the Auvergne (*Le bal de la rue de Lappe*) and in the following year a history of Bretons in Paris to match that of the Auvergnats. At the same time, Breton rural life was exoticized and celebrated in series of new books about the old days—books beautifully illustrated with postcards, photographs, and works of art, such as *Une Bretagne si étrange, 1900–1920*. Celebration and commercialization have gone hand in hand with inclusion.

Bretons are now seen as provincials like any others who created a charming French past. When a story of past migrations was published for a broad public in 1997, Jean-Louis Beaucarnot used the title *Quand nos ancêtres partaient pour l’aventure* and gave the Bretons a chapter like any other group, albeit a chapter near the end of the book, with a title that described them as domestic servants, sellers of crêpes, and market gardeners (“bonnes à tout faire, crêperies, et oignons roses”). A review by the famed historian Emmanuel LeRoi Ladurie focused on “ces petits métiers qui poussaient à l’aventure,” citing, as the last of the French, “the immortal Bécassine from the Montparnasse station and of the Marquise de Grandair.” Perhaps the lesson lies in the final lines of this review: “We are all [toutes et tous] nurses of the Morvan, water carriers of the Auvergne, peddlers of Ubaye or Queyras.” That is, no longer do we have “our ancestors, the Gauls” as in the textbooks of the Third Republic, but rather “our ancestors the provincials.” And from beyond France as well, to be fair, for Beaucarnot finishes with foreigners, Polish miners and Spanish maids, who arrived “when strangers took up the baton.” One must also speak, LeRoi Ladurie writes, of those from outside France: Armenians, Gypsies, Jews, and Arabs.

Exclusion and prejudice are now visited upon other quarters. The long history of postwar immigration—following substantial labor immigration in the 1920s and refugee immigration in the 1930s—has produced a most diverse French people. Southern Europeans and North Africans—primarily Algerians—came to work in the immediate postwar years and continued to do so after Algerian independence in 1962. Since 1973, when immigration was at a maximum and a long economic downturn began, attention has been focused on foreign newcomers, and since the departure of the Ayatollah Khomeini in 1979 to head the new theocracy in Iran,
Muslim newcomers have been subject to particular attention, with a host of consequences for law and society. France, along with the rest of the European Union, braced for a much greater wave of immigrants from post-communist central and eastern Europe than that which materialized. By the beginning of the twenty-first century Asians—whether Chinese or Southeast Asian—were second only to Portuguese and North Africans among immigrants. Although some newcomers are highly skilled and educated, many took unskilled work as a result of changes in the labor force that allowed French to take secure and white-collar work. As Chevalier wrote already in 1953, this change in the structure of the labor force, along with the arrival of less trained and ethnically distinct newcomers, created the rising tide that elevated Breton fortunes in Paris.

Banlieues like Saint-Denis (where the last Breton Pardon was celebrated in 1996 and which lost its Breton-run crêperie about 2000) have been cursed by the economic restructuring of the past thirty years, which has wreaked havoc on their economic base and offered nearly insuperable challenges to mayors like Patrick Braouezec. The immigrant workers there—originally called “black Bretons” by some—who came for good jobs during the “trente glorieuses” of the postwar period, had children for whom no such jobs exist. Moreover, education and job training do not yet work equally for immigrants and their descendants, depending on origins. Inclusion has worked for the French-born like the Bretons, and for most western European immigrant groups, but less so for newcomers from eastern Europe and Africa. Bretons may be the pariahs, but they are the pariahs of yesterday, and the current story of exclusion is a global one.

Bretons proved to be distinct in past years, and they are in some ways also distinct from current newcomers. Exceptionally, women made up a high proportion of Bretons in the city of Paris, setting them apart from many migrant groups in Paris such as the Auvergnats and the Creusois, who first came to work in the construction industry, and often as seasonal laborers. This also sets them apart from earlier immigrant groups like Italians and most immigrant groups that arrived since the Second World War, who were predominantly male. As a consequence, the large proportion of Bretonnes who began their urban lives as domestic servants operated in greater isolation from the Breton community than their male colleagues, who worked in a more collective and less isolated setting; this was the price paid for choosing work that afforded room and board. Yet it also meant that newcomers would meet and perhaps marry men from
other areas. The choice of domestic service carried other consequences: primarily, it prolonged Bretons’ place in an atavistic corner of the labor market that only gradually and partially improved. Also, a larger proportion of Bretons in Paris were women without any family support who could turn to prostitution in an economy that did not allow them to earn a living wage by other means. In any case, a larger proportion of Bretons were vulnerable to pregnancy than groups with a larger proportion of males, and for the poor this meant interaction with the social services of the city and with institutions like the maternity hospital for the indigent. Yet Bretonnes characteristically could, and did, also help their younger brothers and sisters, nephews, nieces, and cousins, since in many cases they were the first in their family to settle in Paris.∞≤

Arriving in Paris in an age of proletarian labor, Breton men lacked any specific or picturesque niche for their efforts. No tradition as water carriers, masons, or chimneysweeps introduced Parisians to Breton newcomers, as it did for those from the Auvergne, the Creuse, and the Alps. Lacking apprenticeships and extensive education, Breton men were able to respond to the demand for unskilled labor on construction sites and in the Paris Métro and rail lines. Lacking the compliant reputation of Breton women, the mass of Breton men in many instances had trouble finding good or steady work. In this they resemble some groups of immigrants and their offspring in the twenty-first century, whose daughters are able to find work but whose sons are less likely to finish school, enter an apprenticeship, or find a good job.∞≥

Breton culture was central to stereotypes held by Parisians. First and foremost, the religiosity of Bretons was held against them, particularly at the turn of the century when the battle to create a secular state and secular schools was at its most intense. Although much of this battle was waged far from Paris in the religious schools and convents of Brittany, the Bretons’ reputation for faithful Catholicism and religious fervor put them in disfavor in many eyes. On the other hand, many employers found devout employees to be pliant and honest, hence desirable. Moreover, the church and a variety of voluntary organizations did their best to save the souls of Bretons in irreligious Paris and to keep them in the fold. Here in some ways Bretons resemble today’s Muslim immigrants, who are by many lights seen as inassimilable because of their religious values, and who are increasingly identified by their common religion rather than according to their diverse origins in North and West Africa, Turkey, and elsewhere, as
many scholars have noted. One sign of this blinkered view has been the focus on Muslim women’s attire and the legal ban on the headscarf in public secondary schools and on the burka in public, instituted in 2004 and 2010. For many of the Muslim and Breton faithful, faith and religious practice are perceived as rare effective shields against the visible corruptions and dangers of modern urban life. If devout Catholicism set Bretons apart, their Druids—to say nothing of the prehistoric dolmen and menhir rock formations—exoticized this group and rendered them more primitive, if not incomprehensible, in Parisian eyes.

Like religion, language was a crucial and contested part of Breton culture. The Third Republic found the Celtic Breton language—much more so than the Gallo dialect of upper Brittany—to be anathema, associating it less with peasant practices than with the church, the lessons of religious schools, and the catechism. It expressed, in the words of one teachers’ publication, “the worst ideas vomited from hell.” On the other hand, many Bretons cherished and sought to prolong the use of the Breton language, an effort that continues to this day not only in Breton schools but in the classrooms of Paris. Every prewar Breton newspaper published articles in Breton—even if some Bretons, like the federation leader René Le Fur, made it clear that doing so was not in the interest of, or interesting to, every Breton. More concretely, the lack of capacity to speak French with ease tied the tongue of many a newcomer, inhibiting the search for work and friendships in the city. This too provides a link between the Bretons of the past and newcomers of today: both have had to endure problems of language, religion in some cases, and gender relations in others, to say nothing of stigma by cartoon.

The recent memoir of the noted historian Mona Ozouf, Composition française: Retour sur une enfance bretonne, thoughtfully articulates the range of forces at work in the life of a child wedded to speaking and identifying as a Breton, to the universalizing ideology of the schools of the Third Republic, and to the way of faith demonstrated by the church. These forces create a tension between the universal and particular that is characteristic, she contends, of French national life. Making the case for flexible and multiple identities, Ozouf recognizes the “plurality of ties” fostered by attachment to a home pays, the French nation, and religious faith, and recognizes these multiple ties in today’s immigrants in France. Bretons in the Paris of the Third Republic demonstrated flexible and multiple identities as they came to work and form new families in
Paris. Moreover, they showed how “diversity occurs and operates,” as some married compatriots while others did not, and some joined regional organizations while others did not. In any case, Bretons combined their connections to home with life in greater Paris by a variety of means and to a variety of degrees.∞Ω

The Bretons in Paris connect the migrations of the past with the present. Suzanne Ascoët, a Bretonne who fought for the rights of servants to the end of her working life, recognizes this connection. At the age of seventy-two she observed: “My neighbors are maids of Filipino, Mauritian, Cape Verdean, Polish origins. I also get along well with my Portuguese concierge. We often party, and I dine with one or the other. I’m the only immigrant from the interior.”≤≠ As pariahs of yesterday, Bretons make a demonstrable case for the integration of newcomers, but they also show that this integration is complex, involving different sending areas within a region and a variety of destinations in greater Paris. Although in the age of mass migrations Bretons were known to be uneducated bumpkins, they included an important educated elite that provided much of their leadership and whose experience was very distinct from that of rural workers who found themselves in Saint-Denis. Men and women at all levels of this group had distinct expectations and experiences. Moreover, they are revealed differently by the wide range of sources—bourgeois observations, marriage records, census data, literature, police records, and popular culture artifacts. Together the Bretons of Paris teach us the value of complexity and the long view of the history of migration.