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France Through Race: Beyond Colorblindness

France through Race: Beyond Colorblindness¹

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From a distance, France is usually implicitly understood as a white country. As a European nation, its history, culture, and population tend to be perceived in uncritical racial terms. When the issue of race explicitly shows up, France is most often considered colorblind, as a country that doesn't see race or for whom race just doesn't come into play with regard to civil liberties, social inequalities, and cultural politics.

As they take part in France's dominant ideology, these widespread assumptions are not neutral. Indeed, based on the supposed guaranteed and unconditional equality between all citizens, Republican universalism's doctrine strictly rejects the consideration of systemic inequality as grounded at the intersection of social conditions involving class, race, gender, or faith. To put it simply, because everybody is said to be equal, differences do not matter. Being Black, for example, would supposedly be a difference that has no impact on the social experiences of Black people. Because again, "it doesn't matter what you are; we're all equal, friend!" Established as a consensus, Republican universalism is problematic in that it erases systemic inequality and the experiences of minorities in French society. If class and gender have been more easily welcomed to the debate, race has on the contrary been the subject of intense polemics. Bringing up racial issues in the public arena in France has been perceived as an attempt to divide the national community, a refusal to assimilate, and an attack on national identity.

These introductory considerations, however, don't tell us much about the reason for a translation section about France in *Ufahamu*, a journal focusing on Africa and its diaspora. The reasons, in fact, are plural. First, France is not a white country. The presence of African people on its mainland, if often forgotten, is very ancient. As historian Pap Ndiaye has shown, there have been African people in France since antiquity, and their presence as a social group has become significant since the 18th century.² However, the African presence in France is commonly reduced to

post-colonial immigrations, which from the 1960s on have widely varied. Given this long history, it is important to specify that there are not only African people *in* France but African people *from* France – Afropeans – people of African descent who were born and raised in France, whose families were also born and raised in France, and for whom France is not just a country of residency and citizenship.³ African people indigenous to France who are just as much part of the culture and history of the country as their white counterparts—or at least should be. It is this key to emphasize the complexity and diversity of the African and Afro-descendant presence in France, which, with ties to the Caribbean, North Africa, Sub-Saharan Africa, and the Indian Ocean, is more largely reflective of the profound relationships between France and the African diaspora.

Of course, because of its colonial empire, France used to be much wider. As it expanded all over the world, many African regions were part of its territory, thus forcibly making millions of Africans part of France. To this day, several former French colonies such as Guadeloupe, Martinique, and French Guiana in the Caribbean, or Mayotte and Réunion in the Indian Ocean off the coast of Southeast Africa, are still under French rule. The populations of African descent primarily populating those territories are the descendants of African slaves brought to work in plantations—they remind us that France, through empire building, racial oppression and capitalist exploitation, has largely contributed to the formation of the African diaspora.⁴ Then, whether they gained their independence or are still under French rule, countries and territories throughout the African diaspora have, under varying and specific conditions of domination, formed idiosyncratic relationships with France and have “negotiated [their] economic, political and cultural dependency [or independence] differently.”⁵ France and the African diaspora, then, have remained inevitably bound together, in such profound and multiple ways that it is difficult to understand one without any relation to the other. For all these reasons, a section dedicated to France has its place in an African studies journal. By going beyond the easy binaries of Europe/Africa, or white/Black, it aims to reveal the relational ground of logics of difference at the root of racial ideologies and the marginalization, exploitation, oppression they have continuously served to justify.⁶ With that

comes the necessity to think about France (and more generally European metropolises) through decolonizing perspectives.

As a translation section, *France through Race: Beyond Colorblindness*, is conceived as a space for authors of the francophone African diaspora, and hopes to contribute to the circulation of their works and ideas. This is a motive that feels necessary given the contemporary climate in France, where the recent mainstream explosion of racial issues has brought about conservative responses from the government. In the wake of the murder of Samuel Paty, and within the scope of the LPPR—legislation pushing for the neoliberalization of French higher education and scholarship—postcolonial, intersectional, ethnic, and racial studies have been directly targeted, thus putting academic liberties in jeopardy. President Emmanuel Macron has personally condemned scholars studying and critiquing racism for “favoring the ethnicization of the social question.”⁷ Similar remarks were made by Jean-Michel Blanquer, the minister of National Education, who insinuated that scholars studying racism kindled the division of the country into separate communities, and for this reason were guilty of “intellectual complicity with terrorism.”⁸ In a larger context, these remarks echo the current establishment of national security and surveillance policies such as the Global Security Law Proposal, and liberticidal policies such as the Law Proposal for the Strengthening of Republican Principles, which by identifying racial issues as threats of “separatism” revive the myth of an inner enemy, to target racialized people and French Muslims in particular.⁹ This overtly racist and Islamophobic atmosphere has resonated in the academic world as Frédérique Vidal, the minister of Higher Education, Research and Innovation, has recently identified scholars in postcolonial and ethnic studies as responsible for the “corruption of the French university” with radical and activist theories. She qualified this as supporting “Islamism-leftism,” a highly problematic neologism assuming the “political alliance between far-left militants and ‘Islamist radicals.’”¹⁰ In such a reproving context, this section, through the translation of selected texts, aims to shed light on racial issues in France by contextualizing them in a wider colonial history, thereby, providing critical entry points to deconstruct dominant understandings of France.

Many authors and thinkers have emerged from the francophone African diaspora. However, only a handful of them, such as

Frantz Fanon, Édouard Glissant, Leopold Senghor, Maryse Condé, Jacques Derrida, and Achille Mbembe, have been heard by U.S. audiences. The contemporary movement sprouting up in France and across the francophone African diaspora has given rise to groundbreaking thinking from brilliant individuals and collectives, and it is the purpose of this section to highlight and amplify these voices beyond language barriers. Further, the section is grounded in the longstanding relationship between France and the U.S. through the African diaspora. Indeed, as France has appeared as a “safe haven” for African-Americans over the 20th century, it holds a particular place in the consciousness of many African-Americans. Paris especially has been a center for interaction between African-Americans and people of the francophone African diaspora. Through their Paris-Clamart literary salon, the Martiniquan Paulette Nardal and her sisters hosted African-American writers such as Claude McKay, Langston Hughes and Richard Wright, who on these occasions met the young Aimé Césaire, Leopold Senghor, and Léon-Gontran Damas. From the influence of the Harlem Renaissance and these Pan-African interactions would come the Négritude movement.¹¹ Beyond these very small intellectual circles, transnational African diasporic exchanges between France and the U.S. have been steady through popular culture, specifically in music. It is these Pan-African flows that this section hopes to echo. It does not attempt to distill Africa to a racial or cultural essence but rather to analyze “the way people of African descent [seek] alliances and political identifications across oceans and national boundaries.”¹²

For this first edition of *France through Race: Beyond Colorblindness*, we have three translated texts from three very special authors. Opening the section is “Racism: The Comparison with the United States is not Absurd,” a text by Rokhaya Diallo, a journalist, filmmaker and author of several books and documentaries, who has been at the forefront of anti-racist work in France. In this piece originally published in *Slate France*, Diallo talks about the paradox by which French media and politics, while easily recognizing racism in the U.S., totally fail to acknowledge the existence of racism in France. She then explores the specificity of systemic racism in France, its historical manifestations, and the common erasure of scholarship and political organizing addressing these issues. Directly following it is a piece by Seloua Luste Boulbina,

a philosopher specializing in postcolonial studies and former program director at the Collège International de Philosophie, and author of many books, including *Kafka's Monkey and Other Phantoms of Africa*, which was translated and published by Indiana University Press in 2019. First published on *Mediapart*, "The Continuation of the Past by Other Means," investigates the racial and racist undertones of Republican universalism and how the erasure of France's colonial past takes part in its systemic persistence. More specifically, she looks into the intersection between racism and Islamophobia, and the targeting of French Muslims resulting from it. Closing the section is "Marlène Schiappa, Femonationalism and Us," a text by Kaoutar Harchi, an author, scholar, and sociologist of literature, whose book *Comme Nous Existons* will be published later this year by Actes Sud. Published in the French journal *Ballast*, the piece translated here addresses the femonationalist positions of prominent government official Marlène Schiappa. More largely, Harchi critiques the role the government's instrumentalization of feminist rhetoric takes in the criminalization of men of color and of immigrant backgrounds, by identifying them as the source of a more threatening and brutal sexism. With these reflections, Harchi reminds us of the importance of situating women's rights at the intersection of larger social issues and struggles. Through an intersectional lens, we can not only start reflecting on the complex conditions of women of color, but also be critical of the co-opting of feminist ideas by capitalist regimes to perpetuate systemic racism and xenophobia.

FORCE À NOUS!

Notes

¹ Special thanks to Madina Thiam, the former editor-in-chief of *Ufahamu*, who introduced me to the journal in the first place. Madina and I met through Robin D. G. Kelley, and those encounters themselves reflect the Pan-African relations from which this section emerges. Special thanks to Elvina Le Poul for her illuminating suggestions.

² Pap Ndiaye, *La Condition Noire: Essai sur une Minorité Française* (Paris: Calmann-Levy, 2008): 131.

³ Leonora Miano, *Afropea: Utopie Post-Occidentale et Post-Raciste* (Paris: Grasset, 2020).

⁴ Robin D. G. Kelley, “How the West Was One: On the Uses and Limitations of Diaspora,” *The Black Scholar* 30, no. 3 (2000): 31–35.

⁵ Stuart Hall, “Cultural Identity and Diaspora,” in *Identity: Community, Culture, Difference*, edited by Jonathan Rutherford (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1990): 228.

⁶ Denise Ferreira Da Silva, “Mapping Pan-Africanism onto Blackness: The Continent, the Diaspora, and Beyond,” *The Funambulist: Politics of Space and Bodies* 32 (2020): 12–17.

⁷ Camille Stromboni, “Comment Emmanuel Macron s’est aliéné le monde des sciences sociales,” *Le Monde* (2020). https://www.lemonde.fr/societe/article/2020/06/30/comment-emmanuel-macron-s-est-aliene-le-monde-des-sciences-sociales_6044632_3224.html (accessed December 28, 2020).

⁸ Soazing Le Nevé, “Polémique après les propos de Jean-Michel Blanquer sur ‘l’islamophobie’ à l’université,” *Le Monde* (2020). https://www.lemonde.fr/societe/article/2020/10/23/polemique-apres-les-propos-de-jean-michel-blanquer-sur-l-islamo-gauchisme-a-l-universite_6057164_3224.html (accessed December 28, 2020).

⁹ The original names of those policies in French: “Proposition de loi relative à la sécurité globale,” and “Projet de loi confortant les principes de la République: Projet de loi contre le séparatisme.”

¹⁰ Norimitsu Onishi and Constant Méheut, “Heating up Culture Wars, France to Scour Universities for Ideas that ‘Corrupt Society,’” *The New York Times* (2021). <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/02/18/world/europe/france-universities-culture-wars.html> (accessed February 23, 2021).

¹¹ Tracy Denean Sharpley-Whiting, “*Femme négritude*, Jane Nardal, *La Dépêche africaine*, and the francophone new negro,” *Souls: A Critical Journal of Black Politics, Culture, and Society* 2, no. 4 (2000): 8–17.

¹² Kelley, 32.