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Erasing Skin Color: The Politics of Race and Class in France

“The skin is a mask, the only one you cannot remove but that you have not to remove” - Daniel Maximin

Since its revolution, France held firmly to its motto “liberté, égalité, fraternité”. Their uncompromised belief in a color-blind society earned them the love, admiration, and citizenship of countless African-Americans. In this context, Daniel Maximin’s words rings with a profound air of truth because from the moment Blacks set foot on French soil they were no longer oppressed by their “mask”. Indeed, like true “statues of liberté”, the French people and their government protected the African-Americans who came to their shores.

Yet despite the shelter from America’s brand of overt racism that France offered, the self-professed love, or negrophilia, that the French showed their visitors came with a price. African-Americans in French society, particularly during the reign of jazz music, were relegated to entertainment and servant roles with little other options economically; this marginalization of Black bodies continues on in today’s social order. Writers like Claude McKay, and other Blacks from the Diaspora, recognized this thinly veiled classism within French society. Yet as tempted as one might be to declare France innocent of violating its own motto, to do so would ignore institutional structuring of class as inextricably intertwined with race. As such, France is a useful palette for working through the multiple faces of racism, especially in light of their recent riots. Its landscape acts as a space which forces one to look at the nuanced complexities of race, beyond the argument that racism is simply black versus white.

The love affair between African-Americans and France began as Michel Fabre asserts in *Black American Writers in France, 1840-1980* with wealthy African-Americans from New Orleans (19-21). The free colored elite wanted their children to have an education away from the rampant racism in their society. France was the country of choice because of the common lingual and cultural ties between New Orleans and France. This option was limited to those who could financially afford the trip and so France remained the playground for wealthy blacks until the Great War (Fabre 2). For the 'common' Black man, France was the land of the revolution and true equality so thousands of men signed up to defend its freedom.

Once Black men landed in France, they experienced a level of equality unknown in America. Beyond the respect that the French showed them, Black Americans soldiers were also allowed to pursue an education at French universities and many took advantage of the opportunity. Nevertheless, men were not the only ones in France at this time seeking an education.

Stephanie Y. Evans brings the struggle and life-work of Dr. Anna Julia Cooper, among others, to the fore in *Black Women in the Ivory Tower, 1850-1954: An Intellectual History*. Cooper, who was born enslaved, studied for her doctorate at the Sorbonne during the time the new batch of Black Americans began making Paris their home. In 1925, Cooper defended her dissertation about France's treatment of Blacks during the Haitian revolution (Evans 2007). Cooper argued with one of her committee chair, objecting to his assertion that "the 'rights of man' were given by the Nordic man; instead Cooper believed these rights were God given and could not be taken away by man" (Evans 2007). This position added credibility to the Haitian revolution, in addition to Cooper's argument for the self-defense and self-determination of women and Blacks.

Even as Cooper fleshed out the conditions of French colonialism in the 1920s, a subject to be addressed later by other Black writers and scholars, the treatment of Blacks in Paris began to worsen from the initial experience of the first Black soldiers. To begin with, in 1923 a special cable to the New York Times reported that “400 negro girls from Martinique and Guadeloupe [were imported] to work in French households” (5). France apparently in shortage of servants because their women chose to remain in the workforce after the war, saw the situation as a *crisis* and “*imported*” their colonials. The French women distanced themselves from the sphere of domesticity and the Black Americans bore a bit more prestige because of their musical accomplishments, it was left to the colonials to take care of France. The issue of race and racism becomes more opaque in this light. Even though both groups are African-descended, because of their geographic and historic connection to America, Black Americans were not patronized and did not need their morals “safeguarded” like the imported girls.

Unfortunately Black Americans would begin to experience patronization and outright segregation in some areas of Paris as the decade marched on. William A Shack recounts in *Harlem in Montmartre: A Paris Jazz Story Between the Great Wars* the experiences of the Black community in Montmatre that developed mainly out of jazz musicians. Shack notes that “on more than one occasion a night club in Montmartre refused admittance to a Black customer in order not to displease its white American clientele” (68). Though the latter treatment was done out of economic motivation both experiences occurred relatively during the same time period.

It is important to note also the difference in treatment. Where the colonial women were patronized, the government came to the aid of the Black Americans: “Once reported to officials, the punishment was always swift, followed by a letter from the prime minister, reasserting the policy of France in racial matters” (Shack 68). It is impressive that the government backed up its

rhetoric of equality. Black Americans in France were not just equal on paper as was the case in America. Rather, France and the majority of its population came to the defense of Black Americans much like the Blacks Americans defended the land during the war.

Despite this official display of solidarity with Black Americans, writer Claude McKay viewed the French situation quite differently. Just as Anna Julia Cooper did before him, McKay saw the French racial landscape in the 1920s as more than just Black or white. In his chapter on McKay entitled “Claude McKay and the Two Faces of France,” Fabre recounts McKay’s reactions to France and his impressions of their society.

Through his protagonist, Ray, in the novel *Banjo*, McKay provides an in-depth look at the racial landscape.

In the novel the color bar seems to be everywhere: a crime committed by a Senegalese is used by the press to testify to the typical brutality of the entire race; black-skinned natives are considered stupid children at best. However, McKay makes the relationship between capitalist exploitation and racism clear. Racism is just an extreme instance of xenophobia caused by economic competition (Fabre 108).

Following this incisive critique, the importation of 400 colonials to work as servants is a clear example of economic exploitation as the report stated that French women enjoyed the “dignity and freedom...and financial advantages” of their place in the workforce. McKay, through Ray, holds France accountable for transforming the colored world into: “labor under its laws, and [France] lacked the spirit to tolerate them within its walls” (quoted in Fabre 108). Ultimately the French opinion of the Blacks is like one who owns a working mule; one becomes so familiar with the animal as a worker and nothing else that the creature loses any dignity it had. On the other hand, Black Americans are treated fairly because of their money and jazz (Fabre 107).

Petrine Archer-Straw continues McKay’s points about the hypocrisy of French obsession with Black Americans in *Negrophilia: Avant-Garde Paris and Black Culture in the 1920s*.

Negrophilia, or love for Black culture, that flourished in the 1920s came at a price to Black Americans.

Those blacks who were ambitious did make it. But they would soon discover that the admiration and success they gained from Parisian society came at a cost. The price they paid was their blackness: if they were to advance, they would have to remain minstrels, singing and dancing a white man's tune. They would be expected to bring to life the stereotypes already promoted through [French] advertising (Archer-Straw 49).

Thus Black Americans left the oppressive Uncle Tom and Mammy stereotypes of America only to be confronted with a more benign version that claimed to love them. Much like McKay's observations and the example of the imported labor illustrates, Black Americans were locked into labor roles which were based on their ability to entertain.

In light of this, one has to question the underlying motivation of the Parisian obsession, or love of, with Blacks. Whereas the common Frenchman because of his lower economic status seemed in a position to really relate to Blacks, the rest of French society layered on a superficial 'love' with a condescending undertone (Fabre 107-109). Archer-Straw notes this contradiction in French love by critiquing their use of Black images in advertising: "It was only by presenting them as different and exotic, by showing them as slaves, servants, entertainers and humorous characters related to animals, that their racial inferiority could be communicated... [which] converted European fears of difference into 'safe' accessible images where whites were given control" (Archer-Straw 38). Therefore by keeping Blacks in positions of service and entertainment, the French could control the strangers in their fast changing society.

This love affair with France, and Paris in particular, continued into the 1940s and 50s when even more Black Americans made their way to the fabled land of equality. Among them was writer James Baldwin, who sought reprieve from the oppressive racist forces in America that would have killed him if he stayed (Fabre 195). Baldwin, like Cooper and McKay, examines the racial landscape and offers a more in-depth and involved analysis than McKay.

Unlike McKay, Baldwin did come to love France for the freedoms it afforded him. Fabre notes in his chapter on Baldwin entitled “James Baldwin in Paris: Love and Self-Discovery” that in France, Baldwin was allowed to grow as a writer and he recognized that even the man on the corner had a deep appreciation and respect for the art form and its artists (Fabre 206). “But I could not hate the French, because they left me alone... [Paris] saved my life by allowing me to find out who I am” (quoted in Fabre 213). Like the soldiers before him who defended France in the great wars, Baldwin saw France as a shelter from America’s racism and a place to grow.

Nevertheless, Baldwin’s love for the city that saved him was always tempered with a critical look at the racial landscape and the conditions under which Blacks lived in France. According to Fabre, Baldwin continually became more conscious of the need to take a stand for civil rights. This came as Blacks in America were fighting for their rights and the first Congress of Black Artists and Writers convened in 1956. During increasingly tense times, Baldwin observed the brutality of Parisian authorities who the law and violence this time to keep their strangers in check, instead of stereotypical images.

I had watched the police, one sunny afternoon, beat an old, one-armed peanut vendor senseless in the streets, and I had watched the unconcerned faces of the French on the café terraces, and the congested faces of the Arabs (Baldwin as quoted in Fabre 207).

Baldwin also posits that the change in attitude towards Blacks came as a result of ‘the fall of Dien Bien Phu and the Algerian rebellion’ (Fabre 210). The colonials were fighting back no longer content to just be entertainers and laborers.

Similar incidents of violent retaliation on the government’s part were illustrated by other writers including Shay Youngblood. In her novel *Black Girl in Paris*, Youngblood takes her protagonist Eden to Paris on a quest of self-discovery similar to Baldwin’s. Indeed, one of Eden’s driving motivations in going to Paris is finding Baldwin. Once in Paris, Eden associates

with multiple social groups which give the reader a more full-bodied perspective on what Paris was really like.

Youngblood also introduces the reader to elements of the African Diaspora and what it means to be Black in Paris and not American through the Haitian character Olu-Christophe. The Diaspora is given a voice when Olu discusses his life of exile in Paris with Eden:

I miss my family, the food, speaking my language. I miss everything. When I first arrived in Paris I was insulted and harassed when I said I was Haitian. People called me dirty, accused all Haitians of having AIDS. Sometimes I pretended to be French or African (Youngblood 168).

Olu's experience speaks for the old man who was beaten senseless and allows the reader to position the experience of the colonial to that of the African American. The difference in treatment is punctuated by Olu's arrest, when he, Eden, and Eden's boyfriend Ving are stopped by the police and asked for their papers. Unable to produce his, Olu is taken into custody and never heard from again. What makes his arrest stand out as racially charged is the police response to their inquiry as to where they were taking Olu: "A L'Afrique avec les autres singes" (Youngblood 181). From this Eden recognizes the word monkey and one can infer from that how Olu would be treated. Indeed this scene holds up the mirror to French society, reflecting their true sentiments towards Blacks without the negrophillia.

Even though this account between the Blacks in Paris and the law, it does lay the backdrop for what has been going on in Paris for decades. Slowly French colonials are resisted and pushed back on French racism and this resistance continues today.

In 2005, this marginalized group retaliated and rioted. The riots that went on for almost month exploded in the banlieues, or inner cities, of Paris after two young men from immigrant families were dead after a police chase. Journalist Jeremy Harding recounted the cause of the riots and what French officials are doing to address them in "Color Blind." Harding argues that

“there is a powerful feeling among the under-or unemployed youth of African and North African descent who did so much of the rioting that **France** has failed to acknowledge them. Most of the time they are invisible citizens, out of sight and out of mind, stuck in peripheral housing projects where jobs are scarce and opportunities nearly nonexistent” (40). Though this might appear to be a case of social unrest spurred on by issues of class inequality, one must note that those in the banlieues are almost exclusively African and North African and as such race becomes key player. Again, race alone did not spur on the riots, but combined with class issues which in turn are determined by one’s race, one sees that racism has taken a different mask.

French officials now try to placate a festering wound and appease the riotous sect by placing a few persons of color in the media and promoting persons of color who will champion diversity. Yet a few drops of color here and there are not the solution France needs. As one walks through Little Africa in Montmartre and observes the shops, then take a stroll around Montparnasse and look through the windows down Rue Vavin for instance, there is a clear difference in the quality of merchandise on sale. This minute observation on something as superficial as clothing is not isolated as the differences in quality exist at all levels of French society.

France is in a state of flux right now as it attempts to rectify its current social situation and return once again to its motto of equality. As France struggles to mind an appropriate balance it refuses to analyze the issue with an eye on the influence race has in its system of discrimination. The fear is that once you look at fear, France will degrade its motto and no longer be a truly equal society-so it chooses to remain color blind. Yet for decades Black Americans from Anna Julia Cooper down to Shay Youngblood have demonstrated a need to examine France’s racial landscape with particular attention to the role of race. Despite its history of

colonialism and underlying racism, France has remained an oasis for many African Americans. Knowing the history yet still falling for the city places one in a state of ambiguity. This ambiguity is exactly what makes the French landscape a palette for examining racism. It forces the outsider to look at the many faces and layers of racism without reducing the issue to merely a dichotomous analysis that is black versus white. Ultimately it is clear to see that France has not always been the gregarious shelter from racism that it took itself to be.

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