

2017

Black France, Black America: Engaging Historical Narratives

John Berteaux

California State University, Monterey Bay, jberteaux@csumb.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.csumb.edu/hcom_fac

Recommended Citation

Berteaux, J. 2017. Black France, Black America: Engaging Historical Narratives. *Cosmopolitan Civil Societies: An Interdisciplinary Journal*. 9(2), 57-71. [http:// dx.doi.org/10.5130/ccs.v9i2.5474](http://dx.doi.org/10.5130/ccs.v9i2.5474)

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Humanities & Communication at Digital Commons @ CSUMB. It has been accepted for inclusion in HCOM Faculty Publications and Presentations by an authorized administrator of Digital Commons @ CSUMB. For more information, please contact digitalcommons@csumb.edu.



© 2017 John Berteaux.
This is an Open Access
article distributed under the
terms of the Creative
Commons Attribution 4.0
Unported (CC BY 4.0)
License ([https://
creativecommons.org/
licenses/by/4.0/](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/)), allowing
third parties to copy and
redistribute the material in
any medium or format and to
remix, transform, and build
upon the material for any
purpose, even commercially,
provided the original work is
properly cited and states its
license.

Citation: Berteaux, J. 2017. Black
France, Black America:
Engaging Historical Narratives.
*Cosmopolitan Civil Societies: An
Interdisciplinary Journal*. 9(2),
57-71. [http://
dx.doi.org/10.5130/ccs.v9i2.547
4](http://dx.doi.org/10.5130/ccs.v9i2.5474)

ISSN 1837-5391 | Published by
UTS ePRESS |
mcs.epress.lib.uts.edu.au

REFEREED PAPER

Black France, Black America: Engaging Historical Narratives

John Berteaux

California State University Monterey Bay

Corresponding author: Dr. John Berteaux, Professor of Philosophy, Humanities and
Communication, California State University, Monterey Bay, 5108 Fourth Avenue, Marina, CA
93933, USA. jberteaux@csumb.edu

DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.5130/ccs.v9i2.5474>

Abstract

Abstract During the first quarter of the 20th Century a small group of black intellectuals, artists, and musicians abandoned the United States for Paris. The rumor was that the French did not believe in racist theories – that France offered blacks social and economic opportunities not available in the States. This paper critically examines that narrative as well as North America’s melting pot legend – an expression of the promise of America made popular in 1909 by playwright Israel Zangwill. The stories that we tell about ourselves as a nation are important because our moral sentiments are frequently a product of these narratives. They influence our vision of populations and their circumstances. They serve as starting points for philosophical investigation and critical self-reflection. My intent is not to prove these stories or narratives false but rather, to illustrate how their widespread acceptance has affected people’s abilities to recognize, understand, and responsibly address compelling and complex racial problems. What I recommend is the need for an on-going, comprehensive, and critical examination of socially dominant historical narratives.

Keywords

Historical Narratives; Assimilationism; Multiculturalism; Debt Peonage; *Negrophilia*; Ethic of Care

DECLARATION OF CONFLICTING INTEREST The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article. **FUNDING** This work was made possible by: Provost Emeritus Cecil Lytle, University of California San Diego, Department of Music; and a Provost Global Engagement Grant, California State University Monterey Bay, College of Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences.

Introduction

It is common today to display ambivalence toward history. In my philosophy classes I find students are somewhat reticent when it comes to talking about majoring in history. Those who are talkative share that friends and relatives query them *ad nauseam* about their reasons relating that they are asked over and over, ‘What are you going to do with that?’ or advised ‘You’re not going to find a good job with a history major ...’. While conventional wisdom has it that those who do not value history are condemned to repeat it, some are convinced that the practical value of history is exaggerated since people do not seem to learn from their mistakes. Others believe that the infinite possibilities of human experience imply that meaningful thought about the past is impossible (Muller, 1952, pp. 38–55). As expressions of motives for or against critically engaging history this list is far from complete. For example, if ethics is a discipline that defines how we are supposed to act towards others and ourselves then one might wonder whether it is possible to do the right thing without a thorough appreciation of the past. Since ethical decision-making is not simply about following rules, it may depend heavily on unreflective assumptions and sentiments that are the product of historical narratives.

Philosopher Charles Mills asks that we recall the narrative once used to justify Western colonialism. Mills (1997, pp. 40–50) says,

The basic sequence goes something like this: there were no people there in the first place; in the second place, they’re not improving the land; and in the third place – oops! – they’re already all dead anyway (and honestly, there really weren’t that many to begin with), so there are no people there, as we said in the first place.

Here Mills suggests that, without an appreciation of the past, it is possible to simply descend into oppressive fantasy. Given his specious anecdote one might see colonialism as simply a competition between nations over raw materials and natural resources. A more accurate historical account indicates that the raw materials and natural resources so readily exploited by colonial nations often came at someone’s expense through force, fraud, or violence. This difference is morally significant since either the use of such methods could render the initial acquisition of materials and resources illegitimate or suggest the wealth of those currently benefiting from the initial illegitimate acquisition should be confiscated and redistributed (Kymlicka, 1990, p. 108).

To put it succinctly, historical narratives can hide our true situation and real interest. Consider, during the First World War (1914-1918) hundreds of thousands of African American soldiers who fought in Europe returned to America from France extolling that country’s inclusiveness – its openness. They saw France generally and Paris in particular as offering opportunity and social freedom not widely available for blacks in the United States, as I shall illustrate later. As a result of this early twentieth century narrative, many, to this day, see Paris as ‘the city of light’, a free, open, color-blind metropolis. And yet, though this narrative endures, as recently as October of 2005, young Arab and African men sparked riots that spread across France. Their indictment of the French police for racial profiling as well as

their plea for jobs, education, and decent housing echoed the cries historically raised by oppressed minorities elsewhere and belies the notion that France is an egalitarian society. While the riots continued sporadically through 2008, the dissatisfaction has not dissipated and is made apparent by the burned out cars one comes across on the streets of Paris (Erlanger, 2009, p. A10).

Indeed, *The New Yorker* magazine correspondent George Packer (2015) contends that the 2015 terrorist attacks in Paris were a ‘response’ to the racial inequality and injustice that has persisted, for quite some time, in Paris’s ‘outer-cities’. And journalist Manu Saadia (2015) argues that, to understand the attack perpetrated by a group of Frenchmen of Algerian lineage at the Bataclan concert hall in 2015 we must put it in a historical and political context that includes the Paris massacre of Algerians that occurred over fifty years ago¹.

So too, racism has been the great failure of the United States. The American melting pot narrative advises us that populations came to the U.S. leaving behind their ancient prejudices, politics, and attitudes. The melting pot created new men and women; it created one out of many, a new race – the American race (Schlesinger, 1993, pp. 23–43). And yet, in 2010 at the University of California, San Diego, a group of white students made a national name for themselves when they hosted a ‘Compton Cookout’. Women were invited to wear nappy wigs, large earrings, cheap clothing, and to speak loudly and start fights. Compton is a city in Southern California that is home to a large African American population (Archibold, 2010, p. A-10). Indeed, historian Tony Judt (2008, pp. 16–20) complains that in the U.S., present day characterizations of the recent past are composed of ‘manifold fragments ... each of them (Jewish, Polish, Serb, Armenian, German, Asian-American, Palestinian, Irish, homosexual ...) marked by its own distinctive and assertive victimhood ... The resulting mosaic does not bind us to a shared past, it separates us from it’. In short, it seems the melting pot does not melt everybody.

Although I should know better by now, I often complacently take in narratives or myths about the past and file them away as historical fact. Of course, there are narratives and counter narratives, narratives seen as top-level political discourse in the form of government documents, and narratives in the form of newspaper articles, or articles in scholarly journals, or simply tales passed on by family, friends, and acquaintances². In this paper I focus on and explore two socially dominant narratives that, I insist, fail to offer an exhaustive picture of populations or society. I urge that it is important unremittingly to evaluate these narratives because they influence moral attitudes.

¹ On October 17, 1961 at the height of the Algerian war of liberation, the Algerian National Liberation Front (FLN) called on all Algerians living in Paris to go into the streets and hold a peaceful demonstration. During that demonstration, Paris police attacked scores of men, women, and children. Many Algerians were injured and jailed and at least 200 demonstrators were killed. The bodies of those killed were thrown from the bridges over the Seine and could be found floating in the river for weeks afterward. The Bataclan concert hall is only a short distance from where a number of the 1961 demonstrations occurred.

² Take, for example, the Irish slave narrative, a myth based on a misinterpretation of the history of indentured servitude that often appears on white supremacist web sites. The assertion that the Irish were slaves just like the blacks rests on the assumption that indentured servitude and chattel slavery is equivalent and that the experiences in the aftermath was similar. It follows, then, that the Irish were slaves too and ‘got over it, so why can’t blacks?’

I begin by appraising France's antique narrative of inclusion. Then I critically engage America's melting pot metaphor. Again these are narratives that have consequences for a broad domain; they shape philosophical inquiry, moral sentiments, and hinder our attaining a clear-eyed vision of the nature of populations and their circumstances. In conclusion, I touch on the work of philosophers and feminist like Dwight Furrow, Daniel Engster, and Nel Noddings to gauge whether it is possible to resolve a legacy of racial subordination, inequality, and injustice without persistently questioning these socially dominant historical narratives.

France's Antique Narrative of Inclusion

In the novel *The Stone Face*, African American journalist, novelist, and editor William Gardner Smith offers an account of how the French regard race, albeit in a fictionalized format. Like Smith his protagonist, Simeon, is an African American expat living and writing in France. Having experienced racism in America, Simeon is sensitive to and curious about the anti-Arab racism he sees in the streets of Paris. Despite what Simeon thinks he sees, his friends, Raoul and Henri, corroborate the age-old adage that the French nation is a community of individuals.

One day at the Touron, Simeon asked Raoul and Henri, two French students he knew, 'Is there racism in France?' Raoul said quickly, 'Of course not. The French don't believe in racist theories, everybody knows that. Africans feel perfectly at home here. The French don't understand racism' (Smith, 1963, p. 62).

In her book, *Resurrecting Slavery: Racial Legacies and White Supremacy in France*, Sociology Professor Crystal Marie Fleming (2017, p. 11) maintains that even into the 1950s prominent French historians of colonialism claimed that the French did not believe in racist theories. She insists, however, 'Such denials of French racism are not only ahistorical and factually untrue ... They are also *atemporal*. That is, portraying France as blind to race requires erasing French racism across time'. Historian William B. Cohen (2003, pp. xiv–xv) reports that 'Frenchmen have traditionally asserted that their country, unlike their neighbors and the white inhabitants of the U.S., have upheld the principles of racial equality overseas and at home'. Cohen (2003, p. xv) continues, 'Official spokesmen for the French government have also pointed with great pride to what they perceive as a record of unparalleled racial egalitarianism'.

In *Black Skins, French Voices: Caribbean Ethnicity and Activism in Urban France*, anthropologist David Beriss (2004, p. 125) says, 'The ideal of 'republican universalism' defines the [French] nation as a community of individuals, not a collection of cultures'. Briess (2004, p. 125) observes 'It had long been asserted that what distinguished French culture from its European neighbors was the humanist ideal according to which anyone could become French simply by accepting French culture'. As a result, most documents in France today, including the national census require respondents to indicate only their citizenship and not their race, ethnicity, or religion (Beriss, 2004, p. 125; Hine et al., 2009, p. 106; Packer, 2015).

How did France's antique narrative of inclusion originate? Historian E.J. Hobsbawm (1992, p. 88,101) reminds us that the nation state is frequently the product of conscious effort. Hobsbawm claims that it is a myth that cultures suddenly mature and pass a tipping point such that they become conscious of themselves as nation states. Whether it was the case of simple maturation or conscious effort, presently there is the belief that an assimilationist narrative has directed the French republic. France embraces and absorbs all those who accept the French language and culture. In their book, *Sixty Million Frenchmen Can't Be Wrong*, writers Jean-Benoit Nadeau and Julie Barlow (2003, p. 301) maintain, 'At the time of the French revolution [1789 – 1799], France was an ethnic and linguistic patchwork. The Revolutionaries developed a policy of assimilation to further the goal of centralization and create a single French identity'.

The Reality

Though it is true that the French have historically rejected dividing society up along religious, racial, cultural, or ethnic lines, it does not necessarily follow that the country has not been involved in race-making or racial discrimination. To see this, one need look no further than France's colonial history and its involvement in the slave trade or its past and present treatment of its Arab and African colonial subjects. Just as hundreds of thousands of African American soldiers fought for the U.S. in Europe during the First and Second World Wars, hundreds of thousands of indigenous soldiers (*Tirailleurs*) supported France's involvement in the Franco Prussian War, the First World War, the Second World War, and in Indochina (Mann, 2006, pp. 15–22). And just as African American soldiers returned to a second class citizenship, the *Tirailleurs* had to fight for pensions and social benefits promised long ago and awarded French citizens as a matter of course (Mann, 2006, pp. 5–6; Saltmarsh, 2009).

Harki is a term meaning 'volunteer' and is used to refer to French Muslims and Algerians who defended France during the Algerian war of independence fought from 1954 to 1962. Although thousands of *Harki* fought and died for France during this war, journalists, novelists, and historians have chronicled the bleak existence of the *Harki* during and after the Algerian war of independence (Werman, 2012). French historian Pierre Daum (Khattab, 2015), in an interview on Aljazeera, describes their dismal treatment both in France as well as in Algeria. Those few who fled to France after the war confronted racism and those who remained loyal to France but stayed in Algeria after the war faced segregation and violence. Daum estimates that tens of thousands of *Harkis* were executed following France's departure from Algeria, while those who left Algeria for France faced inhumane conditions in French camps.

In her chapter, 'Black (American) Paris And The French Outer-Cities', Professor of African American and Diasporic Studies, Trica Danielle Keaton, explores the race question and the fallacy of color-blindness in French society. She points out that the age-old narrative, accepted by many of a 'color-blind or race-free France' is a fallacy. It is a fallacy that continues until today and results in the '(mis)representation of Paris and France as sites of a paradoxical Black American inclusion'. This narrative, she contends, 'dismiss[es] and/or deny[s] the social realities of race in French society' (Hine et al., 2009, pp. 95–118).

In short, Trica Keaton's sober analysis of France's antique 'narrative of inclusion' is important in that it draws our attention to the fact that the narrative sustains a fantasy – the fantasy that France is a race-free society. Moreover, the policy upon which the narrative is based explains why it is so difficult to overturn the fantasy and investigate racial inequality and injustice in France. Census statistics are unavailable since the government cannot legally ask citizens about their race, religion, or ethnicity. Therefore, it appears that while not counting can solidify the narrative suggesting that groups do not exist and that nothing needs fixing, essentially *de facto* discrimination continues to endure even as the narrative masks it.

Real life on the other side of the Atlantic

As modern day France struggles to realize its universal humanistic ideals, on the other side of the Atlantic the United States labors to overcome a history that includes chattel slavery, debt peonage, segregation, and discrimination. And just as France's antique narrative of inclusion prevents the French from attaining an honest vision of their populations and their circumstances, so too America's melting pot thesis seems to be little more than propaganda. For example, it is possible to find historians who suggest that the reality that race played, and continues to play, in sculpting the nation's understanding of itself and of American blacks is as much a product of the distant past as it is an invention of the eighty-year period between the end of the chattel slavery and World War II. After all, historian Douglas Blackmon (2009, pp. 1–10) insists that while chattel slavery may have been irrevocably abolished with the signing of The Thirteenth Amendment to the Constitution and its ratification in 1865, technically the end of slavery did not occur in the United States until 1941.

The essence of Blackmon's argument is that it is a forgotten part of American history that, by the end of Reconstruction, southern states had created a labor system that was as destructive as chattel slavery – turning thousands upon thousands of ex-slaves into convicts and robbing them of their newly found freedom. It was a labor system that destroyed families, confiscated land, and subordinated blacks. Blackmon (2009, p. 7) argues:

Instead of thousands of true thieves and thugs drawn into the [prison] system over the decades, the records demonstrate the capture and imprisonment of thousands of random indigent citizens, almost always under the thinnest chimera of probable cause or judicial processes ... Instead of evidence showing black crime waves, the original records of county jails indicate thousands of arrests for inconsequential charges or for violations of laws specifically written to intimidate blacks.

This was a system built first on debt peonage and then on convict labor – forms of involuntary servitude that accommodated whites' (continued) need for free labor and gratified their desire for racial subordination. Jailing more than a million black men (women and children) in this manner, the system, Blackmon insists, criminalized the image of blacks in the United States – creating an image of blacks as those people one should be afraid of – those people that one should expect to be in prison or working in chain gangs along the side of the road.

This was an eighty-year period in which blacks throughout the south faced laws that allowed for their being legally grabbed off the street and jailed, or sold as free labor to the

highest bidder for such things as ‘riding freight cars without a ticket, engaging in sexual activity or loud talk – with white women’ (Blackmon, 2009, pp. 7, 53–57). Blackmon updates our understanding of race relations by demonstrating that racial inequality and injustice existed right alongside the melting pot thesis.

Black America, Black France

In 1918, 53 years after the end of chattel slavery, black American World War I veterans returned to the United States and found continuing hostility, lack of opportunity and little social and economic freedom. Although they found the system looked to force them back into involuntary servitude, returning soldiers fought back (Blackmon, 2009, p. 360). As a result historian Eric Foner (1990, p. 174) reports, ‘The last year of the war [First World War] witnessed an orgy of violence (there were eleven lynchings in Georgia alone in May 1918) and a wave of repression that drove the NAACP out of local communities throughout the South’. This then, was the world in which Josephine Baker, Richard Wright, Sidney Bechet, Ada ‘Bricktop’ Smith and other African American artist and intellectuals came of age. Josephine Baker, arguably the best-known expat, left the United States heading for France in September 1925. She left the U.S. for a country that returning black soldiers characterized as ‘open and free’.

Professor of French Literature Eileen Julien (2009, p. 49) observes that when Josephine Baker first arrived in France as a member of the dance troupe *Revue Nègre*, ‘France was in fact in the throes of *negrophilia*, an esthetic manifested prominently in the visual arts, music, and performance. *Negrophilia* was a complex, ambiguous phenomenon, conflating European notions of African and African American life and performance’. Julien (2009, p. 49) emphasizes that the performances of Baker and others in *Revue Nègre* (1925), *Folies Bergères* (1926) and the *Bal Nègre* (1927) ‘was greeted in the French Press with hysterical acclaim ... not only was Baker *not* a French colonial subject or citizen but, as a victim of American racism, she bolstered French claims to have created the premier republic of “liberté, égalité, fraternité”’.

Approximately twenty-five years after Josephine Baker arrived in France, writer James Baldwin wrote *Encounter on the Seine: Brown Meets Black*. In this short piece, Baldwin offers a mid-twentieth century examination of expatriate African American life. He estimates that there were approximately five hundred ‘American Negroes’ living in Paris during his time there. He goes on to say that they were pretty much isolated from each other and then explores the reasons for their isolation. Baldwin notes that American blacks in Paris sought invisibility and emphasizes at least three reasons for this. First, he argues, they avoid each other because ‘It is altogether inevitable that past humiliations should become associated not only with one’s traditional oppressors but also with one’s traditional kinfolk’ (Baldwin and Jones, 2012, pp. 119-120). Through those who are most like him, he [the black] comes to relieve the agonizing reasons he left the United States in the first place.

Second, Baldwin (2012, pp. 121–122) says, long before he came to Paris he had acknowledged the absolute futility of blaming any one of his countrymen for the position of blacks in America. ‘American Negroes’ and whites cannot discuss the past, he insists,

because they live and have lived in different worlds. Hence, the ‘American Negro’ has lost any hope of conveying to whites any of his experience. It is not about all whites being mean and ugly racists; rather, blacks and whites simply live in different worlds. Conversations with Europeans and African blacks generally tend to adhere to the fantasies that Europeans and African blacks have constructed for themselves about the United States and the American black. The European sympathizes with the American black, while the African has not endured the alienation of self from self as have American blacks. Baldwin goes on to suggest that the ‘American Negro’s’ past is more complex than the histories suggest. Their past ‘has not been simply a series of ropes and bonfires and humiliations, but something vastly more complex’ (Baldwin and Jones, 2012, p. 121).

France may have remained in the throes of *negrophilia* but its treatment of its blacks left much to be desired and created an interesting inconsistency for American blacks. Certainly, historian Tyler Stovall (2009, p. 185) makes us aware that the ‘rosy portrait of African American life in Paris contrasted sharply ... with the experiences of most French Blacks’. Like their counterparts in the United States, many African soldiers (*Tirailleurs*) returned home from the First World War demanding full citizenship and were disappointed. In France, the old colonial order did not pass away after the war; rather, it endured. Stovall (2009, p. 185) says, ‘In Francophone Africa, the new emphasis on the economic development of the colonies led to a massive increase in forced labor, often under brutally exploitative conditions’. Although blacks in the French Caribbean and Africa may not have suffered the violence experienced by American blacks in the south, still they were not fully accepted in French society. As a result, African Americans in Paris were in the odd position of ‘witnessing and escaping the mistreatment of a lower caste in the city’ (Stovall, 2009, p. 185).

In the novel *The Stone Face*, author William Gardner Smith’s protagonist, Simeon, an African American writer living in Paris in the early 60s, finds himself caught in an awkward situation. Simeon happens upon a man seemingly attacking a woman. He intervenes, attempting to help the woman. A fight ensues. The police arrive and take both men in for questioning. During the questioning, Simeon learns that his adversary, an Algerian called Hossein, was trying to retrieve money that the woman had stolen from him. The following exchange occurs:

“What happened?” he asked.

“These *bicots* [Algerians] attacked the Monsieur,” a policeman said.

The sergeant looked at Simeon. “Do you want to bring charges?”

“No.”

“Explain what happened, Monsieur.”

The man Simeon had fought tried to speak, but one of the policemen slapped him in the face. The sergeant said to the man, “Be quiet!” then turned to Simeon. “Go ahead, Monsieur.” The sergeant had used the familiar *tu* in speaking to the Algerian, but employed the polite *vous* in addressing Simeon. Simeon felt extremely uncomfortable. He said, “This man was with a girl and, I don’t know, I suppose I interfered when I shouldn’t have. “Lock him up. And the others, too. A night in jail will do them good.”

A policeman said, “The American too?”

“No, not monsieur.”

Simeon looked at the Algerians with a plea for forgiveness. They did not return his glance. He protested to the sergeant, “But I’m not lodging charges. I didn’t know his pay was stolen. They shouldn’t be locked up, everything was my fault.”

The sergeant frowned. “Listen, are you telling us how to run our own country?”

“No.”

“Okay, get out of here.”

A policeman led Simeon to the entrance. Simeon looked back at the Algerians, who were being pushed roughly through a door in the rear. The policeman put his arm on Simeon’s shoulder and said, “You don’t understand. You don’t know how they are, *les Arabes*. Always stealing, fighting, cutting people, [and] killing. They’re a plague; you’re a foreigner, you wouldn’t know. A night in jail is letting them off easy.” (Smith, 1963, pp. 52–53).

Some time later Simeon ran into Hossein on the street. Hossein confronted Simeon asking, “How does it feel to be the white man for a change” (Smith, 1963, p. 57)?

In sum, then, France’s narrative of inclusion hid the sinister nature of its color blind or race-free story line in that its acceptance of black Americans pointed away from its racist treatment of its own colonial subjects. France’s treatment of its Arab and African subjects could not be racist – after all, look at the treatment the French afforded American blacks. Without doubt, French culture is egalitarian; hence, it is superior to U.S. culture (Cohen, 2003, p. xv). It allowed France to draw a distinction between ‘good’ American blacks and ‘bad’ African and Arab blacks. And what is more, the difference in treatment between the ‘good’ blacks versus the ‘bad’ blacks entered everyone’s identity (American blacks, French blacks, whites, and Algerians) to shape their perceptions and prejudices. In short, France’s dominant social narrative is not just a fantasy; it is an insidious fantasy.

The upshot of all this is that historical narratives must be critically examined. If James Baldwin and others are correct, then, it is through critically engaging the past that we make contact with the complex and inconsistent ways in which racial narratives take shape and unfold. For instance, many like to think of the New Deal Era of the 1930s and 1940s as a time when the United States turned a new leaf and became concerned about poverty, old age, unemployment, and the burdens placed on widowers. In discussions of the Social Security Act of 1935, one controversial issue has been its exclusion of farm workers and domestics from coverage – targeting the disproportionately minority sectors of the work force and denying protections and benefits routinely afforded whites.

Public Historian Larry DeWitt (2010, pp. 49-50) insists that this is a story line that has passed from historical narrative to historical fact. Dewitt (2010, p. 49) argues ‘the racial-bias thesis is both conceptually flawed and unsupported by the existing empirical evidence ... The allegations of racial bias in the founding of the [New Deal Era] Social Security program,

based on the coverage exclusions, do not hold up under detailed scrutiny'³. This difference of opinion has significant implications, since conscious as well as unconscious actions and the dissemination of cultural stories have institutionalized racial identities.

To put it another way, novelist William Faulkner (2011, p. 73) says, 'the past is never dead. It's not even past'. In fact, historian Tyler Stovall (Hine et al., 2009, p. 189) claims that at the turn of the 21st century black France and black America 'have come to resemble each other more closely, in ways that [have] rendered the transatlantic link historically constituted by African American expatriates less important'. While the rise of a large black middle class in the United States has resulted in fewer black Americans who visit France with the idea of exile in mind, the changing nature of French society has led some black Americans to reconsider the old notion of a color-blind France. Indeed, currently the French press is filled with reports of demonstrations following the violent arrest by four police officers of a young black man (Theo) in one of France's 'outer-cities'. The reports of police brutality, in this case, parallel incidents that have occurred in the United States in 2016 and led to the Black Lives Matter movement.

Once we acknowledge how easy it is to surrender to illusion, we are left with a clear question: Given a global history of racial inequality and injustice, what is it our moral responsibility to do now? Ethical decision-making depends upon context. To the extent that socially dominant historical narratives provide context they may offer either an impoverished vision, or a rich, circumspect, and insightful appreciation of populations and their circumstances. If this analysis is correct it does not seem possible to resolve racial problems while simply looking past these equivocal accounts of history.

Reconstructing Liberal Theory

By contrast, some are convinced that to defeat racial oppression, all liberal democracies need do is to live up to their ideals (individualism, equality, and universalism): others maintain that liberal ideals and values must be reinterpreted so as to accommodate racial groups; and still others believe that liberal ideals have been racialized and, as a result are not powerful enough to overcome racial oppression (Kukathas, 1992, 1992, pp. 111–117; Kymlicka, 1995, pp. 1-2; Mills, 1997, pp. 9–40). In any case, I insist that liberal democracies must gauge the material as well as non-material suffering of the 'other' and in order to do so a comprehensive and critical appreciation of the past is necessary.

But first, conventional wisdom has it that social environment is the problem. In Europe, Prime Minister David Cameron of Britain, Chancellor Angela Merkel of Germany, and Former French President Nicholas Sarkozy all responded in the same way when right-wing extremist Anders Behring Breivik killed 69 young people on the island of Utoya and set off a bomb that killed eight in Norway's capital city, Oslo: *The New York Times* reported that, while trying to avoid arguments that would expose them to possessing racially tinged views, all made speeches critical of multiculturalism.

³ Dewitt (2010, pp. 49–68) offers an extensive list of labor historians who allege racial bias in the founding of the Social Security program. To name just a few: Linda Gordon, Lee Alston and Joseph Ferrier, and Robert Lieberman.

As Chancellor Merkel stressed that immigrants are welcome in Germany, she complained that multiculturalism ‘has failed, utterly failed’ (Burns, 2011, p. 6). The Dutch government went further to say it would abandon its decades-old policy of multiculturalism. According to the Dutch Interior Minister Piet Hein Donner, the government would step away from multiculturalism and implement a new integrationist policy (Kern, 2011). Despite this continuing debate in Europe, on the other side of the Atlantic, Canadians remain unswerving in their commitment to multiculturalism while apologetically acknowledging the on-going discouraging economic and social statistics of Canadian’s aboriginal communities (Simpson, 2012). In the United States, Columbia University Humanities Professor Mark Lilla (2016), in a *New York Times* op-ed article, insists identity politics have proven a failure. He argues, ‘One of the many lessons of the recent [2016] presidential election campaign and its repugnant outcome is that the age of identity liberalism must be brought to an end’ (Lilla, 2016).

On the other hand, there are those who argue that liberals misunderstand the problem. Presently, philosophers, such as Dwight Furrow, Daniel Engster, and Nel Noddings, highlight what they feel is an inadequacy of liberal [isms]. They warn that liberals have made a habit of conceptualizing solutions to social and political problems in terms of impartial rules and procedures. These philosophers insist that while a focus on impartial rules and procedures demands the state accord each individual equal treatment, this does not always result in its being sensitive to the unique needs of others. According to Furrow (2009, p. 24), ‘A progressive liberalism is more than a simple tolerance or inclusiveness, it responds to the call of human flourishing and seeks to make for everyone the social conditions that enable flourishing’. He goes on to suggest that ‘fostering a culture of responsibility and care’ is required to create ‘the social conditions that enable flourishing’ (2009, p. 134).

Philosopher Daniel Engster (2007, p. 51) writes in his book *The Heart of Justice: Care Ethics and Political Theory* that ‘Care theory roots our moral obligations to the other in our empirically verifiable dependence upon others and others depending on us’. In Engster’s (2007, p. 43) view, we begin and live out our lives in a web of dependency and caring. It is not just that we depend on and probably will depend upon the care of others one day; rather, human existence is inextricably implicated in relations of dependency and caring. Even when we are not immediately dependent upon the personal care of some particular individual, we will depend upon the care of many others, for our survival and functioning.

Basically, Engster is warning that as social animals we all depend on the care of those in many fields (i.e. fields such as manufacturing, medicine, education, and the law). Hence, he reports, care theorists derive moral obligations not only from abstract moral ground but also from our relations with others as dependent social creatures. If we want to act consistently, our own claims for care commits us to extend care to all other beings.

While philosophers like Furrow and Engster insist our relations define moral obligations to others, Nel Noddings goes further. She maintains that a strong connection to the dependent reality we find ourselves in requires that we go beyond simply identifying with the ‘other’. Noddings (2003, p. 14) writes, ‘When I am in a caring relationship, the others’

reality becomes real for me'. Pulitzer-prize winning author Michael Chabon (2012) corroborates this point when he writes:

To qualify as a racist, you don't have to go to the extreme of slurring, stereotyping, or discriminating against people of another race. All you have to do ... is feel completely disconnected from them. All you have to do is look at those people in a kind of scientific surprise, as I looked at African-Americans I passed in the streets of L.A. in the days after the Simpson verdict, and realize you have been passing them by in just this way, for months, for years. They were here all along, thinking what they think now, believing what they now believe, and somehow you failed to notice.

In making this comment, Chabon urges us to try to see beyond the surface expressions of race. What is required, then, is the resolve to look beyond the barrier of one's own experience and to strive to step into the 'other's' reality. History dictates that this is no easy task.

Imagining the Lives of Others

Is it possible to reveal the ways in which those defined as 'other' experience their lives from the inside? A couple of years ago while living in Buenos Aires, I wrote a short piece for my hometown newspaper, the *Monterey Herald*. In the column, I asked readers to recall a scene from the movie *Death and the Maiden*. In the scene, Sigourney Weaver's husband interrogates her. More than once he insists that she explain why she didn't tell him she was raped while in custody in Argentina's 'dirty war'. In frustration, Weaver blurts out, 'There is a difference between hearing the facts and knowing the details'. I understood her to intend that while she could give him the facts, it was details – meaning lived experience – that rendered what happened to her real and he could never absorb the depth of her experiences.

Along the same lines, in *Imagining the Lives of Others*, psychologist Paul Bloom (2015) offers a critical analysis that is reminiscent of the earlier discussion of James Baldwin's *Encounter On The Seine* and Sigourney Weaver's response to her husband. Bloom, like Baldwin and Weaver, explores the limits of empathy. Just as Baldwin claims that American blacks and whites cannot discuss the past because they live in different worlds, Bloom insists that acts of immersion in the lives of others are fascinating but have their limits. For example, Bloom says, given the revelations about torture that followed the Iraq war, there were journalists who decided to get themselves water boarded so that they might know what it is like. He observed, 'I don't doubt that they learned something from the experience, but what they couldn't experience – was the lack of control. Surely part of the terror of waterboarding is that it is done to you when you don't want it and you have no way to make it stop' (Bloom, 2015).

Although I grant that it is no easy task to expose the way in which those defined as 'other' live their lives from the inside, I still maintain the necessity of trying to do so. A key to accomplishing this task is to reflect on and critically engage socially dominant historical narratives. A failure to do so impedes self-transparency and a genuine understanding of social realities. As Charles Mills (1997, p. 19) argues, 'misunderstanding, misrepresentation, evasion, and self-deception on matters of race are among the most pervasive mental

phenomena of the past few hundred years'. He insists 'such misunderstanding is ... psychically required for conquest, colonization and enslavement' (Mills, 1997, p. 19). Whether it is an antique narrative of inclusion or the melting pot thesis, narratives influence our vision of populations and their circumstances.

Conclusion

What might this analysis require of France and the United States? One answer is the French might want to ground their 'universal republicanism' by first acknowledging the need for a deeper understanding of the historical reality of black France. Such a profound understanding could lead them to recognize the way in which their dominant narrative results in attitudes that hide their true situation and real interests. It would acknowledge, as James Baldwin suggests, that all too often life is messier than our narratives imply.

On the other hand, Americans might want to acknowledge the limits of the melting pot myth. They may want to concede that while many have assimilated, the social reality of race has challenged and continues to challenge and even contradict the notion that America has, without exception, made one out of many, same out of 'other'. For example, sociologist Steve Martinot (2003, pp. 167–168) insists, 'The most frequent police rationale for killing is thinking the 'suspect' had a weapon. When a white person pulls out a wallet or holds a cell phone or an address book, it is seen as a wallet, or a cell phone, or an address book; when a black person does the same thing, it is a weapon, leading to defensive retaliation'. But how was this negative image or idea constructed?

Again, if Douglas Blackmon (2009, pp. 7, 99, 360,) is correct, arresting and pushing hundreds of thousands of blacks into a forced labor system over an eighty year period criminalized black life and created an image of blacks in general, and black men, in particular as those people one could expect to see in prison, or working on chain gangs along the side of the road. These were individuals who could not be trusted or that should be feared. The melting pot thesis aside, it appears America's veiled history of criminalizing black life has insinuated itself into the identity of both blacks and whites. It has resulted in a 'structured blindness' and the tragic killing of unarmed black men by police (Mills, 1997, p. 19).

To the extent that historical narratives offer a context for 'natural caring', philosophical investigation, and critical self-reflection they predetermine what is thought, believed, or imagined. As a result, our moral attitudes or sentiments will be the product of narratives that fail to accurately reflect society. In fact, for many of the citizens of both France and America, since their founding storylines persist as unreflective assumptions or sentiments they will find it difficult if not impossible to gain a factual vision of themselves or their circumstances. Hence, it is important to keep in mind that the narratives we tell can hold us hostage.

In conclusion, then, I insist that while tolerance and inclusiveness are necessary to resolve our global history of racial inequality and injustice they are not sufficient. In order to create for everyone the conditions that enable flourishing, liberal democracies must acknowledge that the material and ideological manifestations of racial oppression are only surface expressions of deeper issues – issues that it may not be possible to resolve without

discrediting preferred historical narratives. Indeed, if this analysis is correct, it appears that socially dominant historical narratives do not draw on a profound or rich understanding of the past. Moreover, their widespread acceptance limits people's ability to recognize, understand, and responsibly address racial problems.

References

- Archibold, R., 2010, 'San Diego Campus awakens to uneasy race relations', *New York Times*, 26 Feb. 2010, <http://www.nytimes.com/2010/02/27/education/27sandiego.html>
- Baldwin, J. & Jones, E.P. 2012, *Notes of A Native Son*, Rev. ed. Beacon Press, Boston.
- Beriss, D. 2004, *Black Skins, French Voices: Caribbean Ethnicity and Activism in Urban France*, Westview Press, Boulder, Colo.
- Blackmon, D.A. 2009. *Slavery by Another Name: the Re-Enslavement of Black Americans from the Civil War to World War II*, Anchor Books, New York.
- Bloom, P. 2015, 'Imagining the lives of others', *Opinionator, New York Times*, 6 June 2015, <https://opinionator.blogs.nytimes.com/author/paul-bloom/>
- Burns, J.F. 2011 'Prime Minister criticizes British multiculturalism as allowing extremism', *New York Times*, 5 Feb. 2011, <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/02/06/world/europe/06britain.html>
- Chabon, M. 2012, 'O.J. Simpson, racial utopia and the moment that inspired my novel', *New York Times Magazine*, 27 Sept. 2012. <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/09/30/magazine/michael-chabon-telegraph-avenue.html>
- Cohen, W.B. 2003, *The French Encounter with Africans: White Response to Blacks, 1530-1880*, Indiana University Press, Bloomington.
- DeWitt, L. 2010, 'The decision to exclude agricultural and domestic workers from the 1935 Social Security Act', *Social Security Bulletin*, vol. 70, no. 4). <https://www.ssa.gov/policy/docs/ssb/v70n4/v70n4p49.html>
- Engster, D. 2007, *The Heart of Justice: Care Ethics and Political Theory*, Oxford University Press, New York. doi: <https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199214358.001.0001>
- Erlanger, S. 2009, 'Study says Blacks and Arabs face bias from Paris Police', *New York Times*, 29 June 2009, <http://www.nytimes.com/2009/06/30/world/europe/30france.html>
- Faulkner, W. 2011, *Requiem for a Nun*, Vintage Books, New York.
- Fleming, C.M. 2017, *Resurrecting Slavery: Racial Legacies and White Supremacy in France*, Temple University Press, Philadelphia.
- Foner, E. 1990, *A Short History of Reconstruction, 1863-1877*, Harper & Row, New York.
- Furrow, D. 2009, *Reviving the Left: The Need to Restore Liberal Values in America*, Prometheus Books, Amherst, N.Y.
- Hine, D.C., Keaton, T.D., Small, S. (eds.), 2009, *Black Europe and the African Diaspora; Blackness in Europe*, University of Illinois Press, Urbana, IL.
- Hobsbawm, E.J. 1992, *Nations and Nationalism since 1780: Programme, Myth, Reality*, 2nd ed. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.
- Judt, T. 2008, 'What have we learned, if anything?' *The New York Review of Books*, 1 May 2008, <http://www.nybooks.com/articles/2008/05/01/what-have-we-learned-if-anything/>
- Julian, E. 2009, 'Now you see it, now you don't: Josephine Baker's films of the 1930's and the problem of color', in Hine, D.C., Keaton, T.D. & Small, S. (eds.), *Black Europe and the African American Diaspora*. University of Illinois Press, Urbana, pp. 48-62.
- Kern, S. 2011, 'The Netherlands to abandon multiculturalism', Gatestone Institute International Policy Council, 23 June 2011, <https://www.gatestoneinstitute.org/2219/netherlands-abandons-multiculturalism>

- Khettab, D.O. 2015. 'Q&A: What really happened to Algeria's Harkis?', *Aljazeera News*, 22 August 2015, <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/2015/05/qa-happened-algeria-harkis-150531082955192.html>
- Kukathas, C. 1992, 'Are there any cultural rights?', *Political Theory*, vol. 20, no. 1, pp.105-139. doi: <https://doi.org/10.1177/0090591792020001006>
- Kymlicka, W. 1995, *Multicultural Citizenship: A Liberal Theory of Minority Rights*, Oxford Political Theory. Clarendon Press ; Oxford University Press, New York.
- Kymlicka, W. 1990, *Contemporary Political Philosophy; An Introduction*, Clarendon Press, Oxford.
- Lilla, M. 2016, 'The End of Identity Liberalism', *New York Times*, 18 November 2016, <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/11/20/opinion/sunday/the-end-of-identity-liberalism.html>
- Mann, G. 2006, *Native Sons: West African Veterans and France in the Twentieth Century*, Duke University Press, Durham. doi: <https://doi.org/10.1215/9780822387817>
- Martinot, S. 2003, *The Rule of Racialization: Class, Identity, Governance*, Temple University Press, Philadelphia.
- Mills, C.W. 1997, *The Racial Contract*, Cornell University Press, Ithaca.
- Muller, H.J. 1952, *The Uses of the Past: Profiles of Former Societies*, Oxford University Press, New York.
- Nadeau, J.-B. & Barlow, J. 2003, *Sixty Million Frenchmen Can't Be Wrong: why we love France, but not the French*, Sourcebooks, Naperville, Ill.
- Noddings, N. 2003, *Caring: A Feminine Approach to Ethics and Moral Education*, University of California Press, Berkeley, California.
- Packer, G. 2015, 'The Other France: Are the suburbs of Paris incubators of terrorism?' *The New Yorker*, 31 August 2015, <http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2015/08/31/the-other-france>
- Saadia, M. 2015, 'The 1961 massacre that could help us understand the Paris attacks', *Fusion.net*. <http://fusion.kinja.com/the-1961-massacre-that-could-help-us-understand-the-par-1793852874>
- Saltmarsh, M. 2009, 'Colonial soldiers want more from France', *New York Times*, 12 August 2009, <http://www.nytimes.com/2009/08/13/world/europe/13iht-vets.html>
- Schlesinger, A.M. 1993, *The Disuniting of America: Reflections on a Multicultural Society*, W.W. Norton, New York.
- Simpson, J. 2012, 'Focus on First Nations Dialogue on Self-Sufficiency', *Globe and Mail*, 25 Jan. 2012, <https://www.theglobeandmail.com/opinion/focus-first-nations-dialogue-on-self-sufficiency/article1359686/>
- Smith, W.G. 1963, *The Stone Face*, Farrar, New York.
- Stovall, T. 2009, 'No green pastures: The African Americanization of France', in Hine, D.C., Keaton, T.D. & Small, S. (eds.), *Black Europe and the African American Diaspora*, University of Illinois Press, Urbana, pp.180-197.
- Werman, M. & Hadden, G. 2012, '50 Years After the Algerian War, Harkis Still Wait for French Apology', www.pri.org 19 July 2012. <https://www.pri.org/stories/2012-07-19/50-years-after-algerian-war-harkis-still-wait-french-apology>