

H-France Salon
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Race, Racism, and the Study of France and the Francophone World Today

Introduction

Emily Marker (Rutgers University-Camden) and Christy Pichichero (George Mason University)

The French Constitution has championed equality “without distinction” of “race” since 1946.¹ That changed this past summer, when the French parliament approved a measure to remove the word “race” from this foundational declaration of French values. At first glance, this maneuver seems in keeping with a French tradition of rejecting race as a legitimate category of political discourse and social analysis. However, the ritual return to republican-universalism-as-explanation cannot account for growing contestation over the meaning of race and the contours of structural racism in France in the last decade. The palpable sharpening of public debate has been fueled by transformations in the study of race and autonomous antiracist activism within and beyond the French academy. It may well be that academic and activist deployment of new conceptual repertoires, especially *racisme d'état* and *racisé.e.s.*, has something to do with the urgency of excising “race” from the Constitution *now*, after more than 70 years of being a part of crucial passages that hail non-discrimination as a French constitutional principle.² At the very least, these developments have changed how this modification has been received. In an op-ed in the *Washington Post* shortly after the measure passed, French journalist, author, and TV producer Rokhaya Diallo reflected that she probably would have supported the change twenty years ago. But having become involved in antiracism work, she is now convinced that “making the word race taboo will not change anything in the lives of people who are affected by racism.” On the contrary, she continued, “it will deprive scholars and activists of a powerful tool to study the implications of racism.”³

¹ This phrasing was first included in the preamble of the Constitution of the Fourth Republic and was reprised in Art. 1 in the Constitution of the Fifth.

² The reference to race in the 1946 Constitution was uncontroversial for postwar French politicians; indeed, it was a critical rhetorical tool. French deputies cited this passage ceaselessly in tense exchanges with colonial leaders to assert France’s antiracist bona fides throughout the 1940s and 50s. See Emily Marker, “Obscuring Race: Franco-African Conversations about Colonial Reform and Racism after World War II and the Making of Colorblind France, 1945–1950,” *French Politics, Culture & Society* 33:3 (2015).

³ Rokhaya Diallo, “France’s Dangerous Move to Remove ‘Race’ from its Constitution,” *Washington Post*, July 13, 2018.

The intellectual and activist currents that are changing how race and racism are framed in French public discourse have emerged as part of, and in response to, fundamentally transnational processes that transcend the bounds of French political culture. In this light, the old refrain “there is no race in France” loses explanatory power further still. As scholars of France based in the United States, we have been particularly struck by the way that the struggle for racial justice in the academy in both France and the U.S. have simultaneously been reinvigorated and come under increasing attack in recent years. We now face a transnational media environment that has homed in on academic norms and antiracist action on college campuses on both sides of the Atlantic as a lightning rod of divisiveness and ferment.⁴ If similar tactics and strategies can so successfully galvanize reaction among French and American publics, we might need to think more expansively about this moment in longer histories of racism and the links between equity and racial justice in the academy and in society more broadly.

To that end, this trio of issues of *H-France Salon* invites the H-France community to critically re-evaluate how we address structural racism in the study of France and the Francophone world. In our view, “the study of” necessarily includes research, pedagogy, and the institutional spaces where such work is conducted. With this *Salon*, we seek to push back against the siloing of these aspects of scholarly production and the corporatizing logics of the contemporary university that encourage us to consider research, teaching, and “service” separately. We therefore hope the *Salon* will serve as a site of both critical inquiry and self-reflection. It presents critical assessments of the state of the field of cross-disciplinary research on race in France and French/Francophone Studies alongside a rather different genre of reflection about structural racism and everyday practice in the academy.

We felt an acute sense of urgency in putting together this *Salon* given the current climate in France and the U.S. today. However, it is important to underscore that that sense of urgency has been felt by many of our colleagues for some time. It has been more than twenty years since Thomas C. Holt, in his 1994 presidential address to the American Historical Association, identified “the everyday” as the level of human experience where race really lives. Fittingly for this *Salon*, Holt’s point of departure was an interdisciplinary and cross-cultural exercise in thinking W.E.B. Du Bois and Frantz Fanon together. Crucially, Holt’s theoretical and methodological intervention about the study of race, racism, and the everyday was also an appeal for self-awareness and a call to action:

Within the everyday that we academics inhabit, we can seek to ensure that the histories we teach about humankind do indeed reflect the diverse stories of human existence and struggle. We can seek to ensure that our faculties, our student bodies, our professional associations are themselves reflective of that diversity of experience and knowledge. And perhaps most unsettling of all to many of us, we can open to critical

⁴ For a global perspective, see Gurminder K. Bhamba, Kerem Nisancioglu and Dalia Gebrial, eds., *Decolonizing the University* (London: Pluto Press, 2018), which approaches campus activism in the Global North as part of a global movement to decolonize higher education.

inquiry and scrutiny not just the content of our “received” wisdom but the very premises, discourse, and intellectual processes by which we received it.⁵

Holt concluded that although such measures may initially seem quite small, the fierce counter-attack they elicit suggests just how powerful attempts to reform the everyday can be. In the two decades since Holt delivered these remarks, racist assaults on efforts to make the academy a more diverse and equitable place have gained ground, often under the guises of “free speech” in the US and “racelessness” in the French context.⁶ The unceasing intensity of such attacks is a forceful reminder that the choices we make as we go about our daily business really do matter. We each – in our writing, in our classrooms, in our home institutions, and in our professional associations – can either reproduce or actively disrupt the constellations of power and social relations that sustain conditions of white supremacy in both France and the U.S. Our goal for this *Salon* is to open up a dialogue about how to take the latter path.

Scope of the Project

The Salon is organized in three issues – one each primarily devoted to research, institutional and professional matters, and pedagogy, though there is welcome overlap and interconnectedness between them – aimed at encouraging our community of scholars to confront and explore the significance of race and racism across all of these aspects of our field. They are not designed to be exhaustive or prescriptive. Rather, they are meant to be evocative, to facilitate the sharing of knowledge, resources, and tools, and to provide a forum where we can listen and respond to one another.

For the first installment, we asked a group of scholars across different disciplines and chronological specialties to write short reflections on the state of their fields and to respond to one another’s thoughts in an online “conversation.” This two-tiered format aims to provide a kaleidoscope of perspectives in motion. The contributors to this issue of the *Salon* are Dorian Bell, Madeleine Dobie, Éric Fassin, Abdellali Hajjat, T. Denean Sharpley-Whiting, Michael G. Vann, and Françoise Vergès. We posed the following questions to this group:

- What do you think are the most pressing problems and questions for thinking about race and racism in France and the Francophone world today and why?
- How can we, as a community of scholars, address those questions?
- What current trends and frameworks do you find useful? Troubling?
- How has your field evolved over time?
- Have contemporary politics and activism reshaped research agendas in your field?
- What contribution can our scholarship make to contemporary social and political life?

⁵ Thomas C. Holt, “Marking: Race, Race-making, and the Writing of History,” *AHR* 100:1 (February 1995): 18.

⁶ On “racelessness” as a fundamentally *transnational* European iteration of a broader phenomenon in the late twentieth and early twenty-first century, see David Theo Goldberg, *The Threat of Race: Reflections on Racial Neoliberalism* (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009).

We also asked each contributor to include a short bibliography of their own relevant research and other works they find most useful for thinking about these questions. We will compile these references in a master bibliography as a general resource for our readers in a later installment, but we have left them as addenda to the contributions here so that we can identify shared lines of communication across disciplinary divides as well as their limits.

To make the *Salon* as inclusive as possible, we invite readers to respond to the essays and conversation presented here. We also welcome further bibliographic suggestions. Please send all communications to hFranceSalonOnRace@gmail.com. We will publish the master bibliography and select responses in a “Letters to the Editor” section in the final part of the *Salon*.

We hope you find the exchanges below as illuminating and thought-provoking as we do, and that you continue to follow the discussion in the next installment of the *Salon*, which will feature reflections on the profession from Nimisha Barton, Mita Choudhury, Crystal M. Fleming, Stephen Harp, Pap Ndiaye, Pratima Prasad, and Tyler Stovall.

Emily Marker and Christy Pichichero

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