

H-France Salon

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## **Race, Racism, and the Study of France and the Francophone World, Vol III Introduction**

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

*There's no such thing as neutral education. Education either functions as an instrument to bring about conformity or freedom.*

Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1968)

This third installment on pedagogy in our series, “Race, Racism, and the Study of France and the Francophone World Today,” comes at a moment when what and how we teach has become a focal point in wider debates about structural inequality, social cohesion, national identity, decolonization, and racial justice around the world. In France and the United States, center-right and far-right governments are mobilizing state power and public resources to keep antiracist and intersectional pedagogies out of classrooms in their respective—and strikingly similar—campaigns against “Islamogauchisme” and “Critical Race Theory.” As of [July 14, 2021](#), seven U.S. states have passed legislation and twenty others are in the process of introducing legislation that bans or condemns teaching and professional training that engage concepts like implicit bias, white privilege, and structural racism. Such a legislative tack in France today seems unlikely (though certainly not [unprecedented](#)), but Frédérique Vidal’s ministerial probe has created a climate of fear and retribution in French higher education to similar effect.

At the same time, rising pressure from the other end of the spectrum is coming from students themselves, who are demanding the decolonization of curricula that they view as upholding white, male, Christian, heteronormative, ableist perspectives.<sup>1</sup> A host of recent events and experiences have both invigorated student activism and heightened many students’ feelings of insecurity, trauma, and pain: the drastically disproportionate ways in which COVID-19 struck women and minoritized communities, the resurgence of Black Lives Matter, the #SayHerName campaign, and the [Comité vérité et justice pour Adama](#) in the wake of the murders of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, and ongoing police violence against Black people around the world, spikes in anti-Asian violence related to the pandemic, and the spectacle of emboldened neo-Nazi and anti-Semitic groups taking to the streets.

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<sup>1</sup> Professor Chanelle Wilson of Bryn Mawr College offers an excellent, detailed explanation of what decolonizing the curriculum indicates and how this relates to syllabus design: <https://www.brynmawr.edu/tli/syllabusdesign/theprocess> (consulted on August 12, 2021). Students protesting the [Humanities 110 at Reed College](#) was one of many examples of student activism regarding curriculum in the past five years.

Educators around the world have been similarly affected by these experiences and have advocated for transformative change in higher education, offering practical means to rethink classroom practices, syllabi, curricula, and policies within institutions of higher education through anti-racist, anti-bias, and decolonial frameworks.<sup>2</sup> These scholars, among whom we count ourselves, affirm with Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang that “[decolonization is not a metaphor](#)” and reject “settler moves to innocence”: “excuses, distractions, and diversions from decolonization” in the form of evasive “strategies or positionings that attempt to relieve the settler of feelings of guilt or responsibility without giving up land or power or privilege, without having to change much at all.”<sup>3</sup> Change is necessary and it involves action. Our action.

Under these circumstances, the fiction that these larger social, political, and economic realities can be checked at the classroom door is no longer tenable. In this time of general divestment from liberal arts and foreign language programs in American higher education, steadily decreasing enrollments in French historical, literary, and cultural studies, and the elimination of discipline-specific faculty positions, it is urgent that we reimagine what we do, how and for whom we do it, and why. The health, vitality, relevance, and impact of our field depend on it. Integrating intersectional and decolonial approaches to teaching race and racism constitutes an important pathway forward. Yet, we recognize that for many, this is unfamiliar, uncomfortable, and intimidating terrain. Sharing resources and approaches to teaching about whiteness and white supremacy, anti-Blackness, Islamophobia, anti-Semitism, and all forms of racism as they intersect with gender, religious affiliation, sexuality, and ability, is a critical first step to empower ourselves and develop the skills and self-confidence to take on this crucial work.

To that end, we have asked a diverse slate of contributors to share syllabi and reflections on how they incorporate the themes of race and racism into their teaching, especially in a global frame. Siham Bouamer, Ethan Katz, and Lorelle Semley have shared pedagogical reflections on intersectional approaches to French-African history, the colonial logics of basic French-language textbooks, and teaching anti-Semitism. Leora Auslander, Lia Brozgal, Laurent Dubois, Rachel Jean-Baptiste, Emily Marker, Sue Peabody, and Alyssa Sepinwall have all shared annotated syllabi from undergraduate and graduate courses in history, cinema, African Studies, and more. Each syllabus is annotated differently; some are framed with introductory paragraphs, some have annotations throughout the body of the syllabus, and others have both. We hope that the generosity of these colleagues in sharing their syllabi and thoughts will lead to further conversation and sharing of materials in our community of educators. We also urge readers of this Salon to read and discuss recent publications on teaching race and racism in French and Francophone Studies and to reach out to colleagues in other disciplines and subfields to discuss

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<sup>2</sup> Gurminder K. Bhambra, Dalia Gebrial, and Kerem Nişancıoğlu, eds., *Decolonising the University* (London: Pluto Press, 2018). In the wake of summer 2020, many universities have curated lists of resources for anti-racist and decolonial approaches to teaching. See, for example, those of Binghamton University (<https://libraryguides.binghamton.edu/antiracism/decolonizingcurricula>), Columbia University (<https://ctl.columbia.edu/resources-and-technology/resources/anti-racist-pedagogy/>).

<sup>3</sup> Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang, “Decolonization is not a Metaphor,” *Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education & Society*, Vol.1, No.1 (2012): pp.1-40.

how they approach teaching these subjects.<sup>4</sup> For professors who lead study abroad programs in France and other Francophone countries, we must also think about how teaching race and racism can drive innovation in traditional and experiential learning inside and outside of the classroom.

Teaching race and racism can be intense and difficult, but also rewarding and transformative. It is our responsibility to ensure that our courses are not spaces that replicate the silencing of the past that Haitian scholar Michel-Rolph Trouillot decried.<sup>5</sup> We must bring courage, camaraderie, humility, and an experimental spirit to our teaching of these subjects and redouble the conviction that we can indeed foster knowledge, freedom, and progress through a better understanding of our world.

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

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<sup>4</sup> See Christy Pichichero, “Critical Race Theory and the Multicultural French Enlightenment,” *Studies in Eighteenth-Century Culture*, Vol. 49, 2020 and other works such as Marlene Daut’s, “Teaching Perspective: The Relation between the Haitian and French Revolutions” in Julia Douthwaite, Catriona Seth, and Antoinette Sol, ed., *Teaching Representations of the French Revolution* (MLA, 2019).

<sup>5</sup> Michel-Rolph Trouillot, *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History* (Beacon Press, 1995).