

H-France Salon

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## **On Accessibility and Relevance: Recentering Colonial History and Racism in French Textbooks**

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The first [\*Diversity, Decolonization, and the French Curriculum\*](#) conference gathered instructors from a wide variety of institutions to reflect on the importance of transforming programs and courses in French and challenging curriculum. The majority of the presentations focused on elementary and intermediate courses, an inclination that confirmed the critical need to rethink their content. Indeed, while advanced courses can offer students the possibility to explore topics at the intersection of ethnicity, race, gender, and sexuality, basic level French—and by extension other modern languages—place the emphasis on proficiency rather than content. In a recent article on small language programs, Patricia K. Calkins and Sharon Wilkinson discuss the importance of building content-based courses from the first semester onward in order to challenge “three main barriers to persistence: access, relevance, and community”.<sup>1</sup> I mention a few of my own strategies in my interview for Lydia Tang’s article “Against Smallness: How Successful Language Programs Reimagine the Humanities.”<sup>2</sup> While defining the scope of the DDFC collective, I further reflected on my pedagogy in making French studies accessible and relevant.

The work of the [\*Diversity, Decolonization and the German Curriculum collective\*](#) has been fundamental to think about best praxes to decolonize language curriculum. In particular, Regine Criser and Ervin Malakaj’s words on the “need [for scholars and instructors] to attend to two colonial histories: that of the United States and that of Germany”<sup>3</sup> resonated with my own approaches to create access points to French studies. Recently, French leaders have denounced the so-called ill-fitting importation of American theories on race to the hexagon threatening the tenets of French universalism founded on ideals of colorblindness and directly attacked French

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<sup>1</sup> Patricia K. Calkins and Sharon Wilkinson, “Redesigning the Curriculum for Student Persistence in Small Language Programs,” *ADFL Bulletin*, Vol. 46, No. 1, 2020: pp. 9-25, 9.

<sup>2</sup> Lydia Tang, “Against Smallness: How Successful Language Programs Reimagine the Humanities,” *MLA Profession*, Fall 2019. Web.

<https://www.google.com/search?client=safari&rls=en&q=Against+Smallness:+How+Successful+Language+Programs+Reimagine+the+Humanities&ie=UTF-8&oe=UTF-8>

<sup>3</sup> Regine Criser and Ervin Malakaj, “Introduction: Diversity and Decolonization in German Studies,” in *Diversity and Decolonization in German Studies*, eds. Regine Criser and Ervin Malakaj (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020): 1-22, 3.

academics who work on race, gender, and sexualities.<sup>4</sup> This position aims in part to deny the long and violent social, political, and cultural legacy of racism and imperialism in France. As an instructor and scholar in postcolonial studies, I have been especially interested in the urgency to challenge how textbooks reproduce this ideology for the fact that manuals (1) are often the first physical interaction with the language that students have when starting a course in French (2) and serve as a tool to build curriculum and to organize syllabi and unit structures.

Fatima El-Tayeb's work has helped me articulate the issues at play. In *European Others: Queering Ethnicity in Postnational Europe*, she explains:

To reference race as native to contemporary European thought, however, violates the powerful narrative of Europe as a colorblind continent, largely untouched by the devastating ideology it exported all over the world. This narrative, framing the continent as a space free of "race" (and by implication, racism), is not only central to the way Europeans perceive themselves, but has also gained near-global acceptance.<sup>5</sup>

El-Tayeb's comment on the global reach and exportation of a color-blind vision of Europe is crucial to understand the dynamics of language teaching in U.S. institutions where the same raceless narratives should be contested. First, textbooks tend to introduce non-whiteness within the framework of the *francophonie*, one of the main components that serve to present French studies as a diverse discipline. I use here italics to criticize the broad homogenization of such a notion presented with little information on its implications, namely, the violent colonial past. Language textbooks, I argue elsewhere, participate in the "erasure of the colonial past and its postcolonial implications". Indeed, in observing the brief introduction to "les pays francophones" which open *Vis-à-Vis*, I conclude that "[a]lthough the textbook [briefly] mentions the historical and political reality behind the widespread presence of French [by mentioning the date of independence of several countries], it does not unpack this reality by connecting the French language to France's colonial history, thereby imagining learners as uncritical."<sup>6</sup> The word "colonial" or its variant appears a few times in the textbook. It is used to describe colonial architecture in Martinique and Gorée. There is also a mention in a text describing the work of the Tunisian author Albert Memmi. While the narrative defines part of his work as criticizing "les effets négatifs de la colonisation" [the negative effects of colonization],<sup>7</sup> there are no activities to engage students in further understanding the importance of his work. More problematically, a video accompanying the unit offers a tour of Tunis, praising the influence of France for the

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<sup>4</sup> I would like here to express my solidarity with colleagues who have been directly subject to those attacks; I am indebted to brilliant scholars such as Mame-Fatou Niang and Maboula Soumahoro whose work has been inspirational for my own research, pedagogy, and the DDFC collective.

<sup>5</sup> Fatima El-Tayeb, *European Others: Queering Ethnicity in Postnational Europe* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011), xv.

<sup>6</sup> Bedrettin Yazan, Baburhan Uzum, Samar Zahrawi, Siham Bouamer, Ervin Malakaj, "A comparative analysis of cultural representations in collegiate world language textbooks (Arabic, French, and German)," *Linguistics and Education*, vol. 65 (2021), <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.linged.2020.100901>.

<sup>7</sup> All translations are mine.

presence of familiar Parisian aspects in the city and presenting Tunisian culture as the product of a cultural exchange after colonization.

Further, *francophonie* reinforces the dichotomy between France/white and other French-speaking countries/non-white, which ultimately erases the racial reality of France. Indeed, grounded in a raceless conception of Europe that El-Tayeb points out, textbooks tend to decenter non-whiteness from the hexagon. When addressed, the term preferred is “multiculturalism” focusing on the positive influence of cultural icons such as Jamed Debbouze, Gad El Maleh, or Paul Pogba. After presenting a superficial overview of France’s diversity, the textbook attempts to address tensions that it can create:

Mais elle [la France] veut, avant tout, que les immigrés qui ont choisi de vivre sur son territoire s’assimilent à la société française, seule garantie pour que les différentes communautés vivent en paix les unes avec les autres. Car il n’est pas toujours facile de vivre ensemble. Et il arrive que la diversité ethnique crée en France des tensions difficiles à gérer. Mais au pays de la Déclaration des droits de l’homme et du citoyen, il est important que le désir de s’unir pour un enrichissement mutuel soit plus fort que la tentation de l’exclusion. Et face aux problèmes du monde contemporain, n’est-il pas évident que l’on est plus forts si l’on est unis?

[But it [France] wants, above all, that immigrants who have chosen to live on its territory assimilate to French society, the only guarantee to ensure that the different communities live in peace with one another. Because it is not always easy to live together. And it happens that ethnic diversity creates in France tensions that are difficult to manage. But in the country of the Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen, it is important that the will to unite for a mutual enrichment be stronger than the temptation of exclusion. And facing the problems of the contemporary world, isn’t it evident that we are stronger if we are united?]

This passage is problematic for the fact that it only associates diversity to immigrants, nurturing the idea that non-white people in France are inherently ‘others’ and excluded from ‘frenchness.’ We should also note that immigration is described as “chosen” denying the presence of children of immigrants born in France or refugees. The short text is followed by a series of questions, among which “Quelles difficultés génère la diversité ethnique?” [What difficulties does ethnic diversity generate?] Students, who will refer to the above passage, will identify immigrants who refuse to “assimilate” since French institutions, presented as precursors for human rights, cannot be blamed. In addition, the use of the word ethnic serves, in the words of Sara Ahmed, “to erase the many traces of [...] history”<sup>8</sup> and avoid the real issue at play when discussing the cause of tensions that might arise—namely, racism—to promote here a solution grounded in discourses of liberal multiculturalism with the importance to stay united.

One might argue that the limited language skills at the elementary/beginner level justify the uncritical engagement with critical socio-political issues in classrooms and programs striving to

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<sup>8</sup> Sara Ahmed, “Racialized Bodies,” in *Real Bodies*. Eds. Mary Evans and Ellie Lee (London: Palgrave): pp. 46-63, 47.

use the target language in the classroom in line with the ACTFL guidelines recommending 90% of TL use. I do not wish here to enter in debates surrounding the ratio between L1/L2, but conclude with the fact that the inclusion of a word such as “racisme” or “colonialisme,” would have been more “relevant” and “accessible” to students than a concept such as assimilation or a vague mention of possible tensions. Besides the linguistic accessibility as cognates, recognizing and using the word racism would have been relevant to students' lived experience in the U.S. and allow students to engage in important, and often difficult, discussions, with the cultural and critical distance that French studies can offer.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> I speak here in particular from my experience as an Assistant Professor of French in a U.S. institution in East Texas where the majority of students are designated as underrepresented, from close-knit rural communities, and first gen.