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Race as the *Fil Conducteur* in History Syllabi

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Moments in the classroom can be powerful. I still remember vividly the spare setting of a French literature course that I took while studying abroad at the Université de Nice (now the Université Côte d'Azur). The professor was likely not the first one to insist on the idea of the *fil conducteur* in our analyses of French literature, but my ears perked up when she said it. In my mind, I translated the term to mean the “driving force” though I know that it also connotes the idea of a “common thread.” In fact, I never fully translated the phrase in my mind but I have used it myself with students to talk about the need for clear, evocative themes in their writing. I also have always thought that syllabi should have an arc of an argument as part of their design. But I admit that it took me some time to discover how race must be a *fil conducteur* in my own syllabi on African history if I am going to be true to my identity as a scholar of Africa working at the intersections of race, French empire, and gender. While my courses focus on African history and incorporate African diaspora history, the lessons I have learned about threading race, as well as gender, throughout my syllabi can be instructive to this forum on race and pedagogy in French Studies.

When I first began teaching African history almost 20 years ago (!), I taught it the way I had learned it. Unfortunately, that meant that the majority of my authors were white men and that Africans only appeared on the syllabus in primary sources and as novelists and filmmakers. Primary sources and African-authored novels and films continue to be staples in my courses. However, I recognized within my first year of teaching that I needed to have Black historians and theorists, and women scholars, in particular, as required reading. My thinking was two-fold even if I did not have the language for it at the time. I did know that I did not want race and gender to be confined to specific weeks of the syllabus. I now realize that I was seeking to decolonize my syllabus by recognizing the intellectual work of African, African diaspora, and women scholars.¹ While the concept of decolonial studies has become a buzzword, the work required is deep, ongoing and necessarily centered around new ways for thinking, writing, and teaching history in relation to our present.²

¹ Akosua Adomako Ampofo, “Re-Viewing Studies on Africa, #Black Lives Matter, and Envisioning the Future of African Studies,” *African Studies Review*, Vol. 59, No. 2 (September 2016): 7–29.

² For the question of decolonizing African Studies in particular, see Shose Kessi, Zoe Marks, and Elelwani Ramugondo, “Decolonizing African Studies,” *Critical African Studies*, Vol. 12, No. 3 (2020): 271-282, DOI: [10.1080/21681392.2020.1813413](https://doi.org/10.1080/21681392.2020.1813413)

It is telling that the first thing that I did was include classic Black scholars of the Francophone Caribbean; I added Aimé Césaire's *Discourse on Colonialism* to my Modern Africa survey and Frantz Fanon's *A Dying Colonialism* to my Muslim Africa course.³ But it was my core course on women's and gender history in Africa that helped me begin this process of course redesign in earnest. The course, now titled "Sex and Society in Africa History," is a historiography and methods course that puts African history in conversation with feminist theory, especially work by women of color scholars. In its most recent version, authors include E. Frances White, Brittney Cooper, Fatima Mernissi, Ama Ata Aidoo, Chandra Mohanty, Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, and Sylvia Tamale.⁴

In turn, my other courses have featured scholars of color prominently in unexpected ways. My "Travel Writing in Africa History" class features a good amount of writing by Africans and people of the African diaspora as travelers. I include Olaudah Equiano's narrative, Caryl Phillips' novel *The Atlantic Sound*, and Saidiya Hartman's *Lose Your Mother*.⁵ My seminar on Human Rights interrogates the concept of human rights by incorporating work by Makau Mutua, Carol Anderson's *Eyes off the Prize*, and Mahmood Mamdani's *When Victims Become Killers*.⁶ I also deploy the idea of the "textbook" creatively. For my Modern Africa survey, I had students read Nigerian American journalist Dayo Olopade's *Bright Continent*. We borrowed some of her frameworks such as mapping and her use of the term *kanju*, meaning "to rush" in the Yorùbá language of Nigeria, as a way to describe the "specific creativity born of African difficulty." In

³ Aimé Césaire, *A Discourse on Colonialism*, trans. by Joan Pinkham, with an introduction by Robin D.G. Kelley (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2000). Frantz Fanon, *A Dying Colonialism*, trans. by Haakon Chevalier, with an introduction by Adolfo Gilly (1965; New York: Grove Press, 1994).

⁴ E. Frances White, *Dark Continent of our Bodies: Black Feminism and the Politics of Respectability* (Philadelphia, Temple University Press, 2001). Brittney Cooper, *Eloquent Rage: A Black Feminist Discovers Her Superpower* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2018). Fatima Mernissi, *Dreams of Trespass: Tales of a Harem Girlhood* (New York, Basic Books, 1995). Ama Ata Aidoo, *Our Sister Killjoy* (1977; London, Longman, 1997). Chandra Mohanty, "Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Postcolonial Discourses," in Anne McClintock, et al., eds., *Dangerous Liaisons: Gender, Nation, and Postcolonial Perspectives* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 255-276. Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, "African-American Women's History and the Metalanguage of Race," *Signs* 17, 2 (Winter 1992): 251-274. Sylvia Tamale, ed., *African Sexualities: A Reader* (Cape Town: Pambazuka Press, 2011).

⁵ "Olaudah Equiano's *Interesting Narrative* in Vincent Carretta, ed. *Unchained Voices: An Anthology of Black Authors in the English-Speaking World of the Eighteenth Century* (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1996). Caryl Phillips, *The Atlantic Sound* (New York: Vintage, 2001). Saidiya Hartman, *Lose Your Mother: A Journey Along the Atlantic Slave Route* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2007).

⁶ Makau Mutua, "Savages, Victims, and Saviors: The Metaphor of Human Rights," *Harvard International Law Journal* 42:1 (Winter 2001), 201-245. Carol Anderson, *Eyes off the Prize: The United Nations and the African American Struggle for Human Rights, 1944-1955* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003). Mahmood Mamdani, *When Victims Become Killers: Colonialism, Nativism, and the Genocide in Rwanda* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001).

the future, I plan to incorporate a different innovative volume, *Global Africa: Into the Twenty-First Century*, edited by Judith Byfield and Dorothy Hodgson. With almost forty short, pointed pieces by a wide range of scholars, the book completely reorients conceptualizations of the continent, its history, and its place in the world.⁷ For my early Africa survey, Guadeloupean writer Maryse Condé's novel *Segu* serves as a "textbook" alongside primary sources. The novel is about a family from the kingdom of Segu swept up rise and expansion of different West African states during the era of the Atlantic Slave Trade.⁸ But for all of my use of African and African diaspora scholars in my work, I do not think that I was explicit about the significance of my choices of authors and the stories that they tell.

Team-teaching the required historiography and methods course for my department in the spring of 2020 helped me realize my vision more fully. My colleague Rosa Carrasquillo and I each had a section of our department's Historian's Craft course but we developed our syllabus on "The Making of the Caribbean" as a joint venture and brought our students together (at least until the COVID-19 pandemic sent us all home). The course had the Haitian Revolution at its center and featured scholars of color and women as historians and theorists throughout the entire syllabus. Michel-Rolph Trouillot's *Silencing the Past* operated as our core text. Because we began the course with him and C.L.R. James alongside podcasts featuring scholars such as Marisa Fuentes, the perspective of these scholars of color became the point of reference for students. We also took care to provide images of many of the scholars we read on Moodle, PowerPoint, or in audiovisual material. One of the most significant moments for us was hearing students, who were all sophomore History majors, express shock because they had never studied the history of the Haitian Revolution. At the same time, we wove gender throughout our coverage of the main themes of the course with critical analytical pieces by Elizabeth Colwill on the Haitian Revolution and Sally Price on African diaspora art, using Suriname as a case study. For a narrative about the experience of enslavement, we had students read Mary Prince. As we moved into the history of Cuba we read Aisha Finch's work and watched Gloria Rolando's film on the 1912 "Race War."⁹ Because we switched to remote learning with the COVID-19 pandemic,

⁷ Dayo Olopade, *Bright Continent: Breaking Rules and Making Change in Modern Africa* (2014; Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2014), 20-22. Judith Byfield and Dorothy Hodgson, *Global Africa: Into the Twenty-First Century* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2017).

⁸ Maryse Condé, *Segu: A Novel*, trans. by Barbara Bray (1987; New York, Penguin, 1996).

⁹ Michel-Rolph Trouillot, *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1995). Episode 173: Marisa Fuentes, Colonial Port Cities and Slavery <https://www.benfranklinworld.com/episode-173-marisa-fuentes-colonial-port-cities-and-slavery/>. Elizabeth Colwill "Fêtes de l'hymen, fêtes de la liberté": Marriage, Manhood, and Emancipation in Revolutionary Saint-Domingue," in *The World of the Haitian Revolution*, eds. Norman Fiering and David Geggus (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2009), 125-155. Sally Price, "Seaming Connections: Artworlds of the African Diaspora," in Kevin A. Yelvington, *Afro-Atlantic Dialogues: Anthropology in the Diaspora* (Santa Fe: School of American Research Press, 2006), 83-114. Mary Prince and Sara Salih, *The History of Mary Prince* (1831; London: Penguin, 2000). C.L.R. James, *The Black Jacobins: Toussaint L'Ouverture and the San Domingo Revolution*, (1963; 2d ed. Rev: New York: Vintage, 1989). Aisha Finch, "What Looks Like a Revolution": Enslaved Women and the Gendered Terrain of Slave Insurgencies in Cuba, 1843–

some of our plans for the course changed. However, the predominance of women and people of color as authors of our secondary and theoretical texts has made me think more about foregrounding my intentionality around intersectionality in my syllabi.

As I try to draw more connections between my research on African history, race, and French empire, I strive to reveal how African and Antillean (Caribbean) populations in France have been a continuous driving force in the history of France from the eighteenth century to the present.¹⁰ I can envision how my future course on Black Atlantic Cities could center the French Atlantic as the fully racialized and gendered place it has been throughout this period. Important scholarship that has been done on the eighteenth-century history of enslaved and free people of color living in France often reflects anecdotal fragments, legal archives, and notarial records where those stories are contained.¹¹ It would be crucial to incorporate both sides of the Atlantic for the early modern and modern periods by utilizing scholarship, for example, by Rachel Jean-Baptiste, Jessica Marie Johnson, Hilary Jones, Rashauna Johnson, Robin Mitchell, Denise Murrell, Jennifer Palmer, Sophie White, as well as my own work. The work of Maboula Soumahoro and the *Mariannes Noires* film by Mame-Fatou Niang foreground the experiences of Black women in contemporary France, in particular.¹² Attention to the past illuminates the present.

1844, *Journal of Women's History*, 26,1 (2014): 112-134. *1912: Breaking the Silence*, directed by Gloria Rolando (Imágenes del Caribe, 2010).

¹⁰ The arresting works by Pascal Blanchard and his collaborators provide much more of a visual history of communities of color in France. Pascal Blanchard, Éric Déroo and Gilles Manceron, *Paris Noir* (Paris, Hazan, 2001). Pascal Blanchard, ed., *Sudouest Porte d'Outre-Mers: Histoire coloniale et immigration des Suds, du Midi à l'Aquitaine* (Toulouse, Milan, 2006).

¹¹ Sue Peabody, "*There Are No Slaves in France*": *The Political Culture of Race and Slavery in the Ancien Regime* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996). Erick Noël, *Être noir en France au XVIIIe siècle* (Paris: Tallandier, 2006). Julie Duprat, *Présences noires à Bordeaux: Passage et intégration des gens de couleur à la fin du XVIIIe siècle* (thèse, École Nationale des Chartes, Paris, 2017)

¹² Rachel Jean-Baptiste, *Conjugal Rights: Marriage, Sexuality, and Urban Life in Colonial Libreville, Gabon* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2014). Jessica Marie Johnson, *Wicked Flesh: Black Women, Intimacy, and Freedom in the Atlantic World* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2020). Hilary Jones, *The Metis of Senegal: Urban Life and Politics in French West Africa* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2013). Rashauna Johnson, *Slavery's Metropolis: Unfree Labor in New Orleans during the Age of Revolutions* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016). Robin Mitchell, *Vénus Noire: Black Women and Colonial Fantasies in Nineteenth-Century France* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2020). Denise Murrell, *Posing Modernity: The Black Model from Manet to Matisse to Today* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2018). Jennifer Palmer, *Intimate Bonds: Family and Slavery in the French Atlantic* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016). Sophie White, *Voices of the Enslaved: Love, Labor, and Longing in French Louisiana* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2019). Lorelle Semley, *To Be Free and French: Citizenship in France's Atlantic Empire* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017). Maboula Soumahoro, *Le Triangle et l'Hexagone - Réflexions sur une identité noire* (Paris, La Découverte, 2020). *Marianne Noires*, dir. by Mame-Fatou Niang and Kaytie Nielson (Round Room Image, 2017).

As was the case in the literature course at the Université de Nice (and elsewhere during my schooling), I was often the only Black student in my classes. However, in Nice, I also took for granted what I saw as diversity among the student body, particularly in terms of North African students.¹³ While I was certainly naïve, I felt fairly unremarkable in Nice in the early 1990s even as the rise of the far right-wing Front National (now the National Rally) was underway. My current project on Black communities in Bordeaux must reconcile how a leading slave-trading port city has been a home to an important population of African, Antillean, and Black French people over the centuries. Research and writing must be part of the pedagogical process. Because histories of race in France are as convoluted and nuanced as they are anywhere else, I see that complexity as a common thread that can unite how we all learn, write, and teach.

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¹³ Université Côte d'Azur celebrates its high percentage of international students, but it is not couched in the language of diversity common in the United States. <https://univ-cotedazur.fr/rayonnement-et-attractivite>