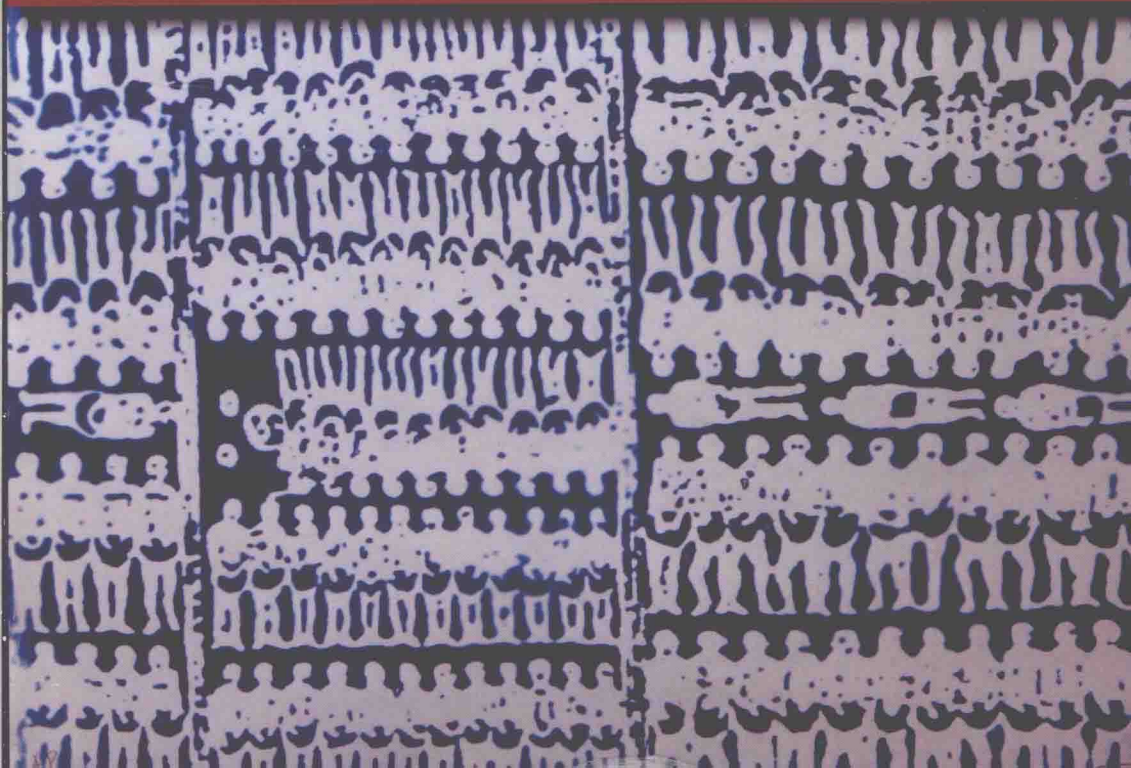




AFRICA AND **FRANCE**

POSTCOLONIAL CULTURES, MIGRATION, AND RACISM

DOMINIC THOMAS



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and Racism*

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For Devereux and Erin

Having authority over our own story, and the means to tell it, is the most potent weapon that any of us are able to utilize against the corrupt vision of the far right.

—Caryl Phillips, *Color Me English* (2011)

The question is not “Who is French, but rather what is a human being?”

—J.-M. G. Le Clézio, “Universalism and Multiculturalism” (2009)

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Introduction

FRANCE AND THE NEW WORLD ORDER

Why is it that at a time when the globalization of financial markets, cultural flows, and the melting pot of populations have engendered greater unification of the world, France, and by extension Europe, remain reluctant to think critically about the postcolony, namely the history of its presence in the world and the history of the presence of the world in France, before, during, and after Empire?

—*Achille Mbembe*¹

an is di same ole cain and able sindrome
far more hainshent dan di fall of Rome
but in di new word hawdah a atrocity
is a brand new langwidge a barbarity

—*Linton Kwesi Johnson*²

On November 21, 2009, the front page of the French daily newspaper *Le Monde* included an entry—"Albert Camus au Panthéon?" (Albert Camus at the Pantheon?)—by the well-known political cartoonist Plantu. This image highlighted the complexity of former president Nicolas Sarkozy's ambition of moving Camus' remains to the great Panthéon mausoleum. In the cartoon, Sarkozy is standing behind a podium bearing a French flag and inscribed with the wording "Sarko-Malraux," and singing "Entre ici l'étranger" (Come in foreigner/outsider). This is an obvious reference to Camus' most well-known novel *L'Étranger* (1942). Indeed the cartoon reinforces an association further by the presence of a winged and airborne Camus holding a copy of his novel, the recognizable structure of the Panthéon in the background, and a police officer ordering a black man with the familiar "tu" ("Toi, tu rentres ici!" [Hey you, this

way!]) to get in to a police vehicle. Only too evident is the allusion to Sarkozy's numerous attempts at instrumentalizing immigration since 2007 through the creation of a Ministry of Immigration, Integration, National Identity and Co-Development, highly publicized arrest and deportation statistics, and controversial *National Identity Debate*. Here, Plantu points to Sarkozy's calculated gesture of embracing a cultural icon such as Camus, cautiously selecting, privileging, and memorializing components of a complicated colonial history of Algerian-French contact (and thereby appealing to electoral constituencies among *pied-noir* communities). The insertion of Camus into these contemporary political debates emerges as particularly opportunistic when one considers equally meritorious figures; what becomes clear though is both the acceptability of the *Algerian* Camus juxtaposed here with undesirable immigrants, and simultaneously with an author such as Jean-Paul Sartre whose presence in the Panthéon remains unimaginable at this moment in history, not least as a result of his anti-colonialism.³

There are of course numerous precursors to this latest debate concerning the pantheonization of historical figures, most notably as far as the commemoration and status of Black figures are concerned, including Félix Éboué (the colonial administrator), Louis Delgrès (a mulatto leader in the struggle against the restoration of slavery in 1802), and Toussaint Louverture (who played a key role in the struggle for Haitian independence).⁴ Further illustration is the petition launched in 2007, "Pour la panthéonisation d'Olympe de Gouges (eighteenth-century French author and anti-slavery activist) et Solitude (a slave who fought alongside Delgrès against the restoration of slavery)."⁵ Associating André Malraux with these matters proves to be significant in multiple ways; his own remains were, after all, moved to the Panthéon in 1996. As Herman Lebovics has argued, "The great man in the Panthéon has become one of the most frequently invoked markers of the glory days of the French nation and French culture."⁶ French cultural and political institutions have, historically, enjoyed symbiotic connections, precisely because of Malraux's appointment by President de Gaulle as the inaugural Minister of Cultural Affairs (today the Ministry of Culture and Communication), a position he held from 1959 to 1969.⁷ Numerous events were planned in 2009 to celebrate the fiftieth anniversary of this ministry, and half a century later, the Ministry of Culture and Communication remains committed to the promotion and development of France's archeological, architectural, archival, and museological patrimony, and continues to occupy a central role in national politics, fostering Gaullist notions of "grandeur" but also in supporting a policy of international "ray-

onnement” (radiance). Prominent appointees have included Jack Lang (1981–86 and 1988–93), the catalyst behind the ambitious architectural projects known as the “grands travaux” that transformed the Parisian landscape (the Institut du Monde Arabe, the Musée d’Orsay, and Opéra Bastille); Jacques Toubon (1993–95), the forceful advocate and protectionist of the French language; and more recently Frédéric Mitterrand (former President Mitterrand’s nephew), a no less controversial figure.

During Sarkozy’s presidency (2007–2012), policies included a broad range of interconnected and interaligned operations between various ministries.⁸ Historically, articulation between these ministries played a central role in sponsoring imperial ambitions overseas, in supporting the establishment of museums in which to display the acquired spoils and glorious symbols of geopolitical power, and in mobilizing public support for expansionist ventures. In turn, decolonization has entailed an interrogation of the relationship between former colonial powers and colonized subjects, alongside the various claims and demands that have been made by ethnic minorities and immigrants insisting upon improved representation in the genealogies of European nation-states. Today, for example, the Ministry of the Interior, Overseas Department and Territories, Local Authorities and Immigration also shares responsibility for “memory/remembrance, patrimony and archives.”⁹ Museological practices are subject to greater scrutiny in light of these political and social transformations, and a comparative transhistorical and transcolonial analysis of European museums stands to improve the contextualization of these experiences and legacies. In addition to the refurbishment and restructuring of colonial era museums, new spaces have also been inaugurated, thereby further highlighting the importance of museums in postcolonial Europe, as well as the significance of incorporating the perspective of postcolonial European populations into these museums.

Foremost among Sarkozy’s initiatives was a concern with French history and French national identity; in other words, with the preservation of “patrimony” and with a definition of “memory.” Not surprisingly, Sarkozy actively pursued a project to open a French history museum. Indeed, several cultural and social projects have come to fruition in France in recent years. Most noteworthy is the opening in 2006 of the Quai Branly Museum (MQB, *Musée du Quai Branly*, a museum that has centralized French holdings in the arts of Africa, Oceania, Asia, and the Americas) and in 2007 of the National Center for the History of Immigration (CNHI, *Cité nationale de l’histoire de l’immigration*). The CNHI is located at the Porte Dorée in eastern Paris in the building that had formerly

accommodated the Musée d'arts africains et océaniens (MAAO), a site with a fascinating transcolonial history since it was initially created in 1931 to house the Musée permanent des colonies.¹⁰ Of course, when one considers the complex practices utilized to display human subjects (in human zoos, for example) *and* objects during the colonial era, and subsequently the manner in which these have been updated during the postcolonial era, then the connections to the Panthéon *as* a museum space that narrates the multiple chapters of a *national* history become in and of themselves all the more compelling.¹¹

The Quai Branly Museum is an inheritance from the Jacques Chirac era and presidency, and Sarkozy's own interpretation of colonial history signaled his discomfort with this presence. In fact, Sarkozy's focus on historical revisionism yielded instances of disquieting nationalistic fervor. Today, globalization and French cultural and national identity have emerged as central concerns in national politics; the authorities have argued that uncontrolled immigration, as well as certain *symbols* (Islam, polygamy, headscarves, veils, Burqas, and so on), serve as indicators of the widespread erosion to the fabric of French society, while observers have evoked a different kind of *crisis* of French identity, pointing to France's failure at negotiating the demands, exigencies, and realities of the new world order.

When Brice Hortefeux was appointed to head the new Ministry of Immigration, Integration, National Identity and Co-Development in 2007, he devoted his attention to regulating immigration and, building on France's presidency of the European Union (E.U.) from July 1, 2008, to December 31, 2008, successfully lobbied for policy standardizing through the *E.U. Pact on Migration and Asylum*. However, his successor Éric Besson elected to amplify concerns with national identity when he took office in 2009 by launching a debate on the following question: "Qu'est ce qu'être Français aujourd'hui?" (What does it mean to be French today?)¹² Whereas the CNHI was conceived around the idea that "Leur histoire est notre histoire" (Their history is our history)—whereby the "est" (is) encouraged constitutive and inclusive notions of *Frenchness*—Besson's imperatives and priorities instead placed this verb under pressure leading one to hear the word as the conjunction "et" (and), pointing to separate and tangential histories in which hierarchies, different forms of belonging, citizenship, and adherence were foregrounded.¹³ This fragile relationship between twenty-first-century cultural, economic, political, and social aspirations and the past/history have framed governmental policy-making and museological developments. To this end, President Sarkozy commissioned a report—the

Lemoine report on the “Maison de l’histoire de France” (2008)—that would seek to outline what a museum of French history might look like—a project therefore diametrically opposed in its aims and aspirations to the presentation of French history at the CNHI.¹⁴

Christopher L. Miller has shown us how, “The history of Africanist discourse is that of a continuing series of questions imposed on Africa, questions that preordain certain answers while ruling others out. . . . One can assert with assurance that the relationship between Europe and Africa has continually been represented as simply North over South, light over dark, white over black: as an unmediated pairing of opposites.”¹⁵ Analogous conclusions are to be found in pioneering research, in works such as Catherine Coquery-Vidrovitch’s *La Découverte de l’Afrique* (1965), William B. Cohen’s *The French Encounter with Africans: White Response to Blacks, 1530–1880* (1980), and Valentin Y. Mudimbe’s *The Idea of Africa* (1994).¹⁶ But how have twenty-first-century geopolitical alignments altered these alignments and configuration? How has “the presence of strangers, aliens, and blacks and the distinctive dynamics of Europe’s imperial history . . . combined to shape its cultural and political habits and institutions?”¹⁷ Examining processes of commemoration, reflections on national identity, government speeches, film, literature, and new museological approaches will invariably assist in the process of accounting for and then reckoning with these entangled histories.

As the Nobel laureate, Turkish novelist Orhan Pamuk has lucidly written, “Anyone remotely interested in the politics of civilization will be aware that museums are the repositories of those things from which Western Civilization derives its wealth of knowledge, allowing it to rule the world, and likewise when the true collector, on whose efforts these museums depend, gathers together his first objects, he almost never asks himself what will be the ultimate fate of his hoard.”¹⁸

Chapters 1 and 2, respectively, examine the Quai Branly Museum and the National Center for the History of Immigration. These museums, MQB and CNHI, opened at a time of political transition, and the conflicting interests of foregrounding non-Western artistic and cultural heritages and humanizing the migratory experience (in state-sponsored public institutions) have been at odds with the government’s objectives of redefining immigration policy. These issues are of course connected to the focus of chapter 3 in which immigration and national identity are explored. The long history of African-French relations, as confirmed by the archival holdings and permanent collections of

the MQB and CNHI, tend to be obfuscated in policy-making. However, closer scrutiny of immigration history serves to complicate French and European debates on identity and singularity.

As Edward W. Said so eloquently showed us in his book *Culture and Imperialism*,

The world has changed since Conrad and Dickens in ways that have surprised, and often alarmed, metropolitan Europeans and Americans, who now confront large non-white immigrant populations in their midst, and face an impressive roster of newly empowered voices asking for their narratives to be heard. The point of my book is that such populations and voices have been there for some time, thanks to the globalized process set in motion by modern imperialism; to ignore or otherwise discount the overlapping experience of Westerners and Orientals, the interdependence of cultural terrains in which colonizer and colonizer co-existed and battled each other through projections as well as rival geographies, narratives, and histories, is to miss what is essential about the world in the past century.¹⁹

Immigration and national identity have been central issues in French politics for decades now. But this question has become all the more complex given that to talk about France today necessarily means to talk about Europe, and to talk about Europe is also to talk about the longer historical experience overseas. This realization informs Paul Gilroy's argument, whereby, "The racisms of Europe's colonial and imperial phase preceded the appearance of migrants inside the European citadel. It was racism, not diversity, that made their arrival into a problem" ("Foreword: Migrancy, Culture, and a New Map of Europe," xxi). Political leaders recognized the benefits to national interests of harmonizing European imperial ambitions in Africa, and this awareness provided the rationale for the 1884–1885 Berlin Congress. Such historical forerunners to more recent transcolonial developments in E.U. policy making and to schemes such as the European Neighborhood Policy (ENP) and partnership treaties with African countries are hard to ignore.

"Africans were citizens of the French Union according to the 1946 Constitution and in theory at least free to circulate on French territory," Pap Ndiaye has reminded us, and "Independence did nothing to alter this relationship given the bilateral agreements that were signed between African countries and France. French industry needed labor, . . . and in those days it was easy to enter France, even illegally, to find work and then to put one's papers in order after the fact. But a decisive change occurred in 1974 when the borders were closed off to work-related immigration from non-European countries."²⁰ France is not of course alone when it comes to considering how it is addressing the question

of belonging and identity. In fact, repeated expressions of racism and xenophobia have placed the founding concepts of the E.U. under pressure. Immigration today has come to concern *both* facets of the term, namely, the control of external factors (migration, border control, security) *and* the internal dynamic of ethnic and race relations, integration, and multiculturalism.

The “immigration” and “co-development” components that came under the Ministry of Immigration, Integration, National Identity and Co-Development’s list of responsibilities between 2007 and 2010 (when it was officially closed down) specifically concerned the bilateral aspects of population movements between Africa and Europe. Chapter 4 is thus strategically located to examine the European and French *Africa policy*, Sarkozy’s official speeches (and the responses to these) delivered on the African continent (in Brazzaville, Cape Town, Cotonou, Dakar, Kinshasa, and Tangiers) and what they tell us about how he conceived of Africa and Africans *and* how this in turn informed the treatment of African immigrants in France, and the lingering problem of neo-colonialism known as *Françafrique*.

By the end of the nineteenth century, the British and the French shared the ambiguous prestige of wielding the most powerful empires and colonies. Their respective projects varied considerably in terms of geographic spheres of influence, and naturally so did the cultural strategies deployed. Any consideration of the legacy of these historical encounters must necessarily acknowledge these factors, particularly when it comes to analyzing the nature of cross-cultural influence. Nicolas Bancel, Pascal Blanchard, and Françoise Vergès have shown that “France and Africa share a common history, expressed jointly by the role France has played for centuries in Africa north and south of the Sahara, and by the more recent presence in the Hexagon of Africans who have, in turn, through their actions, their work, their thinking, had a concrete impact on the course of French history.”²¹ In this regard, the French context is all the more complicated given the concerted effort made by the colonial authorities in shaping policy through a *civilizing mission* determined to establish cultural prototypes in France *overseas*. Some fifty years have now elapsed since the official end of the French colonial presence in most of francophone sub-Saharan Africa, yet the failure of the French authorities to address and reconcile this colonial legacy with the challenges of globalization, immigration policy, and minority politics is striking. To accurately contextualize the landscape of post-colonial writing in France, its particularities and specificities, necessarily entails reflection on the transition from the colonial to the postcolonial and a consideration of the dynamics of race relations. But this is also a pan-European

phenomenon, because “every European power contributed to the expansion of Europe’s borders overseas. Every European power is experiencing today the ‘return of empire’ on their soil” (Bancel, Blanchard, and Vergès, *La République coloniale*, 161).

Chapter 5 endeavors to improve the contextualization of the cultural, political, and social dynamics of twentieth- and early twenty-first-century (post) colonial societies through a consideration of imperial discourse and the emergence of decolonizing imperatives in film. Initially, the French colonial authorities endeavored to restrict African access to this mode of expression, but gradually African and diasporic filmmakers succeeded in bypassing limitations and in developing an autonomous corpus of works. From the 1950s onward, the Parisian metropolis provided a privileged topographic space for African film production (with films such as *Afrique-sur-Seine*, *Paris c’est joli*, and *Les princes noirs de Saint-Germain-des-Prés*). Since at least the 1970s, Africa and African-centered films have successfully evaded simple categorization, and the degree of interpenetration has been reflected in films featuring African populations in Africa, in the diasporic communities of France and Europe, among ethnic minorities and immigrant populations, as well as asylum seekers and refugees. These films therefore provide us with important antecedents to current (re)formulations of African/European/French relations, but also directly engage with, deconstruct, and demystify the kinds of longstanding fantasies and reductive representations of Africa and Africans circulating and recycled in official governmental speeches. The films considered, from 1955 to 2011, reveal a significant diversification of the topographic spaces in which films are made, thereby announcing an expansion and decentralization of the parameters of French-language film production itself. This is a phenomenon that has also been accompanied by a thematic evolution that has reflected shifts in the political and social concerns of immigrant populations. As with government policy, concerned as it is with migrants and immigrants, films (by Med Hondo, Idrissa Ouedraogo, José Zeka Laplaine, Jean-Marie Teno, Alain Gomis, Rachid Bouchareb, Jean-François Rivet, Abdellatif Kechiche, Mathieu Kassovitz, Moussa Sene Absa, and so forth) also engage with this dual component, offering challenging insights through their engagement with the evidentiary mode and the plight of transnational migrants.

In chapter 6 our attention shifts to the fascinating case of writer Marie NDiaye (of African descent, the daughter of a white French woman and black Senegalese father), who was awarded the prestigious Prix Goncourt for her novel *Trois femmes puissantes* on the very day (November 2, 2009) on which

Éric Besson launched the *National Identity Debate*.²² Several months earlier, NDiaye had been critical in an interview of Sarkozy's immigration policies, and when these comments came to the attention of Éric Raoul (the mayor of Raincy and UMP deputy for the Department of Seine-Saint-Denis), he took it upon himself to attack NDiaye on the grounds that the "[w]inners of this prize must uphold national cohesion and the image of our country."²³ Such claims for patriotic flag-brandishing bring to mind one of the most well-known posters of French colonial propaganda, namely Éric Castel's *Trois couleurs, un drapeau, un Empire* (Three colors, one flag, one Empire, 1941), a tri-colored allegory, in which the three *races* are superimposed under French rule over the French flag.²⁴ Having said this, this controversy has made it possible to think about a broad range of questions pertaining to racial classification in France, and by disentangling the knotted intersection of government, media, and cultural discourses to complicate discussions on national identity and the subject of "World Literature in French."

In chapter 7 we examine the increasing attention accorded to notions such as *Eurafrica* and the *Euro-Mediterranean*. Economic, political, and social asymmetries that account for transitions in migratory patterns within countries and continents and beyond strict nation(continent)al borders remain of crucial importance, and recourse to the *global south* as a category has made it possible to circumscribe those disadvantaged regions from which emigration is most significant, while also highlighting the unidirectionality of human mobility toward those economically prosperous geographic zones in the E.U. Naturally, these migratory routes and patterns inscribe themselves alongside a multiplicity of other twenty-first-century transnational networks. Indeed, if migration has emerged as a key geometric coordinate of globalization today, then so too has the concern with *controlling* the planetary circulation of human beings, particularly when it comes to the African continent. Political leaders recognized the benefits to national interests of harmonizing European imperial ambitions in Africa, and this awareness continues to inform more recent transcolonial developments in the E.U. Perhaps not surprisingly, a number of writers—French, Italian, Spanish, Moroccan, and so on (including Alain Mabanckou, Abdourahman Waberi, Tahar Ben Jelloun, Laurent Gaudé, Mahi Binebine, Salim Jay, J. R. Essomba, Abasse Ndione, and Laïla Lalami), have turned their attention to these realities, thereby introducing new forms of political commitment, and narrating the latest biographical chapter in the history of African-European relations. These pioneering works engage with globalization while themselves being globalized and raising consciousness with