

RACE IN THE UNITED STATES: A VIEW FROM OUTER SPACE

STEPHEN W. SMITH* & GÉRALDINE FAES-SMITH**

Chickens cackle around the cage. White chickens . . .

Darn it—one goes bonkers in this country!¹

Romain Gary

I

INTRODUCTION

In Bob Fosse’s award-winning 1972 musical drama film *Cabaret*, a nightclub in Berlin is the dark glass through which the rise of Nazism in the early 1930s is chronicled. In one of his satirical songs, the MC, played by Joel Gray, entreats his guests to share his love for his Jewish girlfriend, a person dressed up as a gorilla in a silk bodice and a tutu. “I grant that the problem is not small,” he readily concedes. But he insists: “If you could see her through my eyes, if you knew her like I do, it would change your point of view.”²

After many years in the United States, we still fail to see “race” through American eyes. In what follows, we will try to explain why. In doing so, our aim is not primarily the advocacy of our own point of view about “race.” Given America’s innate obsession with skin color, there is no more need for that than for bringing sand to the beach. However dominant or embattled any given perspective on “race” in this country may be in the current debate, and notwithstanding the widening gap between public and published opinion, all views are already out there, ready for the taking. Adding ours to the mix would be of scant interest, especially as we are no scholars of “race.”

Copyright © 2022 by Stephen W. Smith & Géraldine Faes-Smith.

This Article is also available online at <http://lcp.law.duke.edu/>.

* Duke University Professor of the Practice in the Department of African and African American Studies (AAAS). Smith’s scholarship focuses on France and Africa, conflict analysis in Africa, and Africa’s youthful population age structure. Former correspondent based in Ivory Coast for Reuters News Agency and Radio France International (RFI), and Africa Editor of the French daily newspapers *Libération* (1988–2000) and *Le Monde* (2000–2005). His latest book, *THE SCRAMBLE FOR EUROPE: YOUNG AFRICA ON ITS WAY TO THE OLD CONTINENT* (2019), won the French Academy’s *Grand Prix*.

** French journalist and writer. Former West Africa correspondent based in Dakar (Senegal) for the Pan-African weekly *Jeune Afrique* and editor-in-chief of the French cultural magazine *Epok*. Author of several books including *RUE JEAN-PIERRE TIMBAUD, FAMILY LIFE BETWEEN ISLAMISTS AND BOBOS* (2016), *SEEN IN AMERICA, SOON IN FRANCE* (2018), and (with Stephen W. Smith) *BLACK AND FRENCH!* (2006).

1. ROMAIN GARY, CHIEN BLANC 119 (Folio 1972) (1970) (authors’ translation).
2. CABARET (ABC Pictures 1972).

So, then, what do we hope to bring to the table? An antidote against the mindless habits that easily become second nature when first principles are no longer questioned. Like Franz Boas, discussed in Part II below, we view “race” as an unscientific mystification. Like Boas, we adopt quotations around “race” to express this view. As Martin Luther King, Jr. came close to arguing in his speeches on the “two Americas,” discussed in Part V hereafter, we believe that the socio-economic divide amongst Americans is more foundational to inequality in this country than prejudice against skin color.

Since 2007, when I, Géraldine Faes-Smith (GF-S), came to the United States, and I, Stephen W. Smith (SWS), returned to my native country, some of the fundamental assumptions about “race” that are widely shared in America have stunned and often bewildered us. Take the 2010 census. In France, the collection of data linked to skin color or ethnicity is illegal because it is viewed as discriminating among citizens supposed to be equal in the eyes of the state—a position that comes with its own train of troublesome questions. Thus, we were nonplussed when asked to self-identify with one of the “race” categories on offer in the U.S. population count.

We’re both former journalists who long lived in, and reported from, sub-Saharan Africa. So, we were used to being perceived as white people. Moreover, coming from France where anti-Arab prejudice has a long and hurtful history, it could have been a pleasant surprise for us to learn that North Africans or Middle Easterners are welcome among white people in the United States. But, clearly, the more capacious “White” category was not devised to disregard the shades of the human epidermis that prejudice singles out and thrives on. To the contrary, an entire bureaucracy had been set up here based on these differing hues. The Interagency Committee for the Review of Racial and Ethnic Standards in Federal Statistics and Administrative Reporting³ is charged with dovetailing the criteria applied by this tentacular administration to run the gamut of “colorism”—a new word that we quickly added to our vocabulary.

It all reminded us very much of Apartheid South Africa where the custodians of “race” had lost their way in a maddening maze of epidermal and phenotypical categories. In the end, the racial classification became simply a test where people hopped up and down with a comb stuck into their hair. If the comb didn’t fall to the ground, the person was labelled “black.”⁴

At first blush, the 2020 U.S. census seemed an improvement. In it, the second most often ticked box, after “White” was “[s]ome other race.”⁵ This residual

3. Standards for Maintaining, Collecting, and Presenting Federal Data on Race and Ethnicity, 81 Fed. Reg. 67,398 (Sept. 30, 2016).

4. See *The Story of Africa: Southern Africa: Apartheid Law*, BBC WORLD VIEW, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/worldservice/africa/features/storyofafrica/12chapter7.shtml> [<https://perma.cc/YUL8-AKKH>] (summarizing apartheid law).

5. Nicholas Jones, Rachels Marks, Roberto Ramirez & Merays Rios-Vargas, *2020 Census Illuminates Racial and Ethnic Composition of the Country*, U.S. CENSUS BUREAU (Aug. 2021), <https://www.census.gov/library/stories/2021/08/improved-race-ethnicity-measures-reveal-united-states-population-much-more-multiracial.html> [<https://perma.cc/3PXE-B6DF>].

category had been chosen by close to fifty million respondents, one out of seven Americans. Had they jumped out of their skin, like us, at the idea of being classified by their pigmentation, the productivity of their melanocytes? We weren't sure any longer. Because, by then, we had grown familiar enough with American racial thinking to entertain a very different thought; perhaps those who preferred mingling in a catch-all category were intent on sabotaging the attempt to rid America of racism thanks to racial discrimination.

This is, of course, the heart of the matter. We don't think that the good end that is being sought can redeem the bad means employed to attain it. But there is no facile answer. After all, war is also waged to bring about peace and, at least in some cases, for example to overthrow Hitler and put an end to the Holocaust, this oxymoronic solution—fighting fire with fire—seems to be the only way out. George Santayana's aphorism "Only the dead have seen the end of war" perhaps sums up a fatal truth.⁶

Now, racial discrimination goes by a different name when it aims to overcome the effects of racism. Policies that give members of disadvantaged communities a leg-up to compensate for harm inflicted upon their group are referred to as affirmative action. The neologism—now a set phrase—was first used, and wedded to racial justice, by President John F. Kennedy in an Executive Order in March 1961⁷ as a stand-in for as yet unspecified remedial measures. It was Lyndon B. Johnson who filled the empty shell with concrete meaning. Famously, in the commencement address he delivered at Howard University on June 4, 1965, he explained: "You do not take a person who, for years, has been hobbled by chains and liberate him, bring him up to the starting line of a race and then say, 'you are free to compete with all the others,' and still justly believe that you have been completely fair."⁸

The metaphor is stark, instantaneously compelling. However, this is precisely how races are organized, say at the Olympic Games. There, no head start, or any other compensatory advantage, is awarded to runners from less developed countries. This is done despite the gaping discrepancies in terms of talent selection, organizational support, training facilities, and coaching that clearly handicap them vis-à-vis their competitors from the richest nations, which, some argue, have exploited the Global South to accrue their wealth in the first place. What would competition need to look like to be fair in LBJ's sense? We strain to imagine the full details. New rules would perhaps produce new winners from hitherto underrepresented countries. But perhaps not as the middle-distance and

6. GEORGE SANTAYANA, *SOLILOQUIES IN ENGLAND AND LATER SOLILOQUIES* 102 (1922).

7. See Exec. Order No. 10925 Establishing the President's Committee on Equal Employment Opportunity, 26 Fed. Reg. 1977 (Mar. 6, 1961) ("The contractor will take affirmative action to ensure that applicants are employed, and that employees are treated during employment, without regard to their race, creed, color, or national origin.").

8. See President Lyndon B. Johnson, Commencement Address at Howard University: To Fulfill These Rights (June 4, 1965), THE AM. PRESIDENCY PROJECT, <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/commencement-address-howard-university-fulfill-these-rights> [<https://perma.cc/R8G9-FRFA>].

long-distance races happen to be already largely dominated by runners from the world's poorest continent, Africa. This result is not really in line with LBJ's argument, and the new rules would also run the risk of being too fair by half. There would still be victories but no more triumphs.

II

THE MIMETIC CURSE OF ENMITY

In the United States, “race” per se is no legal ground for affirmative action. In its rulings over the past half-century, the Supreme Court has never endorsed discrimination on the basis of skin color, however well-intended, as a stand-alone justification for remedial policies. But, since 1978, the highest court in the country has predicated its approval of affirmative action on diversity, that is the benefits derived from pluralism. This takes us straight back to Apartheid South Africa, whence the term was brought into this country by American legal scholars seeking a way to combat racism without surrendering to its terms. They discovered that, in 1957, two South African universities tried to defend their integrated classes against a racist state in the best tradition of academic freedom. “Nowadays,” they argued, “it is almost axiomatic that a university should be more diverse in its membership than is the community in which it exists. This diversity itself contributes to the discovery of truth, for truth is hammered out in discussion, in the clash of ideas.”⁹

We couldn't agree more. But pluralism in America has come to mean principally *embodied* pluralism, *visible* difference. We will return to this point later. For the moment, suffice it to say that the pluralism of debatable opinions—once the daily bread of liberal democracies and their changing majorities—has been largely winnowed out of the system as a sort of “paleo-liberal” chaff. Yet the grain of empowerment is not as good as one would have hoped. One example, which stands for many others: at Bowdoin College, a small liberal arts college in Maine, the percentage of students of color has risen from 7.5 percent in 1988 to 35.1 percent in 2021; but 69 percent of the Bowdoin students come from families in the top 20 percent of income earners—of whom a fifth earn more than \$630,000 a year—and only 3.8 percent from the bottom twenty percent.¹⁰

This means two things. First, for diversity to work in America, you need to wear it on your sleeve and, ideally, know how to perform it—visibility, not actuality, makes the difference. Elite colleges have long figured this out. Already in 2004, addressing Harvard's black alumni, Henry Louis Gates Jr. and the late

9. Nicholas Lemann, *Can Affirmative Action Survive?*, NEW YORKER (July 26, 2021), <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2021/08/02/can-affirmative-action-survive> [https://perma.cc/WU45-U77L].

10. Jay Caspian Kang, *It's Time for an Honest Conversation About Affirmative Action*, N.Y. TIMES (Jan. 27, 2022), <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/01/27/opinion/affirmative-action-harvard.html> [https://perma.cc/ZXA6-DY42].

Lani Guinier, both faculty at Harvard, exposed that possibly as many as two-thirds of the university's black students were first or second-generation immigrants from Africa or the Caribbean, or the children of biracial couples.¹¹ Yet, these demographics are not the intended beneficiaries of affirmative action, at least not primarily. Second, diversity as it has been implemented in the United States is best described as elite connivance across the color, and gender, bar. It is top-down, selective empowerment, not a groundswell of emancipation.

On the assumption that affirmative action and diversity aim at more than just reshuffling the cards of opportunity among members of the upper classes, this begs the question: what has gone wrong, and why? In 1924—at a moment when, as a result of colonialism, international connectivity had reached a high tide mark that it would only attain again, and surpass, in the 1980s when the term “globalization” was coined—a student in New York City took notes in the introductory course to a brand-new academic discipline, Cultural Anthropology. The student's name—soon to become widely known—was Margaret Mead. “Take the problem of determining the difference between Swedes, Bavarians and Negroes” she jotted down. “Naively we say that Swedes differ more from Negroes than they do from Bavarians. But it is another matter to attempt the definition of this difference.”¹²

A century later, at the beginning of each semester, I, Stephen W. Smith (SWS), routinely ask the students enrolled in my courses whether they see in our classroom a “Caucasian.” Most of them are puzzled by my silly and embarrassing question, others strain to suppress a laugh, while a few timidly point at me. All of them have romped through the American school system as overachievers, they have made it into an elite college, and they usually hold strong views on all things “race.” But, save rare exceptions, they haven't heard of a German anatomist, Johann Friedrich Blumenbach, who opined at the end of the eighteenth century that the single cranium on his shelf that originated from the Caucasus Mountains belonged to a “white” person—purportedly a German, of course—and represented the pinnacle of human evolution.¹³

My students generally haven't learned either that the shift from white Anglo-Saxon Protestant (WASP)¹⁴ to Caucasian was a ruse to cement white supremacy in this country.¹⁵ By the 1920s, unprecedented numbers of new European immigrants freshly arrived in the United States, many of them Catholics from

11. *Id.*

12. CHARLES KING, *THE REINVENTION OF HUMANITY: HOW A CIRCLE OF RENEGADE ANTHROPOLOGISTS REMADE RACE, SEX AND GENDER* 132 (2020).

13. *Id.* at 79–80.

14. For background on the acronym WASP, which tellingly first stood for “wealthy Anglo-Saxon Protestant,” see Karl Vick, *He Defined the WASP – And Stung It*, WASH. POST (Aug. 20, 1996), <https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/lifestyle/1996/08/20/he-defined-the-wasp-and-stung-it/bf53c1d8-f45a-49a8-a38a-4059a59f17a9/> [<https://perma.cc/6AE8-MCTJ>].

15. For more detail on the redefinition of white supremacy, see JACKSON LEARS, *REBIRTH OF A NATION: THE MAKING OF MODERN AMERICA 1877–1920* 94 (2010); see also Sheila Dewan, *Has ‘Caucasian’ Lost Its Meaning?*, N.Y. TIMES (July 6, 2013), <https://www.nytimes.com/2013/07/07/sunday-review/has-caucasian-lost-its-meaning.html> [<https://perma.cc/V9RQ-Y4PE>].

Mediterranean countries. This immigration led to the expansion of the white category, solidifying the racialization of what it meant to be mainstream in this country. Caucasian became a synonym not only for white but for American. It gives pause to think that you can travel endless miles on Martin Luther King Jr. streets, roads, and highways, that you can know MLK's "I Had a Dream" speech by heart, that you can celebrate Black History Month year-in year-out, and still fall for the lexicon of racism.

The department in which Margaret Mead learned to defy skin-deep thinking was set up by Franz Boas, the father of Cultural Anthropology in America. A secular Jew from a well-to-do family in Germany, he himself had come to the United States as an adult immigrant. Boas fought a lifelong uphill struggle to disprove biological determinism and the attendant claims laid to cultural superiority. This fight took place at a time when craniometry—the measuring of human skulls to assess brain size and intelligence—and orthogenesis—the lineal, teleological ascent from supposedly lower to higher forms of civilization—were widely accepted building blocks of science. Given that "race" was not grounded in empirical fact but was, as he put it, "at best a poetic and dangerous fiction,"¹⁶ he took care to always cordon the term off by quotation marks.¹⁷

Modern science has thoroughly invalidated both biological determinism and orthogenesis. But nowadays we have given up on the scare quotes around "race" and organize myriad events that are variations on the theme of "race matters." For the sake of anti-racism, we have accepted "race" as a reality, something akin to gravity. Eager to strike down our enemies, racists, we speak their language and disregard Nietzsche's warning against the mimetic curse of enmity: "He who fights with monsters should be careful lest he thereby become a monster."¹⁸

Between age five and eighteen, I (SWS) grew up with my German-Jewish mother in her home country. In the 1960s and 1970s, "race" was not a word anyone would use in Germany, if not as an epithet for absolute evil, the folly for which some six million people were put to death in extermination camps. Like the N-word today in the United States, "race" was the watchword serving to police the boundaries of what was regarded as acceptable company. In my Latin classes, we went to extreme lengths to read Caesar's *BELLUM GALLICUM* without ever translating *dux* as "Führer," leader.

III

A PERPETUALLY DEFERRED BETTER FUTURE

Shortly after my (SWS) arrival at Duke, a group of students invited me to speak at a weekend get-together they had organized "to work through race." At the end of my talk, which was only politely applauded, a number of black students accused me of starry-eyed color-blindness and an ill-advised attempt to bring

16. KING, *supra* note 12, at 309.

17. *Id.*

18. FRIEDRICH NIETZSCHE, *BEYOND GOOD AND EVIL* 117 (Open Road 2008) (1886).

them, as one of them worded it, “into mainstream culture where we would lose our identity.” What I had described as a prison—“race”—that they should strive to escape by all means, was seen by them as their bastion of resistance against racism, their home base if not their home *tout court*. They couldn’t imagine any other safe space and even less so how to get there.

While I (SWS) was giving unwanted advice, my family was learning basic lessons about “race” in America. In 2008, a year after our arrival here, our son Max fancied to play Notorious B.I.G. in his drama class. Raised until age eleven in an immigrant neighborhood in the outskirts of Paris—*la banlieue*—where many of his friends had been Franco-Africans, he found that there was much to be said for being black. So, I (GF-S) helped him to dress up with a backwards cap, a hoodie, and a gold necklace with a big dollar sign. I also assisted him in making it more “real” by blackening his face with burnt cork. We were lucky. Two African American men—the football coach who, despite Max’s undersize body-build, recruited him as kicker onto his team, and the middle school’s black janitor—whisked him away, right off the school bus. “Max, don’t you understand?” That day our son read the yellowed clippings pinned to the wall in the janitor’s tiny office. The newspapers reported that, back in 1964, the janitor had been one of four teenagers who went on a hunger strike in front of Chapel Hill’s post office to protest segregation. Until that moment, our family was not familiar with the hurtful history surrounding blackface in America.

Nine years later, in 2017, while in his third year at a small liberal arts college in Ohio, Max and a Ghanaian friend wanted to share an apartment on campus. The Ghanaian student was part of a black fraternity, Men of Color. Its leadership effectively torpedoed their cohousing plan for reasons that, in different contexts, have also been invoked by some feminists. They argued victims need to, first, stay among themselves and grow strong enough to confront their oppressors, before trying to live with them on more equal terms. But when will this time come?

In a Pew Research survey conducted in 2016, fifty-four percent of black respondents between eighteen and twenty-nine years, and forty-one percent of the white respondents in the same age group, thought that, “to improve race relations, focus should be [put] on what makes racial and ethnic groups unique.” Among their elders, beyond the age of sixty-five, respectively only twenty-six and twenty-one percent believed that foregrounding what made them “unique” was the best way to find common ground with others.¹⁹ The hope of sitting one day at the same table, all together, is growing old in America.

Racism can be defined by the false claim that phenotypically distinguishable human groups share a common genetic pool that is linked to certain physical, cognitive and moral qualities, and that these groups can be ordered by their

19. *On Views of Race and Inequality, Blacks and Whites are Worlds Apart*, PEW RSCH. CTR. 35 (June 2016), https://www.pewresearch.org/social-trends/wpcontent/uploads/sites/3/2016/06/ST_2016.06.27_Race-Inequality-Final.pdf [<https://perma.cc/KR85-XZND>].

purported superiority or inferiority. At its heart lies the wrong idea that “race” exists, not only as a social construct but as an empirical reality. This idea is one of THE LIES THAT BIND—the perceptive title of Kwame Anthony Appiah’s 2018 book on identity categories.²⁰ Disturbingly, “race” unites not only people who consider themselves *visibly* better than others whom they stigmatize on the basis of skin color or other bodily markers. Race also binds together the stigmatized when they come to believe that their collective condition—however refracted by their individual experience of the world—is the single most important commonality sparking community. Then, some are brothers while others can be only allies.

In his 1967 novel THE MIMIC MEN, V.S. Naipaul put sobering advice in the mouth of his protagonist and first-person narrator: “Hate oppression; fear the oppressed.”²¹ While the proposition “hate oppressors; fear oppression” might be equally good advice, it is indeed naïve to presume that the historical victims of, for instance, patriarchy or racism will be, ipso facto their experience of inequity, better builders of a better future. For example, this logic would lead to the conclusion that women should always serve in positions of power over men. Yet, there is no clear evidence for the redemptive power of victimhood. The proletariat has not freed us from exploitation, postcolonial rulers have not set new standards of democratic governance, abused children don’t become necessarily more caring parents, and it remains altogether vague how the “damaged life”²² of victims and the damaging life of perpetrators may give birth to saner and more hospitable societies.

We don’t know the road to a more perfect union in America better than the next person. But one condition for the possibility of getting there seems clear to us: we would all need to agree that truly liberating anti-racism is incompatible with the belief in “race.”

IV

BESETMENT WITH BLACK SKIN

In the mid-1920s, Zora Neale Hurston, the first African American to attend Columbia University’s Barnard College, became a member of the “Papa Franz” [Boas] family. As a rare young female voice, she had already joined the Harlem Renaissance—she would later fall out with the movement’s protagonists—and would make her mark as a writer. The opening of her novel THEIR EYES WERE WATCHING GOD, “[s]hips at a distance have every man’s wish on board,”²³ has become one of the most famous first lines in American literature. As an

20. See generally KWAME A. APPIAH, THE LIES THAT BIND: RETHINKING IDENTITY (2018).

21. V.S. NAIPAUL, THE MIMIC MEN 14 (Vintage 2001) (1967).

22. See generally THEODORE W. ADORNO, MINIMA MORALIA: REFLECTIONS FROM DAMAGED LIFE (1978) (drawing from everyday experiences disturbing insights on general tendencies of late industrial society).

23. ZORA N. HURSTON, THEIR EYES WERE WATCHING GOD 1 (Harper Perennial 2006) (1937).

anthropologist, who did field work in her native Florida as well as in Jamaica and Haiti, she helped cut the faux scientific ground from under racism's feet. Yet institutionalized discrimination endured and drove many other black intellectuals and artists—Josephine Baker, Eugene Jacques Bullard, Langston Huges, and later James Baldwin, Richard Wright, Chester Himes, and Sidney Becht—into exile. For them, France was the ship at a distance that held promise.

After the First World War, in which twenty million people—half of them civilians—died, and as many were injured, Europeans lost faith in civilization. They were desperate for some salvific otherness, closer to nature, that would reconnect them with life's exuberance. Blackness seemed to fit the picture. The Harlem Hellfighters²⁴ brought jazz—"the black virus"²⁵—to the Old Continent, African masks re-inspired European art, and in Paris, Berlin, and Stockholm, black entertainers brought down the house.²⁶ White folks mingled and danced with them through the night, upper-class European women imitated the marcelled hairstyle of Josephine Baker and, more easily, wore the perfume and smoked the cigarettes endorsed by the performer of the banana dance. The craze was known as "negrophilia."²⁷ It was affirmative action *avant la lettre*, "positive discrimination"—which is, by the way, how affirmative action is translated into French.

In hindsight, of the interwar celebration of blackness in Europe we retain above all that it was short-lived. While this is true, a far greater indifference to black skin than in America remained a striking feature of French society until, at least, the mid-1980s. Why, then, did the French develop their own, more widespread prejudice against black people? There are many reasons for this but one sticks out in particular: sub-Saharan immigrants arrived in France in great numbers only at the end of thirty years of post-WWII economic growth, *les Trente Glorieuses*. They entered into competition with the French for jobs, housing, education and health care when employment opportunities and social security benefits were no longer expanding. In 1926, there were only 2,580 "black Africans" in France, most of them factory workers, dockers, and domestic

24. Erick Trickey, *One Hundred Years Ago, the Harlem Hellfighters Bravely Led the U.S. Into WWI*, SMITHSONIAN MAG. (May 14, 2018), <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/history/one-hundred-years-ago-harlem-hellfighters-bravely-led-us-wwi-180968977/> [<https://perma.cc/QF7K-RPZB>].

25. André Levinson, *The Negro Dance: Under European Eyes*, THEATRE ARTS MONTHLY 11.4 (1927), reprinted in ANDRÉ LEVINSON, ANDRÉ LEVINSON ON DANCE: WRITINGS FROM PARIS IN THE TWENTIES 70 (Joan Acocella & Lynn Garafola eds. & trans., 1991); see also ROBERT GOLDWATER, PRIMITIVISM IN MODERN ART (1986).

26. Meredith Etherington-Smith, *Antenna: How African Masks Inspired the Greats of Modernism*, CHRISTIE'S (May 4, 2016), <https://www.christies.com/features/antenna-picasso-modernism-and-african-art-7323-1.aspx> [<https://perma.cc/3WRY-2XEH>]; see also JODY BLAKE, LE TUMULTE NOIR: MODERNIST ART AND POPULAR ENTERTAINMENT IN JAZZ-AGE PARIS, 1900–1930 (1999).

27. See generally PETRINE ARCHER STRAW, NEGROPHILIA, AVANT-GARDE PARIS AND BLACK CULTURE IN THE 1920S (2000) (discussing the introduction and influence of Black culture that was seen across Europe in the 1920s).

workers.²⁸ Black students were then so rare, even in Paris, that three of them—Aimé Césaire, Léopold Sédar Senghor and Léon Gontran Damas—came up with *négritude* as an answer to their nagging, everyday questions, “[w]ho are we? What are we in this white world?”²⁹

Anti-black racism in France and in America is of course very different, as different as either country’s history that shaped its emergence. No need to expatiate here on the American side of the story, from the transatlantic slave trade to Black Lives Matter by way of the plantation economy, Jim Crow, and the civil rights movement. As for France, with the notable exception of Colbert’s 1685 *Code noir*,³⁰ discrimination on the basis of skin color has never been the law of the land—which, of course, doesn’t mean it didn’t exist. Still, the comparison between the two countries is of interest inasmuch as it throws into relief a paradox: America’s “race” concept is at once exceptional and typical.

The United States is the epitome of an immigrant country. Like other parts of the New World, it came into existence by denying the existence of its native population. This inaugural crime exacerbated its obsession with the otherness that has since ceaselessly landed on its shores. Would the differences brought into the country be reducible in its melting pot? *E pluribus unum*—“out of many, one”—is both begging the question and providing the answer. But paroxysms of rejection—of the “swarthy Germans” (Benjamin Franklin), the Catholic Irish (“no need to apply”), the Chinese “coolies,” the Jews—have spasmodically contradicted the *petitio principii* of the great American experiment. As have waves of visceral hostility against newcomers in France where, for instance, anti-Italian sentiments at the end of the nineteenth century, or anti-Arab sentiments in the 1970s, ran high before they abated.

American exceptionalism, when it comes to “race,” is rooted in this nation’s besetment with black skin as the outer sign of unassimilable otherness. Whether the color bar is enforced by legal means, unfair conditions, or informally, it is always maintained on a plea of warding off an existential threat. This alone could be enough reason for African Americans not to embrace the United States as their home; the country seems united against them. First dehumanized and still discriminated against, the descendants of enslaved Africans can’t forget that their forebears were brought to America in chains, against their will. Hence the binary coding that is the default mode of the American understanding of “race”: it is black or white, the one drop rule, an either or, and not a spectrum—like in France, around the idea of *métissage*—with room for a give-and-take inside a less confrontational continuum of skin colors.

28. See PASCAL BLANCHARD, ÉRIC DEROO & GILLES MANCERON, *LE PARIS NOIR* 86 (2001) (this figure originates from the archives of the Ministry of the Colonies; some independent estimates put the number of African migrants on French soil in the 1920s three times higher).

29. AIME CESAIRE, *NEGRE JE SUIS, NEGRE JE RESTERAI: ENTRETIENS AVEC FRANÇOISE VERGÈS* 23 (2005).

30. See generally Kelly Buchanan, *Slavery in the French Colonies: Le Code Noir (the Black Code) of 1685*, LIBR. OF CONG. BLOG (2011), <https://blogs.loc.gov/law/2011/01/slavery-in-the-french-colonies/> [<https://perma.cc/3EEP-MMXK>] (contextualizing the *Code Noir*).

V

SEEN IN AMERICA, SOON IN FRANCE . . .

Martin Luther King, Jr. explored the theme of “two Americas” in a series of speeches that he delivered in 1967 and 1968. One America “overflowing with the milk of prosperity and the honey of opportunity,” the other “a daily ugliness that transforms the ebullieny of hope into the fatigue of despair.” He sought to explain why the twain had never met. He told audiences across the country that the “struggle for decency”—the end of segregation that the civil rights movement brought about—had only been the prelude to the struggle for “genuine equality.” Arguing that it was “a cruel jest to say to a bootless man that he ought to lift himself by his own bootstraps,” he beat the drum for a federal Open Housing Bill and “a guaranteed minimum income for all people.” He clearly identified the socio-economic underpinnings of racism, the substance—the injury added to the insult of symbolic violence—that makes discrimination profitable. But, in the end, he could not entirely extricate himself from an understanding of racism as an “ontological problem.”³¹

Until quite recently, where America saw racial inequality, Europe rather perceived socio-economic inequality. So, we may be speaking here under influence. Still, in our view, the divide between the two Americas is primarily socio-economic. And the failure to translate this divide into a leitmotif for political action is the single most important *missed* opportunity in contemporary America. For us, this is not a matter of political credo, but an argument grounded on the ongoing reproduction and, hence, modernity of racism. In the United States, racism is not *only* a legacy of the past that “we shall overcome” someday, a day of tantalizing elusiveness.³² Here and now, day in, day out, it is the perpetuum motion machine that unfairly distributes opportunities and wealth with the heaviest of all penalties imposed on black skin.

Racism in the United States is indeed systemic. Yet, in our attempt to remove structural biases, we should not be “dreaming of systems so perfect that no one will need to be good.”³³ Personal decency—Franz Boas called it *Herzensbildung*, “the education of one’s heart to see the humanity of another”³⁴—is indispensable to anti-racism that does not actively promote the acceptance of “race.” Therefore, in our view, affirmative action is not the solution. Elite connivance double-crosses the majority in this country. Its generalization would not rid

31. Martin Luther King, Jr., Speech at Stanford University: The Other America at Stanford University (April 14, 1967) (Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. gave the last version of this speech in front of the Local 1199 in New York City on March 10, 1968, less than a month before his assassination on April 4, 1968).

32. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., Sermon at Temple Israel of Hollywood (Feb. 26, 1965), <https://www.americanrhetoric.com/speeches/mlktempleisraelhollywood.htm> [https://perma.cc/9U6P-GWBA].

33. T.S. ELIOT, *THE ROCK* (1934).

34. KING, *supra* note 12, at 132.

America of discrimination but, rather, spread the misconception of “race” like a nosocomial infection. That would be an inordinate price to pay for removing the color bar merely at the higher echelons of our society, as it is the case in our elite schools. The poor and, among them, most African Americans would remain placed under house arrest in the deprived America cut adrift by its still egregiously opulent albeit purportedly diverse twin sister.

We are struck by the deeply entrenched parochialism *and* universal appeal of America’s conception of “race.” In the globalized world that the colonization of this country ushered in, and that mass migration is shaping under our eyes, the multiple repertoires of collective identity—religion, ethnicity, nationality, ideology, profession, sedentary, nomadic or digital lifestyles—are increasingly supplanted by ostensive signs of alterity. Skin color is the most obvious one. Perhaps it is simply a question of scale. On a planet that, since 1800, has seen its population soar from, then, one billion people with only intermittent contact among them to, now, almost eight billion widely interconnected denizens, the crucial question “who is who?” exceeds the realm of individual life experience. As Arjun Appadurai pointed out, “dead certainty” regarding the vital distinction between friend and foe can only be ascertained today, in the “real time” in which modern life pulsates, when bodily markers are invested with meaning.³⁵

That makes it likely that America’s idea of “race” will go global and fracture the rest of the world, in its own image, along the impassible lines of embodied otherness. For me (GF-S), this is no longer a mere possibility but already a process well underway in my home country. In 2007, when I left France, “race” was still a bad word. By 2018, when all political parties represented in the French parliament voted unanimously to remove “race” from the preamble of the Constitution—though it was clearly there to prevent discrimination on the basis of skin color—I published a book titled *Vu en Amérique, bientôt en France*, in English, SEEN IN AMERICA, SOON IN FRANCE. My intent was to alert to the fact that “race” was increasingly gaining currency in the French public debate. Alas, I was not proven wrong. “Race” has since made many more inroads though it is still far from being, as much as here, the coin of the realm. But to the extent that it has already been accepted in France, the outer space, whence we claim to be writing from, no longer exists for me.

VI

CONCLUSION

In 1968, the year that Martin Luther King, Jr. was assassinated and that many American inner cities went up in flames, the French novelist Romain Gary—a raw talent and, as it happens, the only writer to have been awarded France’s most prestigious *Prix Goncourt* twice, the second time for a novel published under a pseudonym—occupied a ringside seat at the events that shaped today’s America.

35. See generally Arjun Appadurai, *Dead Certainty: Ethnic Violence in the Era of Globalization*, 10 PUB. CULTURE 225 (1998).

A former fighter pilot of the French resistance movement and a war hero, he was a fervent Gaullist rewarded for his services to his country by prestigious diplomatic postings, inter alia in New York City and San Francisco. Gary knew this country well, to the point that he, a naturalized Frenchman born in the Russian empire, wrote several of his novels in both English and French. In 1968, he was sufficiently well connected to meet Bobby Kennedy in a beach house in Malibu shortly before the leading candidate for the Democratic nomination for the presidency—who was running on a platform of socio-economic reform—was shot dead. Moreover, as Jean Seberg’s husband, Gary knew from up-close many of the radical black leaders who were regulars at their home as the Hollywood star generously funded their struggle.

Romain Gary published his account of 1968 in America in a book titled *WHITE DOG*.³⁶ In it, page after page, he relates in elaborate detail just how deeply engrained anti-black prejudice is in American life. In parallel, he tells the story of a stray German shepherd that shows up one day at his door and turns out to be a former police dog, trained to attack black people. Gary enlists an African American animal handler to attempt the seemingly impossible task of curing the dog of the fierce racism that has become its second nature. The man succeeds but at a cost. At the end of the book, the dog ferociously mauls a white liberal. Romain Gary insists that this anecdote is not an allegory, but literally and practically true.

“Wherein lies the danger also grows the saving power.”³⁷ If the *WHITE DOG* does not dismiss its reader in utter desolation, this is because its author explains for himself what also holds true for us: “It is impossible for me to stay away from America for long, because I am not yet old enough to lose interest in the future, in what will happen to me. . . . Something there, painfully, seeks to be born. It is the only all-powerful country in history to ask itself the question of its crimes. This is unprecedented. And it is why, even in the depths of its despair, America is a country that does not allow despair.”³⁸

36. See generally GARY, *supra* note 1.

37. FRIEDRICH HÖLDERLIN, *PATMOS* (1803).

38. GARY, *supra* note 1, at 214.