

Who Is French?

Jennifer Anne Boittin and Tyler Stovall

In recent years scholars of France have devoted a great deal of time and effort to the study of what has been called French universalism, the idea that the nation's republican tradition, and to an important extent French culture in general, centers on certain values held to be applicable to all peoples. Explorations of this issue have emphasized not only the essential contours of this ideology but also its contradictions.¹ How can adherence to a certain set of values simultaneously define both a specific national identity and the common experience of humanity? Among other things, Frenchness is a culturally expressed sense of belonging to a political state. Yet what does one make of those individuals and communities who live in France, even possess French citizenship, and yet are not regularly included in the concept of civilization—defined through education, language, culture, and morals—that normalizes acceptance?² Moreover, if one focuses on ideas generated during a particular period (for France, especially the Enlightenment and the Revolution), do those values change over time, and how do concepts of national identity reflect those changes? Ultimately, what does it mean to be French, and to what extent does republican universalism exemplify or reify the essence of the nation?

Feminist and postcolonial theories have posed fundamental challenges to the idea of France as one and unified. The two approaches, while certainly not the same, have much in common. Both antislavery and feminism have a heritage that reaches back at least to the eigh-

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¹ Joan Wallach Scott, *Only Paradoxes to Offer: French Feminists and the Rights of Man* (Cambridge, MA, 1996); Gary Wilder, *The French Imperial Nation-State: Negritude and Colonial Humanism between the Two World Wars* (Chicago, 2005).

² Rogers Brubaker, *Citizenship and Nationhood in France and Germany* (Cambridge, MA, 1992); Alice L. Conklin, *A Mission to Civilize: The Republican Idea of Empire in France and West Africa, 1895–1930* (Stanford, CA, 1997).

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teenth century, and both resurfaced out of the global political struggles of the 1960s. These topics have also inspired major schools of historiography, and each has produced substantial revisions of our approaches to French history. In addition, they both address the margins of French national identity, exploring how women and the colonized, even while effectively excluded from the national ideal, have developed alternate ideas of what it means to be French and have found ways to center the nation's periphery. Finally, these two approaches have evolved from a focus on the subaltern to an examination of how questions of race and gender shape the lives of all people in France.

Because of these similarities, the historiographies of race and gender have often been lumped together under the broader rubric of "identity politics." Yet important distinctions also mark them. Whereas women have always lived in metropolitan France, often constituting the majority of the nation's population, histories of colonialism and race often challenge the idea of France as a nation bounded by other European nations and instead foreground global transnationalism. Social and cultural bonds defined by race or gender also frequently take different forms. Residential communities segregated on the basis of race and nationality are more common than those organized around gender. At the same time, differences between men and women have been recurrently central to ideas of French identity.

Race and gender have traditionally been used, much like class, as methodological tools for uncovering groups and sources that risk occlusion. Recently, however, such categories have also inspired considerations of politically and socially dominant groups in all their complexities, for example, through a focus on whiteness or on masculinity and manhood. How dominant individuals experience such social identities generates questions. For example, is masculinity or whiteness more salient for French men? Which plays a greater role, objectively or subjectively, in their lived experiences? These are important questions, but answering them in the abstract can prove futile, leading to sterile debates about who is the more oppressed.³

Such concerns motivated us to organize this special issue of *French Historical Studies* around the theme of intersections of race and gender. Much of the work done by French historians today addresses either the

³ On masculinity in France, see Judith Surkis, *Sexing the Citizen: Morality and Masculinity in France, 1870–1920* (Ithaca, NY, 2006); Christopher Forth and Bertrand Taithe, eds., *French Masculinities: History, Culture, and Politics* (New York, 2007). The literature on whiteness in France is still in its infancy: see Tony S. Jugé, "Racism in France: The Civilizing Mission of Whiteness" (PhD diss., University of California, Riverside, 2008); and Michael Vann, "White City on the Red River: Race, Power, and Culture in Colonial Hanoi, 1872–1954" (PhD diss., University of California, Santa Cruz, 1999).

one or the other issue, and some have considered how they overlap.⁴ Here we make the point that questions of identity and difference must be situated in specific contexts. Intersections of race and gender also constitute connections between the theoretical and the empirical, the global and the local. By placing contrasting formulations of social and cultural difference as defined by race and gender under the lens of historical analysis, we can bring new insights to the consideration of French republican universalism and its uneven mapping onto the history of France.

In recent years historians of colonialism have taken the lead in analyzing the relationship between race and gender. One feminist concern has been to challenge earlier arguments that blamed the creation of racial barriers in Europe's colonies on the settlement of white women overseas. In her pioneering work Ann Laura Stoler considers how questions of race and power have been gendered in the colonial context.⁵ Others have explored the impact of imperialism on colonized women and on the relationships between them and colonized men. Still others have discussed the interrelationship of race and masculinity in a colonial context, showing how both colonizers and anti-imperialist activists deployed different ideas about what it meant to be a man subordinate to other, racially distinct men.⁶ Finally, students of postcolonial societies have written about how issues like female excision, Islamic cultural practices, and debates about crime and social unrest are both gendered and racialized.⁷

The contrasting study of gender and race immediately raises the question of how individuals balance their membership in different

⁴ Some recent examples are Elisa Camiscioli, *Reproducing the French Race: Immigration, Intimacy, and Embodiment in the Early Twentieth Century* (Durham, NC, 2009); Laura Levine Frader, *Breadwinners and Citizens: Gender in the Making of the French Social Model* (Durham, NC, 2008); Joan Wallach Scott, *The Politics of the Veil* (Princeton, NJ, 2007); and Dominic Thomas, *Black France: Colonialism, Immigration, and Transnationalism* (Bloomington, IN, 2007).

⁵ Ann Laura Stoler, *Carnal Knowledge and Imperial Power: Race and the Intimate in Colonial Rule* (Berkeley, CA, 2002).

⁶ On masculinity and racial discrimination, see Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, trans. Charles Lam Markmann (New York, 1967); Mrinalini Sinha, *The "Manly Englishman" and the "Effeminate Bengali" in the Late Nineteenth Century* (New York, 1995); and Jennifer Anne Boittin, *Colonial Metropolis: The Urban Grounds of Anti-imperialism and Feminism in Interwar Paris* (Lincoln, NE, 2010).

⁷ Antoinette Burton, *Burdens of History: British Feminists, Indian Women, and Imperial Culture, 1865–1915* (Chapel Hill, NC, 1994); Nupur Chaudhuri and Margaret Strobel, *Western Women and Imperialism: Complicity and Resistance* (Bloomington, IN, 1992). See also Julia Clancy-Smith and Frances Gouda, eds., *Domesticating the Empire: Race, Gender, and Family Life in French and Dutch Colonialism* (Charlottesville, VA, 1998); Alice L. Conklin, "Redefining 'Frenchness': Citizenship, Race Regeneration, and Imperial Motherhood in France and West Africa, 1914–40," in Clancy-Smith and Gouda, *Domesticating the Empire*, 65–83; Carolyn J. Eichner, "La citoyenne in the World: Hubertine Auclert and Feminist Imperialism," *French Historical Studies* 32 (2009), 63–84; Richard C. Keller, *Colonial Madness: Psychiatry in French North Africa* (Chicago, 2007); Patricia M. E. Lorcin, "Mediating Gender, Mediating Race: Women Writers in Colonial Algeria," *Culture, Theory, and Critique* 45 (2004): 45–61; and Martine Lefeuve-Déotte, *L'excision en procès: Un différend culturel?* (Paris, 1997).

social groups when constructing a sense of singularity. How do white men view their gender and racial identities, and to what extent does dominance permit one to ignore the question of identity entirely? Do white women, or colonized men, privilege their gender or race when one of those identities is socially dominant and the other socially subordinate? Do women and men, whites and nonwhites, even separate their social identities in this clear-cut fashion? Or do they deploy these differences strategically to create distinctive ideas about their social positions? In recent years black feminist scholars have used the concept of “intersectionality” to approach such subjects. They have recognized that individuals have multiple identities that shape their lives and views of the world, a fact that studies of identity have frequently neglected. As Kimberlé Crenshaw has argued, “Feminist efforts to politicize experiences of women and antiracist efforts to politicize experiences of people of color have frequently proceeded as though the issues and experiences they each detail occur on mutually exclusive terrains. Although racism and sexism readily intersect in the lives of real people, they seldom do in feminist and antiracist practices.”⁸ From this perspective, we view questions of gender and race, and the identities they produce, as both separate and mutually constitutive. Above all, their intersections assume different forms in different times and places, underscoring the essential historicity of this relationship.

Until recently, the lion’s share of feminist and postcolonial studies, both theoretical and empirical, came out of the English-speaking world.⁹ Studies of the British Empire have dominated the historiography of colonial race and gender, while feminist and antiracist movements in the United States have often set the academic tone for both historical and contemporary studies of social differences. Yet in the last few years questions of race and gender in France have become much more important, both politically and academically. Not only does France offer a burgeoning field of inquiry for scholars, but the French themselves are also engaging with such questions in both popular and academic culture. During the last decade feminism has gained a new presence in French politics and intellectual life, as symbolized above all by the parity movement for the equal representation of women in French politics, a movement that triumphed (but remains unresolved) with the national parity law of 2000.¹⁰ Five years later widespread sub-

⁸ Kimberlé Crenshaw, “Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence against Women of Color,” *Stanford Law Review* 43 (1991): 1242.

⁹ There are, of course, seminal French theorists of race and gender, most notably Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, trans. H. M. Parshley (New York, 1989); and Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*.

¹⁰ Joan Wallach Scott, *Parité! Sexual Equality and the Crisis of French Universalism* (Chicago, 2005).

urban riots placed questions of race and exclusion squarely on the national political agenda and also spurred French scholars to investigate the issues posed by postcolonial theorists and social critics.¹¹ In both cases, concepts often rejected in the past as “Anglo-Saxon” and irrelevant to France have become issues of concern for scholars of France.¹²

As scholars of France have devoted more attention to race and gender, the relationships between the two categories have become more significant. Again, this reflects changes in French politics and culture more generally: both in academe and in contemporary politics writers and activists have explored the intersections of different identities. At times, in the United States, France, and elsewhere, this has taken the form of conflicts between feminism and multiculturalism.¹³ Debates over the role of misogyny in the youth cultures of the *banlieues*, in particular concerning hip-hop, have occasionally pitted representatives of each side against one another.¹⁴ The rise of *Ni Putes Ni Soumises*—a multicultural women’s organization whose leader, Fadela Amara, is secretary of state for urban affairs in the Ministry of Labor—has been accompanied by charges of anti-Islamic hostility and of selling out in general.¹⁵ In contrast, most historians, both those represented in this special issue and those working on these aspects of French history elsewhere, have eschewed polemics in favor of exploring in detail the dialogic relationship between race and gender. In doing so, they bring new insights into the relationship between universalism and difference and into how French peoples have negotiated this relationship over time. In this respect, therefore, the study of intersections between gender and race constitutes an important aspect of French historical study as a whole.

Each of the essays in this issue approaches these themes in decisive and creative ways. Jennifer L. Palmer, for example, explores intersections of race and gender in eighteenth-century La Rochelle not at the urban or national levels but from the perspective of how an intimate,

¹¹ See Charles Forsdick and David Murphy, eds., *Postcolonial Thought in the French-Speaking World* (Liverpool, 2009).

¹² On the question of a Franco-American difference of perspective, see Eric Fassin, “The Purloined Gender: American Feminism in a French Mirror,” *French Historical Studies* 22 (1999): 113–38; and Jean-Philippe Mathy, *French Resistance: The French-American Culture Wars* (Minneapolis, MN, 2000).

¹³ See Leti Volpp, “Feminism versus Multiculturalism,” *Columbia Law Review* 101 (2001): 1181–1218.

¹⁴ André Rauch, “Threatening Virility in the French Banlieues, 1989–2005,” in Forth and Taithe, *French Masculinities*, 220–31.

¹⁵ Fadela Amara with Sylvia Zappi, *Breaking the Silence: French Women’s Voices from the Ghetto*, trans. Helen Harden Chenut (Berkeley, CA, 2006); Samira Bellil, *To Hell and Back: The Life of Samira Bellil*, trans. Lucy R. McNair (Lincoln, NE, 2008); Bronwyn Winter, “Marianne Goes Multicultural: *Ni Putes Ni Soumises* and the Republicanisation of Ethnic Minority Women in France,” *French History and Civilization* 2 (2009): 228–40.

familial sense of belonging is simultaneously an intricate political question. Palmer ponders slavery and family together, considering how the national and the domestic traverse matters of race and gender. From the setting of everyday family life dissected by Palmer, Tessie P. Liu takes us to Saint-Domingue, where her reading of Mary Hassal's novel *Secret History; or, The Horrors of St. Domingo* serves as a counterpoint to depictions of black male violence during the revolutionary period. Liu uses intersectionality to read the many layers within just one so-called race, showing, for example, that whiteness gains many more characteristics and meanings once the term *Creole* is elucidated. Focusing on Hassal's text, Liu argues that domesticity also reflected the background of military conflict, and thus, like Palmer, juxtaposes private households and public conflict.

Margaret Cook Andersen examines how the tensions between race and gender had global ramifications for France. She considers pronatalists who evaluated the implications for the French "race" of why and how populations developed worldwide in the early twentieth century. At that time race was both a color and a nation-based term that encompassed politics, culture, and socioeconomic status, as well as ethnicity. Thus, Andersen argues, policies and ideologies initially developed in and for mainland France shifted to the empire at large, in particular to Madagascar. This intertwining of race and gender shows that as spaces, France and Madagascar (and the same can be argued for other colonies) were in fact merely extensions of one another.

Natalya Vince studies how the female bombers of the Algerian War of Independence upset the roles and stereotypes assigned to women in Algeria. Years of presumptions shaped by Algerian women's race and gender were abruptly undone by their revolutionary acts. Arguing against binary constructions of these categories, and articulating a theme that runs through this issue, Vince explores how Algerian women were far more nuanced and explicit in their intentions and desires than French or Algerian men assumed, and indeed that they appropriated and manipulated the traditional roles assigned to them. Finally, she reminds us that even the extraordinary violence of rape reflects identity politics.

Felix Germain returns us to mainland France for his post-decolonization consideration of the mass recruitment of Antillean women for metropolitan work. Scholarship on colonial migrants has tended to focus on men, but Germain explains why and how Martinican women, consigned to a hypersexualized trope in the Caribbean, were recruited by the French government to be maids in France. This administrative tactic, destined in part to constrain Antillean women to domesticity even while educating them, was hotly contested by Antil-

lean men, who also laid claim to these women's bodies. Joining considerations of sexuality and femininity with those of masculinity and politics, Germain's work asserts that the female body, even more private than the family, was a crucial site for such struggles.

In very different ways the authors in this issue contemplate the advantages of considering intersections between racial and sexual categories in French history. Among other things, this approach invites a creative treatment of sources. From Palmer's use of private correspondence and wills to Liu's analysis of a novel, from Vince's rare compilation of an oral history based on interviews with Algerian women to Germain's juxtaposition of oral, governmental, and published sources, each of these scholars demonstrates that understanding junctures among identity-forming categories also depends on compiling a rich, comprehensive layering of sources.

The present collection also reveals some intriguing trends. The history of France is a diverse field, and inevitably a given theme resonates more with some historians than with others. In compiling this issue, we have tried to represent all periods of French history. Of the essays submitted, however, the overwhelming majority dealt with the period since the Revolution, and almost half with the twentieth century alone. Most striking was the absence of any submissions concerning French history before 1700. Nonetheless, race and gender clearly have their roots in an earlier period that remains less well understood and yet is well worth exploring.¹⁶ Moreover, almost all these considerations of connections between race and gender presuppose a reading of France as an empire. Most of the articles here are set in imperial spaces, although the original call for papers did not make any such distinction, and the articles that focus on mainland France often do so from the perspective of formerly colonized individuals. These articles clearly reinforce the idea that metropolitan France also encompasses numerous private and public colonial spaces. Yet nonimperial topics certainly could have found a place in this issue, especially since race has also been used in French history to define nations, religions, and classes. In addition, the essays in this issue focus chiefly on women and people of color; even though some address masculine and white identity, this is not their central concern. The critical analysis of dominant social identities remains an underdeveloped field in the historiography of France.

This collection thus offers both a starting point and a finger on the pulse of French historical studies. It suggests that race and gender as

¹⁶ Pierre H. Boulle, *Race et esclavage dans la France de l'Ancien Régime* (Paris, 2007); Sue Peabody, "There Are No Slaves in France": *The Political Culture of Race and Slavery in the Ancien Régime* (New York, 1996).

categories are particularly useful for studies of colonialism and immigration, perhaps because both fields focus on obfuscated individuals and groups at the center of both private and public power struggles. Moreover, this issue's articulations of race and gender indicate that both categories reflect how people identify themselves as well as how they are perceived. Race and gender determine rights and belonging, whether social, political, economic, legal, military, or familial. Through these articles we are reminded that on any given day, individuals and groups may bring one category to the fore over another or may not explicitly see themselves as any of these concepts. These are intricate, shifting definitions of identity formation, but it is precisely at their points of intersection that France's history is revealed in all its nuance, tension, and complexity.