Social identities are created by means of both inclusions and exclusions. One must define not only who belongs, but also who does not, in order to construct a sense of group cohesion and solidarity.\(^1\) This essay considers the expulsion of large numbers of colonial laborers from metropolitan France in the period immediately after World War I, and the broader impact this process had on questions of French national identity. The exigencies of the war effort introduced a significant population of subjects from the empire to metropolitan soil, but at the same time raised questions about the continued desirability of their presence there. The relationship of this group to the French working class as a whole underwent rapid and dramatic shifts immediately after the war, in ways that suggested fundamental changes in the nature of working class identity as part of the transition from war to peace. While government policymakers and industrial elites directed these changes, the desires of working people (including the colonials themselves) played a central role in reshaping notions of class. One must therefore consider this process not as something simply imposed from above, but rather one that reflects different relations of power and contrasting conceptions of who was a worker, who was French.\(^2\)

In recent years historians, literary critics, and others have developed the theory of whiteness to explain the role played by racial difference in American society. In a nutshell, whiteness theory contends that being white, or occupying a dominant position in a racially stratified society, is by no means naturally or biologically determined but rather a product of specific historical circumstances. One must therefore strip away the veils that have generally masked white privilege in order to arrive at a more sophisticated analysis of relationships of power. Scholars like David Roediger, Theodore Allen White, Michael Rogin, and Matthew Frye Jacobson have demon-

**ABSTRACT** This article addresses both the specific history and the broader implications of France’s expulsion of colonial labor after World War I. The article also considers questions of race, immigration, and exoticist culture during the interwar years, showing that the French fascination with the Other reflected a determination to confirm a national identity as white. The use and expulsion of colonial labor in effect transferred a central colonial focus, racial identity, to the metropole. / Representations 84 © 2004 The Regents of the University of California. issn 0734-6018 pages 52–72. All rights reserved. Send requests for permission to reprint to Rights and Permissions, University of California Press, Journals Division, 2000 Center St., Ste. 303, Berkeley, CA 94704-1223.
strated how European migrants to the United States in the nineteenth century gained social and financial advantage by successfully challenging their classification as subordinate racial groups and claiming new identities as whites. Crucial to this process was their ability to distinguish themselves from the racial Other, in this case African Americans.³

The theory of whiteness as a racial construct offers much to studies of French colonialism, in particular to analyses of the social and cultural relations between empire and metropole. This essay will argue that the exclusion of colonial labor from France in 1918—1919 was not only interesting in and of itself but also part of a larger process that racialized French working class identity, and that of France as a whole, as white. In attempting to reverse one effect of the Great War by sending these colonials home, this process of expulsion did not restore prewar certainties but rather created a new vision of France, one constructed along subtle but real lines of racial domination and exclusion. The vaunted exoticism and fascination with empire of the interwar years arose not just from the colonial presence in wartime France, but also from its abrupt termination once the war was over. At the same time, the exclusion of colonial workers suggests alternative perspectives on whiteness to those developed by students of race in the United States. In sending imperial subjects back home, the French inadvertently gave racial distinctions a new, and permanent, place in the metropole itself.⁴

France provides a fascinating and instructive context in which to test whiteness theory. Since the Revolution, the nation’s dominant Republican ideology has strongly emphasized the color-blind nature of national identity. The belief in universalism has time and time again stressed that Frenchness was a matter of culture and adherence to Republican values, not a matter of skin color or biology.⁵ As a result, French scholars have generally rejected the idea that racial difference has played much of a role in the nation’s history.⁶ The fact that universalism has often gone hand in hand with imperialism, both in Europe and overseas, has rarely been considered a contradiction of this core belief. Yet the distinction between France and her colonies was not just one of culture, let alone of levels of “civilization,” but a racial one as well. In this racially stratified context one should consider French universalism not just as a noble ideal not always perfectly applied in practice, but as a kind of whiteness, serving to mask the dominance of one group in a polyglot society. This is not to condemn simplistically French universalism as racially coded, however; the historical context is crucial. In order for ideas of French national identity to take on a racialized character two particular developments were essential. One was the conclusive triumph of Republican values and institutions in France, emphasizing the global significance of Revolutionary ideology. The other was the creation of a significant nonwhite presence in France, a presence of both actual individuals and cultural representations of the Other. World War I brought about both developments, leading to an understanding of whiteness as a muted but nonetheless real part of French national identity during the early twentieth century.

National Identity and Shifting Imperial Frontiers 53
Such conclusions depend upon a fundamental reconsideration of the relationship between empire and metropole in general. Traditionally, historians of modern France have seen the nation's colonies as a separate space with a separate history. In contrast, this essay argues that we should regard European France and France overseas as part of one unit, greater France, a unit that is linked not just by politics and military conquest but increasingly by economics and culture. The differences between the two reflected hierarchical structures of power, rather than lack of connection. Moreover, this unity did not arise all at once, but developed and changed over time. Both the importation and the exclusion of colonial workers during World War I thus elaborated a hierarchical unity between France and her colonies based ultimately upon racial distinction and white privilege.

Colonial Frameworks

Racial thinking in France has a long history, as numerous studies reveal, and has been manifested in both the colonies and the French homeland. Nonetheless, in studying the impact of colonial workers on conceptions of whiteness, it makes sense to start with imperial frameworks. Definitions of Frenchness and citizenship have often been racially coded in the nation's history. During the eighteenth century, the fact that French legal traditions embraced the Freedom Principle, according to which slavery was illegal in France, did not prevent the nation from creating a flourishing slave plantation society in the Caribbean and elsewhere. As Sue Peabody has demonstrated, black slaves brought to France by their masters frequently exploited this contradiction to petition successfully for their freedom. The French Revolution and the advent of Republican citizenship only intensified this distinction. By the end of the nineteenth century France had created the world's second largest overseas empire, the only republic in Europe to engage in colonialism. This paradox of the Republican empire, an empire without an emperor, created a contradictory model of citizenship. Proudly based upon universal male citizenship, the France of the Third Republic presided over colonies peopled by subjects devoid of the rights enjoyed by men in the metropole. The fact that most of the citizens were white and most of the subjects black and brown meant that the very nature of Frenchness was conditioned by race.

This distinction between white citizens and nonwhite subjects lay at the base of French identity as white identity. Reports from the colonies frequently referred to subject populations, especially those of Africa and East Asia, in racial terms. At the same time, although less frequently, the French in the colonies were often designated as European or white, rather than simply French. Interestingly, chroniclers of colonial life often applied racial labels to nonelite French groups, such as workers and women. In Algeria, for example, working class settlers were usually termed petits blancs. In particular, Frenchwomen in the colonies were often called
femmes blanches, and colonial officials placed strong emphasis upon racial distinctions between them and native women.\(^{11}\) It was also possible for certain indigenous groups to become effectively white; the term Afrique blanche was used in colonial Algeria to separate the “good” Kabyles off from the “bad” Arab population.\(^{12}\)

As relations in colonial society became more complex, the initial contrast between conqueror and conquered gave way to an understanding of race as a more important marker of the boundaries between colonizer and colonized. The best example of this was the debate over métissage in the colonies. Mixed-race individuals were increasingly viewed in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries as not French or, at best, as a loyal intermediary class that would foster colonial attachment to France. “Monsters and revolutionaries,” they were a source of danger precisely because they threatened the racialized boundary between colonizer and colonized.\(^{13}\) In contradiction to doctrines of universalism, therefore, the rejection of the métis was predicated upon a definition of Frenchness as whiteness, as discussions of the amount of white versus native blood in their bodies demonstrated. In 1931, for example, a colonial official in French West Africa noted that, in spite of the attractions of African mistresses, white men and women in the colony had a racial duty to marry each other.\(^{14}\)

French colonialism therefore not only relied upon racial privilege in the maintenance of the civilizing mission; it also articulated the distinction between the French and the natives in terms of racial identity. A frequent slippage existed in colonialist discourse between “French,” “European,” and “white.” The very existence of a large nonwhite empire at least implied a sense of French identity as whiteness. However, in order for this racialized conception of the nation to assume a more concrete form, it was necessary to bridge the distance between metropole and empire. The import of massive numbers of colonial subjects to France during World War I accomplished this.

**Colonial Labor in Wartime France**

Even before 1914, France had played host to a large working class population of foreign origin, but wartime needs for both industrial and agricultural labor sharply increased the size and significance of this group.\(^{15}\) More than half a million foreigners worked in French factories and fields between 1914 and 1918. The majority of these, like most immigrant workers before the war, came from different European countries, principally Spain, Greece, Portugal, and Italy. Although their greater numbers during and after the war made an impact on observers of working class life, white-skinned foreigners were not so unusual in French workshops and working class neighborhoods.\(^{16}\) However, the war also brought a large population of nonwhite workers, more than three hundred thousand, to France from China,
North Africa, and Indochina. The introduction of a group of laborers who differed so strikingly in language, customs, and skin color from French workers raised the possibility of a fundamental shift in what it meant to be working class in France.17

Like colonial soldiers, workers from the empire and China made a crucial contribution to France’s war effort. However, these contributions often went unrecognized and in general their experiences in the metropole were not happy. Authorities from both the War and Colonial Ministries feared the consequences of introducing a large nonwhite male population into French life.18 In order to control them more effectively the government established the policy of *encadrement*, or regimentation. In contrast to European migrant workers, those from the colonies and China were recruited and brought to France by official means, then housed in work battalions separated by nationality. The War Ministry’s Colonial Labor Organization Service (SOTC) made all decisions as to their places of employment, housing, and food. Unlike white workers, therefore, nonwhites were militarized in conditions that recalled prisoner of war camps, or even slavery. The regimentation system, intended in part to protect these “exotic workers,” in fact proved mostly harmful to their interests. Strict control of wages soon made colonial laborers, in the context of wartime inflation, some of the poorest paid workers in France. Reductions of food rations, often in violation of labor contracts, meant that by the end of the war some individuals were subsisting on as little as three hundred grams of food per day.19 At times implemented to forestall racial conflict, regimentation had the paradoxical effect of promoting it, by underlining the large number and the difference of the colonial subjects. Not surprisingly, letters from these individuals to their families and friends back home often depicted an alienated, demoralized population. As an anonymous writer stationed in Saint-Denis noted in a letter to an acquaintance in Tunis,

I wish to inform you that I have paid for all the sins that I ever committed since the day I was born. You should know that it is only evildoers who come to work in Paris. This is a land that only loves money, one whose inhabitants take us for savages. I assure you that since my arrival in Paris nothing has pleased me. I can’t stand this country: everything is expensive, work is hard, and it freezes all year long.20

Another Tunisian advised his brother to “sell everything you possess and find a replacement [rather than come to France]. Here we are suffering from famine.”21

If many colonial workers did not like France, the reverse was also true. In spite of the fact that the French actively recruited non-Europeans for labor in France, both officials and ordinary men and women took a predominantly negative view of these strangers from a different shore. The official commentaries on nonwhite workers during the war consistently recall those made by French authorities and settlers in the colonies about native labor: the *indigènes* were lazy, unskilled, stupid, and prone to vices of all kinds.22 A major August 1916 report from the War Ministry evaluating workers from various French colonies concluded that the Indochinese
National Identity and Shifting Imperial Frontiers

and Malagasy should only be called upon in the last instance. North Africans were ranked somewhat higher, but the report suggested they were only fit for unskilled tasks and easily corrupted by gens de moralité douteuse. Nor was the attitude of the French man and woman in the street much better. While there are some indications of cordial relations between French and colonial workers, for example, the majority of reports indicate distance and hostility toward the newcomers. Laborers from the empire were criticized for taking French jobs, consorting with French women, breaking strikes, and enabling the government to draft more French workers out of the war plants and send them to the front lines. This hostility arose in part from long-standing xenophobic attitudes toward foreigners in France. However, in general European foreigners encountered a different, markedly better, reception during the war than did colonial subjects.

**Back to the Empire**

With the end of hostilities, France faced a dilemma as far as its continued use of foreign labor was concerned. On the one hand, many government, industry, and union officials decided that the use of foreign labor had been a failure, justified only by extreme wartime shortages of French workers. This attitude was especially pronounced where colonial workers were concerned. Many employers refused to hire colonial workers, claiming that they lacked necessary skills and aptitudes, that language problems were insurmountable, that they were weak and lazy. Now that the war was over, French authorities often felt colonial workers were no longer needed. Some also feared the problem of competition with demobilized French soldiers returning home to look for work, predicting riots if foreign workers were allowed to stay. On the other hand, it was clear to many French policymakers in 1919 that labor shortages would not end with the war. France had lost roughly 1.6 million men during the conflict, and many more returned wounded and unfit for many kinds of work. Moreover, the devastation of much of northern France in particular by occupying German armies meant that more workers would be needed to rebuild the country. One writer estimated that as many as four hundred thousand additional laborers would be required. If the French economy was to recover and prosper in the 1920s, someone would have to replace these lost Frenchmen in the nation’s workplaces. The question was, who?

Immediately after the Armistice thenational government closed France’s borders to further immigration, but within a matter of months it became clear that this was only a temporary expedient to allow time for the reorganization of immigration, not a permanent policy. By the spring of 1919, state authorities had reopened several French industries, including dock work, construction, and mining to foreigners. In March of that year the government established a new organization, the Conférence permanente de la main-d’oeuvre étrangère, to oversee the process of recruit-
ing workers from abroad. Within a year this group had negotiated treaties with the governments of Italy, Poland, and Czechoslovakia to facilitate bringing laborers from those countries to France. By the end of 1924 more than one million new foreign workers entered France as a result of these and other agreements.28

This new cosmopolitanism had its limits, however. Although French labor, industry, and government representatives were willing, if sometimes reluctantly, to countenance large-scale importation of foreign labor from other parts of Europe, they drew the line at colonial workers. During the war these two groups of immigrant workers had been treated very differently, and these differences reached their logical conclusion at the end of the war. Since most officials concerned with foreign labor concurred in a negative view of the potential and achievements of colonial workers, they agreed to repatriate those remaining in France at the Armistice, and not to renew this experiment with “exotic” labor.29

Once decided upon, the expulsion of colonial labor was accomplished with breathtaking speed. Thanks to the regimentation system, rounding up these workers and sending them home was a relatively simple matter. By the end of 1919 less than thirty thousand remained of the three hundred thousand North Africans, Indochinese, and Chinese who had come to work in France during the war.

The most complete statistical portrait available concerns the repatriation of North Africans in 1919. An official total of 132,000 individuals from Morocco, Algeria, and Tunisia came to work in France during the war. In August 1918 some 69,000 remained in the country, 66,000 by December. Thereafter their numbers began to drop precipitously. By May 1919 nearly half of that number had been sent back across the Mediterranean. A year after the Armistice only 13,910 North Africans still lived in France, and a report on Christmas Day 1919 recorded less than 7,000.30 This number was not much greater than the figure for colonial inhabitants on the eve of the war. By 1921 the population of North Africans seems to have increased somewhat, but compared to wartime figures the colonial presence in France remained very small. The 1921 census gives an indication of numbers by national group, listing 13,000 Chinese; 6,500 Algerians; 4,000 Moroccans; 1,500 Tunisians; 175 Indochinese; and only 37 Malagasy resident in France during that year.31

In part, French authorities justified this massive repatriation of colonial workers by arguing that their experience in France had been an unhappy one and that most were only too glad to return home.32 Given the harsh and bewildering conditions experienced by laborers from the French Empire and China during the war, it is hard to argue with this logic; certainly many of the letters they wrote home indicate a willingness to leave France as soon as possible.33 Yet the French were unwilling to permit colonial workers to decide for themselves, taking steps to expel them whether they wanted to go or not. This was especially true of North Africans. More than the Asians or Malagasy, they had created a certain, tiny presence in prewar
France and had established small communities in some French cities by the end of the war, notably Paris and Marseilles. They were therefore more likely to want to stay in France, and more able to do so, once the war ended.

More to the point, French authorities feared the consequences of allowing a large nonwhite population to develop a permanent presence in the metropole. The strong antagonism from much of the French people to colonial labor during the war could not be ignored. Colonial interests had also frequently opposed sending workers from the empire to France, fearing both labor shortages that might increase local wages, and the corrupting influences of unions, socialism, democracy, and French women on the natives. Above all, administrators argued that France was simply not ready to become a multiracial nation. A Labor Ministry article early in 1920 used this as a justification for recruiting white immigrant labor, arguing that “[we need] to call upon labor of European origin, in preference to colonial or exotic labor, because of the social and ethnic difficulties which could arise from the presence upon French soil of ethnographic elements too clearly distinct from the rest of the population.” Implicit in this reasoning was the belief that France must regain its racial homogeneity violated by the war; moreover, that European foreigners, instead of threatening this homogeneity as in the prewar era, could now reinforce it.

Paris occupied a central position in the expulsion of colonial labor in 1918 and 1919. While most of these workers found themselves stationed elsewhere during the war, French officials feared that once the conflict ended, in the confusion surrounding repatriation many would gravitate to the French capital and disappear into its large, polyglot, and anonymous population. Some also worried that because of the high wages offered by the city’s industries and the fact that many soldiers were demobilized there, a large population of foreign workers in Paris would be particularly likely to provoke clashes with French laborers returning from the war in search of jobs. Consequently, during 1919 and 1920 Parisian police systematically raided the city’s Arab neighborhoods in search of illegal immigrants, summarily deporting all those who fell into their nets. While a certain North African population remained in Paris, much of it existed on a clandestine basis in isolation from French working people in the city.

The expulsions of the immediate postwar period created an enduring legacy for the working class experience, in Paris and in France as a whole, during the 1920s and 1930s. Although during the interwar years France became one of the world’s leading recipients of foreigners, almost all of these came from other parts of Europe, notably Poland and Italy. More than one million European aliens lived in France according to the census of 1931. On the other hand, few nonwhite laborers found much of a reception there during these years. This was especially noteworthy in Paris. The *Annuaire Statistique de la ville de Paris* counted 120,000 Italians; 98,000 Belgians; and 33,000 Poles residing in the Department of the Seine at the end of
The French government did not in fact terminate all importation of labor from outside Europe during the interwar years. Algerians in particular were allowed to come to France to work. They came in under the auspices of the French Labor Ministry, which in 1919 established a center in Marseilles to organize their recruitment and distribution throughout the country. In effect, the Algerians constituted the exception that proved the rule about the exclusion of nonwhite labor from France after World War I. As during the war, French employers and government officials generally regarded Algerians as the least desirable workers, to be hired only when no French or European laborers could be found. They were also, as during the war, kept segregated from other workers. Moreover, most Algerians came to France on a very temporary basis; although close to half a million entered the country during the twenties, for several years more returned home than arrived. Their presence was a transitory phenomenon that did little to alter the character of French working class life.

This exclusion of nonwhite workers took place with the full accord and participation of the major French unions. Indeed, some of their members wished to go further and bar virtually all foreign workers from French soil. Fear of postwar unemployment was especially sharp in early 1919 and prompted many union attacks on the use of immigrant labor. The issue of foreign labor also played a small role in the burgeoning struggle between the centrist majority and the antiwar radical minority in the Confédération Générale du Travail (CGT), with the latter claiming that one of the evils of war (and by extension, of the majority’s support of the national war effort) had been the increased use of foreign workers. The important point here is simply that both sides wanted to limit the number of foreign workers in France. By the end of the year, however, national CGT leaders had largely conceded that, in the face of the need for economic reconstruction, France would have to continue to bring in foreigners for the foreseeable future. Yet all factions—labor, capital, and government—were able to agree that this should not include non-Europeans. Therefore, the fact that during the 1920s France imported large numbers of Europeans, but few from outside the continent to work in its fields and factories, reflected both a compromise between organized French labor, industry, and the government and a strikingly rare unanimity of opinion among all three parties after the war.

The wartime importation and postwar exclusion of colonial workers from France, combined with the recruitment of European immigrant labor in unprecedented numbers, introduced a new type of stratification into French society. The presence of colonial workers during the war established a new, racially distinct stratum of the working class, one that facilitated a new level of integration of white foreigners into the world of French labor. The contrast between European and non-European was sharpened by the postwar remaking of the working class, which ex-
cluded one group precisely to justify including the other. This process of exclusion created a new vision of France, one in which foreigners were welcome as long as they had white skin.

Race, Labor, and Culture in Interwar France

During the interwar years political and business leaders and makers of public opinion in France continued to warn against the use of nonwhite labor in France, and to call instead for importing European foreigners. As Elisa Camiscioli has shown, the powerful pronatalist movement strongly encouraged immigration to repeople and revitalize the anemic French race, but it only welcomed certain kinds of immigrants. Widely employing racialized terminology, pronatalist writers praised the qualities of European immigrants while harshly criticizing the colonial workers of the war years. As a 1936 study sponsored by pronatalist organizations concluded, “[The] introduction or maintenance of North African workers on our metropolitan territory, and of all other workers who do not belong to the white race, or who have a mentality different from our own, appears detrimental to both the physical and moral health of our race.”

While the exclusion of colonial labor did underscore a new view of French labor as white, it did not create the same kind of whiteness that existed in the United States. The American model required the presence of a racial Other situated in opposition to white identity, and the postwar deportation of colonial workers to an important extent deprived France of such a group. As a result, differentiation between the French and white foreigners resurfaced during the interwar years, and race remained a muted theme in French working class discourse. Yet the colonial workers did not disappear without a trace, and the concept of a racial Other retained some salience for French life after 1919. This was especially true because the departure of nonwhite labor occurred at the same time that awareness of the empire as a whole increased in France. The remainder of this essay will consider the peculiarities of whiteness in France between the wars, the ways in which white racial identity developed in a country without a significant nonwhite population.

The exclusion of colonial workers after the war to a certain extent restored prewar ethnic tensions, so that racism failed to supersede xenophobia completely in the 1920s and 1930s. France did not see the kind of violence against Italians and other European immigrants that had characterized the belle époque, and working class organizations generally adopted a neutral, if not friendly, stance toward foreign workers. Yet hostility to foreigners not only persisted but became more explicit during the depression years of the 1930s. Right wing commentators on working class life, notably Jacques Valdour, gave immigrants an important place in their essays, portraying the polyglot ghettos of Belleville and Ménilmontant in lurid, hos-
tile tones. The most extreme example of this was the anti-Semitism directed against Jewish immigrants from Eastern Europe in the 1930s. As Eugen Weber has shown, much of this bigotry was rooted in traditions of popular xenophobia, traditions that gained new life in the era of depression and fascism. In general, differences of language, custom, and national origin remained important divisions in French working class life between the wars.

The case of the Algerians in interwar France confirms this. Algerians were firmly relegated to the worst-paid and least desirable jobs in France, and they received little support from working class organizations, except the Communists, when they infrequently tried to improve their conditions by going on strike. Yet in sharp contrast to the period after 1960, the interwar period does not seem to have been one in which Algerians were subjected to significant popular racial prejudice. In particular, some students of Algerian labor in France between the wars have argued that the French tended to view Algerians more favorably than they did white immigrants, because of the Algerians’ relatively small numbers and their inability to compete with the more highly skilled local workers. As Norbert Gomar pointed out in 1931:

French workers rarely complain about the Kabyles. . . . they prefer to compete with Algerians rather than [European] foreigners. The latter often combine low wage demands with equivalent levels of skill, at least in certain professions. Algerian labor, in contrast, complements French labor rather than competing with it. If the Algerians’ standard of living are very low, their low skill levels prevent them from supplanting French workers.

The ultimate example of this prevalence of xenophobia over racism was the tendency of René Coty’s fascist street thug organization, Solidarité française, to hire unemployed Algerians in its battle against the threat posed by Jews and other foreigners to the health of the French nation. As the Algerian example demonstrates, by excluding most nonwhite workers the French to a very important degree rendered the very concept of racial distinction invisible during the 1920s and 1930s.

Yet invisible does not mean nonexistent, and even if most colonials left France at the end of the Great War, their sojourn in the metropole had created a cultural presence that in significant ways survived their physical absence. For one thing, perceptions of European foreigners seemed to take on a more racialized character, especially during the 1930s. Whiteness is of course a slippery phenomenon, and those considered white in one context can serve as racial Others in another. In particular, the virulent hostility directed against foreign Jews carried considerable racial overtones. As the work of Arthur Gobineau and Eduard Drumont makes clear, racialized anti-Semitism existed in France long before the 1930s. Yet the Depression witnessed not just an explosion of such bigotry but also an increased insistence that the Jews were a foreign body, distinct and unassimilable. The discursive focus upon Jewish immigrants linked anti-Semitism not just with xenophobia but
also with the racial antagonism that had led to the expulsion of colonial workers. Scholars have debated the relationship between anti-Semitism and xenophobia in the 1930s, differing on the extent to which the former arose out of the latter.\(^5\) I stress the racialized nature of this hostility, arguing that in its perception of the Jew as a working class immigrant who threatened the racial purity of the nation, it had a lot in common with the opposition to colonial labor. Ultimately foreign Jews would experience their own, far more tragic, expulsion from France during the 1940s. The experience of colonial labor after World War I provided another template for France’s version of the Final Solution, whose inspiration may have been not just *outre-Rhin* but *outre-mer* as well.

The creation of a new racialized sense of national identity also altered relations between France and the empire. Many historians have written about the vogue for empire and exoticism that characterized French culture between the wars.\(^5\) From the tumultuous reception accorded the *Revue nègre* in 1925 to the unprecedented success of the 1931 Colonial Exposition in Paris, exotic cultures seemed all the rage among not only the intelligentsia but appreciable segments of the broader public as well.\(^5\) The popularity of exoticism and primitivism has often been related to the presence of peoples of color from the empire and other parts of the world in France during the war: the presence of African soldiers helped create a new, more favorable set of stereotypes concerning that continent, and the French interest in jazz dates back to concerts performed by black American musicians in 1918.\(^5\) Yet the postwar exclusion of nonwhites also contributed to the popularity of their cultures in the interwar years. It is easier to romanticize something that is safely distant than something that exists in close humdrum reality.\(^5\) During the war the French viewed colonial soldiers much more favorably than they did colonial workers, not only because they viewed the latter as economic and sexual competitors, but also because the former were much less likely to stay on once the war was over.\(^5\) The repatriation of colonials of both groups reestablished the empire as something comfortably far away and intriguingly exotic, suggesting continuities with prewar views of *la France outre-mer*. But the fact that colonial workers, unlike their brethren in uniform, were excluded not because they were not needed but because they were not white indicates the contextual nature of this distancing process, one based in cultural desires, not economic necessities.

In short, French exoticist fantasies about the colonies between the wars paralleled the exclusion of real-life colonial subjects from France. Students of French and European culture in this era have often suggested that primitivism had much more to do with Europe than with those peoples it supposedly embraced. In particular, the fascination with the exotic, of which the vogue for African sculpture is the most famous example, represented a critique and a rejection of nineteenth-century European positivist civilization. Yet primitivism also contributed to the idea of whiteness in France by underlining the difference between whites and others, between the
metropole and the empire. The 1931 Colonial exposition is a case in point. Although the various exhibits from the French Empire ostensibly depicted the particular history and culture of each colony, the essential dividing line at the Exposition was between the overwhelmingly white French spectators and the native objects of fascination. French visitors to the fair could easily come away with not only a glimpse of exotic new worlds but also a reaffirmed belief in the superiority of their own nation.59

Another example is the 1935 film *Princess Tam Tam*, in which Josephine Baker portrays a false Tunisian princess in Paris. A classic celebration of primitivism, so much so that the final image depicted a donkey eating a book entitled *Civilization*, *Princess Tam Tam* also made it clear that racial differences were ultimately immutable. In a climactic scene a mysterious Indian maharajah (played by a French actor) urges Baker to return to her own country as quickly as possible, explaining that “my house has two kinds of windows. Those facing the East, and those facing the West.” This piece of wisdom leads Baker back to Tunisia, where she lives the rest of her life in happy savagery. The prospect of a white man in blackface telling a black woman she had no place in Europe was a powerful metaphor for the combination of cultural exoticism and racial exclusion in interwar France.60 As Elizabeth Ezra has recently argued, “Although the interwar period in France is often identified with a love of the exotic (the Jazz Age) and assimilation rhetoric, time and again its cultural representations emphasized (or invented) difference, denying the very possibility of assimilation.”61

These examples raise the question of whiteness in French popular culture as a whole. A variety of cultural products presented colonial themes to French audiences between the wars, in the process conveying messages of racial differentiation and white identity. During the late 1920s and 1930s French filmmakers produced several films about the life of the Foreign Legion in North Africa. Films such as *Le Grand Jeu* (1934) and *La Bandera* (1935) featured French heroes, from both elite and working class backgrounds, finding redemption and meaning in the struggle against usually faceless natives. The fact that the legion itself attracted mostly white foreigners from Europe and America, who became French by fighting against non-whites, underscored the message that legionnaires were defending white civilization against the colonized Other.62 Advertising imagery constituted another important conveyor of racial identity. Usually marketing colonial products like coffee, chocolate, tobacco, and soap, these images reached a broad and diverse consumer market. Scholars have noted the ways in which both advertising posters and trademark images portrayed Arabs, blacks, and Asians in a derogatory style. Yet they often also contrasted nonwhite and white imagery, emphasizing the civilized nature of the latter at the expense of the former. This was especially true of advertisements featuring blacks, the most extreme being those that showed blacks literally washing themselves white. Such images in effect marketed whiteness as the ultimate desire and achievement of the enlightened French consumer.63
The racialization of French popular culture had important implications for working class life. While the political Left continued to embrace a certain proletarian internationalism (which did not always extend to the colonies), at the same time French workers often saw themselves as culturally beleaguered by a new cosmopolitanism. Popular writers and singers bewailed the loss of traditional French culture, for example, in the old neighborhood of Montmartre, where traditional French artists were being replaced by black jazz bands and Russian balalaika orchestras. The bitter rivalry between Josephine Baker and Mistinguett replicated the distinction between international exoticism and popular French culture in the world of the Paris music hall. At the same time, colonialist advertising figured significantly in marketing aimed at working class consumers. Most of the products advertised were aimed at a mass market; luxury products like automobiles rarely featured colonial images. Working class xenophobia has a long history in France, but during the interwar years the increased presence of colonial exoticism tended to redefine working class culture in racial terms.

In parallel fashion, the forces that shaped France as a white space also constituted the empire as Other. Much has been written by colonial historians about the contrast between the policies of assimilation and association. Association, which most scholars see as in the ascendant during the interwar years, rejected the idea that the natives could become French and instead emphasized the preservation of autochthonous cultures. But the doctrine of association, and its primacy after World War I, reflected a double distinction between metropole and empire; the natives could not become French precisely because France was defined as white. As Jules Harmand argued in 1910: “The policy of association . . . reserves with unshakable firmness all rights of domination and takes into account all its exigencies. It does not at all attempt to prepare and achieve an equality forever impossible, but rather it attempts to establish a certain equivalence or compensation of reciprocal services” (emphasis added). Association rested upon a conception of native cultures as autonomous, unchanging, and not French. In order to make sense, it had to essentialize Frenchness as something the colonial peoples were not, and this essentialization went hand in hand with the construction of a racialized concept of French identity.

During the 1920s and 1930s in particular the concept of association was linked with the policy of mise en valeur, or the economic development/exploitation of the colonies. This policy had close connections to the history of colonial labor in the metropole during the war. The wartime experience reinforced the long-held colonial practice of exploiting indigenous labor, demonstrating that it could benefit not only the empire but France as well. This belief that the colonies should turn a profit for France was a key theme of Albert Sarraut’s 1922 La mise en valeur des colonies françaises, and the projects inspired by this new policy, such as the construction of the Brazzaville-Atlantic railway in French Equatorial Africa, depended heavily upon abundant native labor resources. The repatriation of colonial workers from the
metropole thus paralleled a new emphasis on labor in the empire itself. This parallel sharpened the racial contrast between labor systems in France and its colonies. By the interwar years large numbers of colonial subjects had been drawn or forced into wage labor systems, consequently reducing structural differences between the economies of the French core and its periphery. 71

This perspective aligns the postwar expulsion of colonial labor with that of another group excluded from the workforce: French women. During the war armaments factories employed hundreds of thousands of women, introducing feminine labor to the previously masculine preserve of heavy industry. Within a year after the Armistice, virtually all these women lost their jobs as part of the conversion to a peacetime economy. 72 At first glance, the parallel seems limited; French women did remain in France, after all, and women workers were not forced back into the home so much as redeployed into different job sectors, especially clerical and retail. Yet if one takes seriously the idea of a unified greater France, this difference largely disappears. Like women, colonial labor shifted from one sector of the French economy to another, so that the end of their use in European France paralleled their increased exploitation in the colonies. More than ever before, the metropole and the empire represented two halves of a racially polarized labor system, divided by the French insistence on the whiteness of French labor, and the whiteness of France in general.

In conclusion, one would be mistaken to regard France’s use of nonwhite labor during World War I as a temporary phenomenon, ending after the war and only renewed following 1945. Like other aspects of the impact of the Great War on French society, attempts to turn back the clock in the interwar years were futile; the very act of trying to restore the past merely underscored the changes that had taken place. The exclusion of colonial labor after 1919 introduced a new level of debate about labor, race, and national identity in France. Even when the conclusions resembled those reached before 1914, as was to a certain extent the case with European foreigners, the nature of the debate itself had shifted permanently. By expelling people from the empire and China, France established racial whiteness as a key component of its national identity, one to which outsiders had to measure up in order to be accepted as French. The travailleurs exotiques may have been physically removed from French soil after 1919, but their absence constituted a white space in the society and culture of interwar France.

At the same time, the French experience with the exclusion of colonial labor suggests new perspectives on whiteness. It emphasizes the need for rethinking the traditional separation between metropole and colonies, seeing the two as part of one racially stratified polity rather than as distinct entities. It shows that the historical construction of whiteness is a far more complex process than the rather teleological narrative of much Americanist literature on the subject. Finally, it suggests that a strongly color-blind ideology like French universalism can at times also serve as
an incubator for white identity. Ultimately, racial thinking arises within national contexts in the modern period. Whiteness has become a part of the identity of France in the twentieth century, but in ways that remain distinctively French.

Notes

Earlier versions of this paper were presented to the national meeting of the Society for French Colonial History, New Orleans, and the Stanford Reading Group in French Studies. For their comments and helpful suggestions I would like to thank Janet R. Horne, Sue Peabody, Douglas Porch, Mary Louise Roberts, Aron Rodrigue, Ted Margadant, Jo Burr Margadant, Naomi Andrews, Hee Ko, Sarah Sussman, Michael Vann, Panivong Norindr, and Erica Peters.


2. Much of the historiography of French labor in this period has tended to treat the working class as a monolith. For a critique of this practice, see Laura Downs, “Women’s Strikes and the Politics of Popular Egalitarianism in France, 1916–18,” in Lenard Berlanstein, ed., Rethinking Labor History (Urbana, Ill., 1993).


7. On the idea of imperial France as one polity uniting colonies and metropole, see Gary Wilder, The French Imperial Nation-State: Colonial Humanism, Negritude, and Interwar Political Rationality (Chicago, forthcoming).


25. On this point see especially the numerous complaints about Chinese workers contained in AN, series F 14 11331.
26. As Léon Jouhaux put it in August 1917, “If the workers return from the front to find themselves faced with foreign workers, who, because there are no guarantees against their exploitation, may cause wage decreases, the discontent will be widespread and violent”; cited in Cross, Immigrant Workers, 49.
27. Ibid., 54.
29. See the December 1919 letter warning against trying to use colonial labor on the docks of Le Havre; AN, series F 14 11332, letter of 5 December 1919.
30. SH, carton 6 N 270, reports of June 1918–December 1919.
32. AN, series F 14 11331, reports of 11 December 1918 and 24 April 1919.
33. Thanks to the diligence of wartime censors in France, historians have at their disposal thousands of letters written by foreign workers during the war. See in particular Société historique de l’armée de terre (SHAT) 7 N 1001, 6 N 149, 7 N 435, 5 N 134, 7 N 144, 7 N 997.
35. SH, 7 N 993, report of 15 May 1916; SH, 7 N 435, telegram of 8 August 1915; Thobie, Histoire, 76–79.
37. See the official reports contained in Archives de la Préfecture de Police (APP), 67; AN, series F 22 2565, report of 8 March 1919.
38. Cross, Immigrant Workers, 123.
42. On this point see Mireille Favre, “Un milieu porteur de modernisation: travailleurs et tiraillleurs vietnamiens en France pendant la première guerre mondiale” (thèse pour diplôme d’archiviste-paléographe, École nationale des Chartes, 1986), 370–82.
43. The factional struggles within the CGT and the French Left at this time also prevented labor from exercising much influence over the question of immigrant workers; Cross, Immigrant Workers, 46–55.

National Identity and Shifting Imperial Frontiers 69
This unity of opinion is all the more striking given the sharp conflicts between capital and labor in the postwar years. See Annie Kriegel, Aux origines du communisme français, 1914–1920, 2 vols. (Paris, 1964); Robert Wohl, French Communism in the Making, 1914–1924 (Stanford, 1966).


Jacques Valdour, Ateliers et taudis de la banlieue de Paris (Paris, 1923); Jacques Valdour, De la Popinqu’a Ménilmouch (Paris, 1924).


49. There were, of course, exceptions to this rule. Jacques Valdour notes widespread anti-Algerian sentiment among the French workers of Paris’s thirteenth arrondissement in his Ouvriers parisiens d’après-guerre (Paris, 1921).


52. Vicki Caron, Uneasy Asylum: France and the Jewish Refugee Crisis, 1933–1942 (Stanford, 1999); Pierre Birnbaum, La France aux français: histoire des haines nationalistes (Paris, 1993); Ralph Schor, L’Antisémitisme en France pendant les années trente (Brussels, 1992); Paul Kingston, Anti-Semitism in France During the 1930s (Hull, U.K., 1983).

For a good overview of this debate, see Vicki Caron, “The Antisemitic Revival in France in the 1930s: The Socioeconomic Dimension Reconsidered,” Journal of Modern History 70 (March 1998).

53. For a good overview of this debate, see Vicki Caron, “The Antisemitic Revival in France in the 1930s: The Socioeconomic Dimension Reconsidered,” Journal of Modern History 70 (March 1998).


This point has often been made by students of representations of rural life. See Eugen

58. Stovall, "Color Line."

59. As Herman Lebovics put it, “To present ancient Asian temples and primitive African huts cheek by jowl with displays of closely machined electric turbine blades is to school the viewer in a dialectic of ancient stability and modern dynamism”; Lebovics, True France, 86. The point is that the exposition defined France every bit as much as it defined the colonies.

60. Princess Tam Tam, director Edmond T. Greville, 1935. Compare this with the discussions of blackface performance and white working class identity in Roediger, Wages, and Rogin, Blackface.


64. Berliner, Ambivalent Desire, 155.


69. This idea of the metropole defining itself against the empire is a staple theme of the new colonial studies. See in particular the work of Edward Said: Orientalism (New York, 1978); and Culture and Imperialism (New York, 1993). See also Ann L. Stoler, Race and the Education of Desire: Foucault’s History of Sexuality and the Colonial Order of Things (Durham, N.C., 1995).


72. James F. McMillan, Housewife or Harlot: The Place of Women in French Society, 1870–1940