

# THE EMERGENCE OF A BLACK FRANCE, 1985–2015: HISTORY, RACE AND IDENTITY

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On the morning of 8 January 2015, less than twenty-four hours after the violent attack on the offices of the satirical magazine *Charlie Hebdo* by the brothers, Said and Chérif Kouachi, an unnamed black gunman shot dead a policewoman in the Parisian suburb of Montrouge. The murderer, later identified as Amedy Coulibaly, would the very next day launch an anti-Semitic attack on the *Hyper Cacher* supermarket at the Porte de Vincennes killing four people. Coulibaly was born in France to parents from Mali, and grew up on the notorious housing estate, La Grande-Borne, in Grigny, south of Paris.<sup>1</sup> Like so many French *cités*, La Grande-Borne was imagined by its planners in the 1960s as a social utopia, the ideal dormitory town; its sinuous, colourful buildings would serve as the antithesis of grey postwar brutalist architecture. Instead, the *cité*, which houses 11,000 people (including a large black population), has become synonymous with poverty, drug dealing, arms trafficking, youth criminality and attacks on police, as well as arson attacks on public buildings. Unemployment amongst the inhabitants of La Grande-Borne is estimated to reach the dizzying heights of over 40%: it has become the classic example of the state housing scheme as social dustbin.

By chance, one of the shop assistants in *Hyper Cacher* on that fateful day was Lassana Bathily, a 24-year-old Muslim immigrant from Mali, who risked his own life to save some of the shop's customers, hiding them in a fridge in the basement. In a rather telling irony, the police initially thought that Bathily was one of Coulibaly's conspirators and, having finally escaped the hostage situation, the unfortunate shop

assistant spent his first 90 minutes of freedom hand-cuffed in police custody. However, as the siege ended, relieved customers told police and reporters of Bathily's heroism and he soon found himself lauded by the French public and a political elite desperate to draw some positives from the most harrowing week in recent French history. An online petition launched two days after the supermarket attack by the *Conseil Représentatif des Associations Noires* (CRAN) had, within a week, received over 300,000 signatures supporting its request that the President should grant Bathily French citizenship and award him the *Légion d'honneur*.<sup>2</sup> On 20 January, he was duly awarded French nationality in a public ceremony at the Ministry for the Interior. The ceremony was conducted by the Prime Minister, Manuel Valls, and the Interior Minister, Bernard Cazeneuve, while several other government ministers were in the audience, seated alongside representatives of the major religions and, somewhat ironically, representatives of the associations that had fought to help Bathily remain in France when threatened with expulsion several years previously.

Bathily's story reflects the complexity of sub-Saharan African immigration to France: at the age of 15, he left his mother in Mali to live with his father who had long been based in Paris; at the end of his studies, he was faced with an 'obligation de quitter le territoire' but with the aid of some of his former teachers, part of the *Réseau Éducation sans frontières*, he was able to gain a *titre de séjour* that had been renewed annually until the events of 9 January 2015. Valls and Cazeneuve both lauded the young man's bravery, and the Interior Minister attempted, somewhat implausibly, to divorce his courageous acts from the decision to grant him citizenship. As *Le Monde*'s reporter noted:

Faut-il croire le ministre de l'intérieur lorsqu'il lui lance un « vous auriez été naturalisé, car la citoyenneté française n'est pas réservée aux braves » ? Les

données chiffrées ne plaident pas vraiment pour les paroles ministérielles, puisque seuls 57 610 personnes ont obtenu la nationalité française par décret en 2014.<sup>3</sup>

The journalist goes on to note, however, that the trend in recent years has been towards greater numbers of immigrants being granted French nationality. Indeed, Cazeneuve declared that he had ‘relancé le processus de naturalisation, car c’est une chance pour notre pays’ and went on to reminisce about his father, ‘instituteur de la République’, who had brought children of different religions together in the classroom to forge them into French citizens, while Valls reminded the audience of his own itinerary, as the Spanish-born son of immigrants to France. The moral of these stories was self-evident: the Republican model of integration was still very much operative.

What do the starkly contrasting stories of these two young men, Amedy Coulibaly and Lassana Bathily, tell us about the position of black people in contemporary France? In many ways, Coulibaly is the type of nightmare figure who not only fuels the perpetually outraged and anxious imagination of *Le Figaro* and other right-wing sources but is also at the heart of a more generalized fear of the non-white, Muslim other who menaces an idealized secular notion of the Republic. Bathily’s case offers an obvious counterbalance to such fears. As Valls’s words had stressed, yesterday’s *sans-papiers* could be today’s Republican hero: the black African Muslim immigrant can serve the Republic and become French.

This article aims to demonstrate that this duality in the perception of black people in France has a long history but it has taken on new forms and gained a new urgency over the past thirty years. The notion of a ‘France arabe’ has long had political and cultural currency – and was clearly at the heart of *Le Figaro magazine*’s alarmist front cover back in 1985<sup>4</sup> – but that of ‘la France noire’ is still relatively new.

The article will thus explore why 'Black France' has now become a common popular and critical term. In addition, it will examine some of the main arguments that have come to underpin discussion of 'black' questions in France, exploring the parameters of the 'black debate' over the past decade or so and the ways in which it has been intertwined with the wider 'postcolonial debate'. Finally, the article will examine a handful of key figures who might be seen to represent different facets of this emerging 'France noire'.

### **The history of 'Black France': friends and enemies**

At the end of the First World War, perhaps the best-known and most respected black man in France was Blaise Diagne, the Senegalese representative in the *Chambre des députés*. The first black African to be elected to this role, he was initially feared by the colonial administration as a threat to French authority in the colonies: however, although he pushed for greater rights for the small number of Senegalese who enjoyed the status of French *citoyens* as inhabitants of the *quatre communes*, Diagne was no anti-colonial revolutionary. He soon proved himself a loyal servant of France, not least when, in January 1918, he accepted an invitation from Clemenceau, desperate for the extra troops that might finally bring the war to a successful conclusion while limiting the loss of further French lives, to lead a recruitment tour in French West Africa.

If the First World War served as a crucible in which the likes of Diagne and thousands of African recruits could prove their loyalty to France, then the conflict also sowed the seeds of a radical anti-colonialism that would eventually gain momentum in the aftermath of the second world conflict. In the mid-1920s, the figurehead of black anti-colonial thought and activism was Lamine Senghor, a former

*tirailleur sénégalais*, who had received the *croix de guerre* for his heroism during the war. Senghor first emerged as an activist within the *Union intercoloniale*, an organization created by the French Communist Party to group together anti-colonial activists from across the empire. Then, in 1926, he created France's first genuinely popular black movement, the *Comité de Défense de la Race Nègre* (CDRN), drawn largely from the small working-class black communities in the ports and major towns across the country. It was in his capacity as President of the CDRN that he was invited to deliver a speech at the inaugural congress of the League against Imperialism in Brussels in February 1927.<sup>5</sup> For the French anti-communist right, Lamine Senghor became living proof that the Soviet Union would seek to bring down France and its empire through an alliance with its colonial subjects.<sup>6</sup>

It is important not to over-simplify the parallels between the interwar years and the present: one can be loyal to France without believing in the values of a long defunct empire, while the *bête noire* of communism, which saw black and white activists work together, has today been replaced by a perceived non-white Islamic fundamentalist threat. However, one does not need to agree entirely with the authors of a recent volume who declare that *Les Années 30 sont de retour* to identify similar patterns at work today to those that operated in the interwar period through which black subjects are deemed either loyal or hostile to the Republic.<sup>7</sup> Within this binary logic, Blaise Diagne can be shown to have proved his loyalty in France's hour of need while Lamine Senghor turned on the nation he had served, acting on behalf of a foreign power. As is so often the case with minority groups, any form of dissent or opposition to the status quo can be mobilized as grounds to undermine the individual's very right to be considered French.

Black people in France do not need to be an Amedy Coulibaly to have their loyalty to France questioned. For instance, in the early stages of her career, the French novelist Marie NDiaye always insisted that she was simply a writer, not a black writer: her Senegalese father had played no real role in her life and she had grown up embedded in white metropolitan French culture. In an August 2009 interview given by NDiaye to *Les Inrockuptibles*, she criticised the Sarkozy government's attempts to impose a restricted notion of French identity through its much-derided 'grand débat sur l'identité nationale' (she declared the France promoted by Sarkozy to be 'monstrueuse'). When NDiaye was awarded the Prix Goncourt in November 2009, the *Inrockuptibles* interview was unearthed and the UMP deputy for Seine-Saint-Denis, Éric Raoult declared that 'Les prises de position de Marie Ndiaye sont inacceptables. [...] Une personnalité qui défend les couleurs littéraires de la France se doit de faire preuve d'un certain respect à l'égard de nos institutions.'<sup>8</sup> The warning could not have been clearer: NDiaye's Frenchness was deemed to be dependent on an uncritical acceptance of a perceived status quo.

### **The rise of black studies à la française**

Over the past five or six years, a wide range of academic and more popular texts, as well as wider cultural artefacts – from exhibitions to television series to documentary films – have sought to position what is now commonly termed 'La France noire' within a wider historical framework that extends beyond the wave of mass migration that began during the *trente glorieuses*. The history of black culture in France prior to the Second World War had long been dominated by accounts of jazz, Josephine Baker and the *vogue nègre* of the 1920s or, for those more interested in literature, the story of Aimé Césaire, Léon Damas, Léopold Senghor and the birth of Negritude in the

1930s. Many such accounts have sought, with some justification, to celebrate France's famed racial tolerance that was so clearly illustrated during the First World War when the coded racial hierarchies at work in the colonial Republic came face to face with the brutal segregationist mentality of the US army.

Now, though, a wider and more complex history has emerged. For instance, the *beau-livre*, *La France Noire* (2011), edited by Pascal Blanchard, a leading figure in the ACHAC collective of scholars, bore the sub-title 'trois siècles de présences', promoting a historical engagement that encompasses slavery and colonialism, as well as more recent patterns of migration.<sup>9</sup> A few months later, a documentary film, *Noirs de France* (2012), co-directed by Blanchard (with Juan Gelas) was screened to audiences over three weeks on France 5: the film acted as a tele-visual companion to *La France noire* and its sub-title, 'de 1889 à nos jours: une histoire de France', declared a similar (if slightly less ambitious) desire to give greater depth to black French history.<sup>10</sup> A few years earlier, Pap Ndiaye's *La Condition noire* (2008), a text primarily devoted to the contemporary situation of black people in France, dedicated a chapter to exploring 'une histoire des populations noires de France'.<sup>11</sup> One of the most high profile historical interventions was provided by the former footballer and now activist Lilian Thuram (who will be examined in greater detail below). As its sub-title suggests, his best-selling book *Mes étoiles noires: de Lucy à Barack Obama*, outlined a popular black history that extended across the centuries (and, indeed, millennia in the case of the prehistoric figure known as Lucy) and was transnational in reach.<sup>12</sup> Thuram has become a close collaborator with Blanchard and the ACHAC collective, working to promote a broad anti-racist agenda, not least through a major exhibition at the Musée du Quai Branly in late 2011–early 2012 – *Exhibitions:*

*L’Invention du sauvage* – exploring the history of ‘human zoos’ in France and elsewhere in the Western world.<sup>13</sup>

The centenary of the First World War has witnessed a surge of both official and popular initiatives to mark the contribution of colonial, and in particular black, troops to the French cause in that conflict. To cite just a few examples, an exhibition on ‘les tirailleurs sénégalais et la Grande Guerre’ was launched at the Institut Français de Dakar in November 2014; a bande dessinée in the popular series, *L’Homme de l’année*, places a *tirailleur* at the heart of its story concerning the search for the unknown soldier to be interred under the Arc de triomphe in November 1920; and a television series *Frères d’armes* (directed by Rachid Bouchareb in collaboration with Pascal Blanchard) featuring fifty short portraits of colonial soldiers (many of them black) who fought for France in various wars has been screened on a number of French TV channels.<sup>14</sup> The material highlighted in these forums may not have been new to many scholars, but the impact of these cultural interventions has been to create among a wider public a sense of a lost history at last being rediscovered.

When taken collectively, these works can be seen to have inaugurated a field of black studies *à la française*, one that has strong roots in the academy but that has also proven capable of reaching a much wider public. Pap Ndiaye’s *La Condition noire* was a genuine media phenomenon with some of the more breathless commentators appearing to believe that the author had somehow single-handedly invented black studies in France, ignoring previous work by both French and Anglophone scholars. Although written in a relatively accessible style, Ndiaye’s book was a thorough historical-sociological study, full of statistics and it constituted an unlikely non-fiction best seller, which has already gone through several editions. In the wake of Ndiaye’s book, texts such as those by Blanchard and Thuram also



enjoyed popular and critical success. Indeed, Blanchard's handsomely produced volume sold out in the run-up to Christmas 2011, suggesting that the story of blackness in France had attained the level of acceptability that allowed it to be offered as a stocking filler.<sup>15</sup>

In many respects, the media championing of Ndiaye's volume mirrored the frenzy that had earlier surrounded the edited volume, *La Fracture coloniale* (2005), which was published shortly before the riots that rocked the poor suburbs of many French cities in October–November 2005, and was either adopted or rejected (depending on the author's political standpoint) as a useful prism through which to attempt to comprehend the events unfolding around the country.<sup>16</sup> Indeed, the 'black debate' that has been launched in France is inextricably bound up in the 'postcolonial debate' that emerged around 2005 and encompasses the memory of slavery, colonization and the position of 'postcolonial minorities' within the Republic. Ann Laura Stoler summarizes this debate in the following terms:

Colonialism and empire now appear as central threads in the [French] nation's unraveling republican fabric. There is intense disagreement about how they figure, whether a focus on the 'colonial continuum' strengthens urgent demands for social equity or is an irrelevant distraction from them, whether repentance and guilt have shaped politics or politics has replaced good scholarship. Some would argue that the Republic and Empire are now difficult to view as mutually exclusive categories.<sup>17</sup>

Stoler herself is less interested in such questions than in what she refers to as 'the political, personal and scholarly dispositions that have made the racial co-ordinates of empire and the racial epistemics of governance so faintly legible to French histories of the present'.<sup>18</sup> It is obvious that, for many scholars, race and the French republic are now on the research agenda in ways that would have seemed unimaginable three decades ago.

If postcolonial studies in France became an acknowledged feature of academic and public discourse in 2005, then it is no coincidence that the same year also witnessed the creation of *Le Conseil Représentatif des Associations Noires* (CRAN), at first under the presidency of Patrick Lozès and, since 2011, under Louis-Georges Tin: the passing of this role from a *Béninois* to a *Martiniquais* illustrating the primarily pan-African nature of black groups in France (although this is not to deny the existence of important differences in the (self-)perception of black Africans and Antilleans, as will be explored further below). CRAN has been a vocal and some would say divisive presence in public debate over the past decade, campaigning against racial discrimination, demanding greater ethnic representation in French public life and, perhaps most controversially, promoting a debate on reparations for slavery. CRAN has given a voice to black issues in a more sustained way than would have been imaginable in 1985 but its very existence has for some in France acted as proof of the rise of an American-style identity politics, whose alleged communitarianism is a threat to the universal Republic.

At the same time, the encounter between black studies and French studies has led to the creation of a distinct area of study in the Anglophone world, not least in North America. Dominic Thomas's *Black France* (2007), which was published a year before Pap Ndiaye's best seller in France, was a landmark work that brought together the different strands of this emerging field of inquiry in a text that examined different cultural forms, contexts and historical periods.<sup>19</sup> 'Black France' has now become a clearly identifiable academic area of study: in 2012, an edited volume with the dual-language title, *Black France/La France noire* was published by three distinguished North American scholars and new courses have sprung up bearing this label (I teach one myself at the University of Stirling).<sup>20</sup> Notions such as 'Afropean literature' have

also become prominent within the academy and have offered new transnational frameworks within which to situate black writing produced in France.<sup>21</sup> As was indicated above, discussions of 'Black France' are often conducted within the wider context of discussions of a postcolonial France, or even of a 'Racial France' to use the term adopted in the title of a 2011 special issue of *Public Culture*.<sup>22</sup>

Talk of the emergence of a new field can serve to occlude the existence of earlier work already engaging with such issues and there are countless books and special issues of journals that one could cite from the 1980s, 1990s and 2000s that were already committed to exploration of the black presence in France.<sup>23</sup> However, as was indicated above, it is no exaggeration to state that, broadly speaking, the notion of 'La France noire' has until recently seemed less of a social or critical given than that of 'La France arabe': for instance, Alec Hargreaves and Mark McKinney's groundbreaking edited volume, *Post-Colonial Cultures in France* (1997) contains a chapter on the latter topic but no separate chapter on Black France.<sup>24</sup> This is largely explained by demographics – there are far more 'Arabes' in France than there are black people – which has given greater visibility to North African culture but has also given rise to more pronounced fears regarding a Muslim takeover of France (a fear so clearly exploited by Michel Houellebecq in his latest novel, *Soumission*). Black people may predominantly have been viewed at various times in modern French history as objects of fear, laughter, contempt or even admiration for their physical or sensual qualities but they have rarely induced the sense of existential panic that is reserved for 'les Arabes'. The case of Amedy Coulibaly and the authors of similarly violent anti-Semitic crimes – most notably, the brutal torture and murder of Ilan Halimi by a gang led by French Ivorian Youssouf Fofana in 2006 – has troubled the more benign perception of the black community, and those fears that have arisen have

been focused primarily on (Muslim) sub-Saharan Africans. The Antillean population in France, which is largely Christian and/or secular Republican, is widely perceived to be far more ‘integrated’ than its often Muslim African counterparts. In addition, the former are all French citizens who have not generally had to struggle for acceptance within metropolitan France to the same degree as persons of sub-Saharan origin, who even when born in France are perceived to be ‘foreign’. Whether the broad pan-Africanist identity that is exemplified by CRAN will survive the spread of such polarized perceptions remains to be seen.

The current projection of an identity broadly defined as that of a ‘Black France’ is undoubtedly, in part, a response to the marginalization of black people in France and to the thoughtless categorization of all young people in the *banlieues* as undifferentiated *jeunes issus de l’immigration*. I would argue, however, that the emergence of the notion of a ‘Black France’ has far more to do with the growing self-awareness and self-confidence of people of colour in France than with the majority population’s fears about black people. Rather than attempting an exhaustive overview of the different areas of French culture in which black questions have been to the fore in recent times – sport, music, cinema, politics, media representations –, the remainder of this article will instead focus on two prominent black individuals in France whose writings and/or actions have placed them at the centre of debates on this emerging Black France: Christiane Taubira and Lilian Thuram.

### **Christiane Taubira: politics, race, memory**

The French parliamentary deputy for Guyana, Christiane Taubira, is arguably the person of colour who has enjoyed the greatest political power and authority in the entire Fifth Republic. She was appointed *Garde des Sceaux* at the beginning of the

2012 parliament and, as will be explored below, has in this role been charged with piloting through the *Assemblée nationale* some of the most controversial of François Hollande's policies. First elected to parliament in 1993, she came to national prominence in 2001 when she played a central role in the passing of the *loi tendant à la reconnaissance de la traite et de l'esclavage en tant que crime contre l'humanité*, which has widely become known as the *loi Taubira*. A year later, she was the candidate chosen by the *Parti radical de gauche* to stand in the Presidential elections, winning 2.32% of the vote (just over 660,000 votes).

The passing of the *loi Taubira* was intended to mark a Republican consensus around the history of slavery, signalling recognition of the past suffering endured by current French citizens in the Caribbean DOMs: that is, this was primarily a gesture towards a group *within* the contemporary nation. However, in the decade since this legislation was passed, it has become all too obvious that no such Republican consensus exists. Instead, the *loi Taubira* inspired right-wing politicians and colonial nostalgics to promote similar legislation celebrating France's colonial past, which led to the *loi du 23 février 2005*, whose infamous fourth clause stated that: 'Les programmes scolaires reconnaissent en particulier le rôle positif de la présence française outre-mer, notamment en Afrique du Nord et accordent à l'histoire et aux sacrifices des combattants de l'armée française issus de ces territoires la place éminente à laquelle ils ont droit'. For their part, French historians have decried the interference of legislators in the recording, interpretation and teaching of history from whatever political perspective.<sup>25</sup>

Taubira's activism on issues of racial history has made her a figure of hate for many on the right in France. This became evident early in her tenure as *Garde des Sceaux* when she was at the forefront of the Ayrault government's drive to introduce

legislation to legalize gay marriage. It was striking that the virulent right-wing Christian opposition to the bill regularly veered off into barely concealed racist slurs as is illustrated by three separate incidents in November 2013 at the height of the debate: a 12-year-old boy taunted her with a banana at a demonstration against the bill; shortly afterwards, Anne-Sophie Leclere, a member of Marine Le Pen's National Front party, created a photo-montage showing Taubira alongside a baby monkey (with the captions 'À 18 mois' and 'Maintenant') which was posted on her Facebook page; finally, at the end of the month, the extreme right-wing magazine, *Minute*, placed a photo of Taubira on its front cover alongside the headline: 'Maligne comme un singe, Taubira retrouve la banane'.<sup>26</sup> That Taubira's actions in support of legislation with no connection whatsoever to questions of race should elicit such an openly racist response is evidence that, for a certain segment of the majority French population, the colour of her skin disqualified her from high office. Over the past three years, she has thus come to act as a symbol of French diversity and equality while at the same time suffering the type of racist abuse that is an absolute denial of Republican principles of equality.

### **Lilian Thuram: diversity and integration**

The multiracial French football team that won the 1998 World Cup were immediately heralded as symbols of the successful integration of France's postcolonial minorities. Subsequent events – from the electoral success of Jean-Marie Le Pen in 2002 to the suburban riots of 2005, through the harshly anti-immigrant tone of President Nicolas Sarkozy's national identity debates to the tragedy of the *Charlie Hebdo* massacres – have underlined the prematurely celebratory nature of this initial response.<sup>27</sup> It is in this troubled context that the former player Lilian Thuram has decided to use his

status as an icon of the 1998 team to become a public figure who regularly speaks out on issues of race, identity and memory.<sup>28</sup> Thuram was born in Guadeloupe, but his family moved to mainland France in 1981, and settled in the Parisian suburb of Bois-Colombes. He was part of the most successful generation of French footballers, and he still holds the record number of appearances (142) for the French national team. Thuram thus brings a huge amount of symbolic capital with him into his chosen post-football role as a public figure seeking to combat racism.

Thuram's numerous interventions on issues of race have over the past decade been marked by two key features: firstly, there is a clear rejection of the notion of integration, for he consistently stresses 'le droit à la différence' which is a deeply problematic concept in the context of the universal French republic; secondly, he makes consistent use of what Mireille Rosello has identified as a 'tactical universalism', that is an appeal to the universal values of the Republic to defend minority rights.<sup>29</sup> For example, in a 2010 interview, Thuram dismissed Sarkozy's national identity debate as follows:

*Je ne comprends pas ce questionnement sur l'identité nationale alors qu'elle est inscrite sur tous les frontons de mairie: Liberté, Égalité, Fraternité. Ensuite, il y a l'identité des Français, ce qui est différent. Chaque personne a sa propre identité qu'il construit chaque jour et on ne peut pas gommer ses identités dans une tentation jacobine.<sup>30</sup>*

In his 2004 autobiography, Thuram had already reflected on the 1998 World Cup and how it had been interpreted by politicians and the media.<sup>31</sup> For Thuram, the 1998 victory had been about the celebration of France's diversity not the successful neutralization of that difference via a conception of integration that he rejected. The victory in 1998 was thus symbolic for Thuram precisely because it promised an

alternative model for national identity, one that was not based on notions of integration.

In 2008, the year in which he retired as a professional footballer, Thuram established the *Fondation Lilian Thuram* whose motto is ‘l’Éducation contre le racisme’.<sup>32</sup> If star footballers from Barcelona (Thuram’s final club) constitute the public-friendly face of the Foundation, the website clearly indicates that the educational dimension of the project is led by a team of prominent researchers. The world-renowned paleoanthropologist Yves Coppens – who identified, in Ethiopia, the fossilized remains of ‘Lucy’ as the oldest example of human life on earth – is just one member of the eleven-strong scientific committee of the Foundation, alongside other prominent figures such as Pascal Blanchard, Michel Wieviorka, the renowned sociologist, and Tzvetan Todorov, the literary critic and theorist of race and alterity. If his *comité scientifique* provide the reasoned arguments and in-depth knowledge that he lacks, it is Thuram’s celebrity and in many ways his aura of authenticity, as a representative from a working-class ethnic minority background, someone who has engaged with race and identity in real life rather than solely in textbooks, that provides the conduit for these ideas to be debated in a popular public forum.

In January 2010, Thuram published *Mes étoiles noires: de Lucy à Barack Obama*, and embarked on a round of print and broadcast media interviews that confirmed his transition from sportsman to public figure. (Although *Mes étoiles noires* is his best-known intervention on race, Thuram has consistently contributed to public debate on these issues in various ways. He is a regular *préfacier* to texts touching on race – for example, see his preface to Thomté Ryam’s *Banlieue noire* – and has contributed to a number of manifestos on race and multiculturalism, including an ‘Appel pour une République multiculturelle et postraciale’ in 2010, and a



*Manifeste pour l'égalité* in 2012.<sup>33</sup>) As its title indicates (the reference to 'black stars' deliberately echoing Marcus Garvey), the book is an eclectic series of portraits of his 'black heroes', which stretches from the Lucy discovered by Yves Coppens to the current US president. As with his website, the primary impulse behind his book is educational. In the introduction, he reflects on the fact that the first time he heard about black people in school was when the class studied slavery. The study of slavery is of course crucial but what upset Thuram was that there was not a single positive role model for black children, and it is this absence that his book seeks to address. If his alternative Pantheon contains figures around whom a genuine Republican consensus might be found such as the Chevalier de Saint Georges, Nelson Mandela or Aimé Césaire, there are other more troublesome figures for a Republican history of the French nation: from the Haitian revolutionaries, Toussaint Louverture and Jean-Jacques Dessalines, to those arch-critics of French (neo-)colonialism, Frantz Fanon and Mongo Beti. The task of changing French society is cast in explicitly Fanonian terms, which involves the deconstruction of the very ways in which people conceive of race: 'l'âme noire, le peuple noir, la pensée noire n'existent pas plus que l'âme blanche, le peuple blanc ou la pensée blanche'.<sup>34</sup> He pre-empted and rejects the dreaded and inevitable charge that he is engaging in 'communitarianism', shattering the unity of the universal Republic by promoting communal minority identities: to create a truly universal Republic, it is necessary to bring an end to racialized forms of thought and perception: 'Seul le changement de nos imaginaires peut nous rapprocher et faire tomber nos barrières culturelles' (p. 9). When one considers that then French President Nicolas Sarkozy had visited the Senegalese capital, Dakar, shortly after his election in 2007 to claim that Africa was a continent outside of history, one can clearly see that a colonial-era racial *imaginaire* did not simply disappear with the

formal collapse of empire.<sup>35</sup> Under Hollande, there have been clear attempts to row back from Sarkozy's racial and colonialist excesses but the open racism towards Christiane Taubira that was mentioned above illustrates that racialized thought has not disappeared with the passage of the presidency from the right to the socialists.

## **Conclusion**

In the 2011 film, *Intouchables* (directed by Eric Toledano/Olivier Nakache), Omar Sy, a black French actor of Senegalese origin, plays Driss, an unemployed young *banlieusard* who forms an unlikely odd-couple friendship with the rich paraplegic man he is hired to care for. The film was a runaway box office success, attracting a remarkable audience of 19 million in France alone. The film was adored by many critics who argued that the film finally allowed a predominantly white French audience to embrace a black French character, while others dismissed it as a rehashing of tired racial clichés.

At the other end of the comic spectrum lies Dieudonné M'Bala M'Bala who, over the past decade, has arguably become the most notorious black figure in France. Born to a white French mother and a Cameroonian father, he grew up in a relatively privileged middle-class household in the suburbs of Paris. Originally a figure broadly of the left, he has gradually veered towards a far right, anti-Semitic agenda that manages to embrace aspects of a Front National agenda while simultaneously espousing the hate-filled ideas of a minority of the black community towards Israel and Jewish people more generally. In typically provocative fashion, he commented on Facebook shortly after the terror attacks of January 2015 that 'Je me sens Charlie Coulibaly', setting his face against the overwhelming expression of solidarity towards the victims, instead expressing a grimly comic solidarity with Amedy Coulibaly.

I would argue that these final two case studies encapsulate the ambivalence surrounding the position of black people in contemporary France. Depending on one's point of view, *Intouchables* invites us to laugh with, or at, the black male *banlieusard*. However, perhaps most significantly, it also signifies the acceptance of black characters within a longstanding, popular French comic tradition. As for Dieudonné, he may appear to some in France as the bastard offspring of the light entertainment wings of ISIS/FN but what is most striking from my perspective here is that his audience is so racially mixed; those who claim most vocally that his inverted Nazi salute, the *quenelle*, is merely an anti-Establishment gesture are often young white French people who situate themselves within an anarchic tradition of non-conformism that in many respects shares the ethos that informs *Charlie Hebdo*. *Intouchables* and Dieudonné are quite clearly products of French culture and tradition, but equally they ask questions of that culture that would not have been asked 30 years ago. That is as it should be, for the French nation of three decades ago is, by its very nature, not the same as the French nation in 2015, though contrary to *Le Figaro*'s alarmism this does not of course mean that it is no longer French.

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<sup>1</sup> Angélique Chrisafis, 'Charlie Hebdo Attackers: born, raised and radicalized in Paris', *The Guardian*, 12 January 2015: <[www.theguardian.com/world/2015/jan/12/sp-charlie-hebdo-attackers-kids-france-radicalised-paris](http://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/jan/12/sp-charlie-hebdo-attackers-kids-france-radicalised-paris)> [accessed 23 February 2015].

<sup>2</sup> See 'Lassane Bathily, héros de la prise d'otages de Vincennes, bientôt naturalisé', *Le Monde*, 15 January 2015: <<http://www.lemonde.fr/societe/article/2015/01/15/lassana-bathily-heros-de-la-prise->

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d-otages-de-vincennes-bientot-naturalise\_4557248\_3224.html> [accessed 23 February 2015].

<sup>3</sup> See Maryline Baumard, ‘Lassana Bathily, “héros” du supermarché cacher, naturalisé français’, *Le Monde*, 20 January 2015:

<[http://www.lemonde.fr/societe/article/2015/01/20/lassana-bathily-heros-du-supermarche-casher-naturalise-francais\\_4560032\\_3224.html](http://www.lemonde.fr/societe/article/2015/01/20/lassana-bathily-heros-du-supermarche-casher-naturalise-francais_4560032_3224.html)> [accessed 23 February 2015].

<sup>4</sup> ‘Dossier immigration: serons-nous encore français dans 30 ans?’, *Le Figaro magazine*, 26 October 1985.

<sup>5</sup> For an account of Senghor’s career and his relationship with Diagne, see David Murphy, ‘Defending the “Negro Race”: Lamine Senghor and Black Internationalism in Interwar France’, *French Cultural Studies*, 24:2 (2013), 161–73.

<sup>6</sup> See, in particular, the polemical tract by Gustave Gautherot, *Le Bolchévisme aux colonies et l’impérialisme rouge* (Paris: Redier, 1930).

<sup>7</sup> Renaud Dély, Pascal Blanchard, Claude Askolovitch and Yvan Gastaut, *Les Années 30 sont de retour: petite leçon d’histoire pour comprendre les crises du présent* (Paris: Flammarion, 2014).

<sup>8</sup> Cited in Dominic Thomas, ‘The “Marie Ndiaye Affair” or the Coming of a Postcolonial Évoluée’, in *Transnational French Studies: Postcolonialism and Littérature-monde*, ed. by Alec G. Hargreaves, Charles Forsdick and David Murphy (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2010), pp. 146–63 (p. 155). As Thomas notes, another black writer, Gaston Kelman, was only too happy to serve as an advisor to then Interior Minister Eric Besson on the national identity debate. Kelman’s essay *Je suis noir et je n’aime pas le manioc* (Paris: Max Milo, 2003) is a fervent defence of the colour-blind Republic.

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<sup>9</sup> Pascal Blanchard et al., *La France noire: trois siècles de présences* (Paris: La Découverte, 2011).

<sup>10</sup> Pascal Blanchard and Juan Gélas, *Noirs de France, de 1889 à nos jours: une histoire de France*. DVD. (Paris: Cie des Phares et Balises, 2012).

<sup>11</sup> Pap Ndiaye, *La Condition noire: essai sur une minorité française* (Paris: Calmann-Lévy, 2008).

<sup>12</sup> Lilian Thuram, *Mes étoiles noires: de Lucy à Barack Obama* (Paris: Philippe Rey, 2010).

<sup>13</sup> The exhibition ran from November 2011–June 2012: <[www.quaibrantly.fr/fr/programmation/expositions/expositions-passees/exhibitions.html](http://www.quaibrantly.fr/fr/programmation/expositions/expositions-passees/exhibitions.html)> [accessed 23 February 2015]. For the festival catalogue, see Pascal Blanchard, Gilles Boëtsch and Nanette Jacomijn Snoep, *Exhibitions: l'invention du sauvage* (Arles: Actes Sud, 2011).

<sup>14</sup> For details of the exhibition, see <<http://www.institutfrancais-senegal.com/Tirailleurs-la-grande-guerre-a.html>> [accessed 23 February 2015]. See Fred Duval, Jean-Pierre Pécau and Mr Fab, *L'Homme de l'année, 1917* (Paris: Delcourt, 2013). At the time of writing (March 2015), a DVD of *Frères d'armes* is due for imminent release; for further details, see the programme's website <[www.seriefreresdarmes.com](http://www.seriefreresdarmes.com)> [accessed 23 February 2015].

<sup>15</sup> Blanchard had, ten years earlier, published a very similar *beau-livre* (with Eric Deroo and Gilles Manceron), entitled *Le Paris noir* (Paris: Hazan, 2001), which did not enjoy the same level of popular success. That *La France noire* was so commercially successful should not be attributed solely to its intrinsic qualities but rather to the propitious conditions it enjoyed at the time of its publication.

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<sup>16</sup> *La Fracture coloniale: la société française au prisme de l'héritage colonial*, ed. by Pascal Blanchard, Nicolas Bancel and Sandrine Lemaire (Paris: La Découverte, 2005). For a discussion of the role of this volume in the emergence of a postcolonial debate in France, see Charles Forsdick and David Murphy, 'Situating Francophone Postcolonial Thought', in *Postcolonial Thought in the French-speaking World*, ed. by Forsdick and Murphy (Liverpool: Liverpool UP, 2009), pp. 1–27.

<sup>17</sup> Ann Laura Stoler, 'Colonial Aphasia: Race and Disabled Histories in France', *Public Culture*, 23:1 (2011), 121–56 (pp. 136–37).

<sup>18</sup> Stoler, 'Colonial Aphasia', p. 122.

<sup>19</sup> Dominic Thomas, *Black France: Colonialism, Immigration and Transnationalism* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2007). Thomas has further developed his reflections in this area in subsequent works: *Africa and France: Postcolonial Cultures, Migration and Racism* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2013); *Racial Advocacy in France* (*French Cultural Studies*, 24:2 (2013)) .

<sup>20</sup> See *Black France/France Noire: The History and Politics of Blackness*, ed. by Trica Danielle Keaton, T. Denean Sharpley-Whiting and Tyler Stovall (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2012). Another important edited volume in the field is *Frenchness and the African Diaspora: Identity and Uprising in Contemporary France* ed. by Charles Tshimanga, Didier Gondola and Peter J. Bloom (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2009).

<sup>21</sup> See Sabrina Brancato, 'Afro-European Literature(s): A New Discursive Category?', *Research in African Literatures*, 39:3 (2008), 1–13; and *Francophone Afropean Literatures*, ed. by Nicki Hitchcott and Dominic Thomas (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2014).

<sup>22</sup> *Public Culture*, 23:1 (2011). Special issue: 'Racial France', ed. by Janet Roitman.

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<sup>23</sup> See, for example, Philippe Dewitte, *Les Mouvements nègres en France, 1919–39* (Paris: L’Harmattan, 1985); Tracy Denean Sharpley-Whiting, *Black Venus: Sexualized Savages, Primal Fears, and Primitive Narratives in French* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1999); *Black Paris*, ed. by Sam Haigh and Nicki Hitchcott (*Journal of Romance Studies*, 5:3 (2005)).

<sup>24</sup> See David A. McMurray, ‘La France arabe’, in *Post-Colonial Cultures in France*, ed. by Alec G. Hargreaves and Mark McKinney (London and New York: Routledge, 1997), pp. 26–39.

<sup>25</sup> In a recent article, Charles Forsdick explores the ways in which certain French port cities have sought to commemorate their historical involvement in the slave trade. See ‘Monuments, Memorials, Museums: Slavery Commemoration and the Search for Alternative Archival Spaces’, *Francosphères*, 3:1 (2014), 81–98.

<sup>26</sup> A casual Internet search in preparation for this article revealed a whole host of similarly racist imagery aimed at Taubira.

<sup>27</sup> The best book on the relationship between football and the postcolonial is Laurent Dubois, *Soccer Empire: The World Cup and the Future of France* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2011).

<sup>28</sup> For a more sustained analysis of Thuram’s intervention on race, see my article, ‘When Symbols Start to Speak: Lilian Thuram and the French Identity Debates’, *Moving Worlds: A Journal of Transcultural Writings*, 12:1 (2012), 19–28.

<sup>29</sup> Mireille Rosello, ‘Tactical Universalism and new multiculturalist claims in postcolonial France’, in *Francophone Postcolonial Studies: A Critical Introduction* ed. by Charles Forsdick and David Murphy (London: Arnold, 2003), pp. 135–44.

<sup>30</sup> Lilian Thuram, ‘Chacun de nous a sa façon de vivre la France’, in ‘Où en est la France d’outre-mer’, *Le Monde*, hors-série, January–February 2010, 7–9 (p. 8).

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<sup>31</sup> Lilian Thuram, *Le 8 juillet 1998* (Paris: Anne Carrière, 2004).

<sup>32</sup> Thuram's website can be accessed at: [www.thuram.org](http://www.thuram.org).

<sup>33</sup> Lilian Thuram et al., *Appel pour une République multiculturelle et postraciale*.

Published as supplement to *Respect Mag: urbain, social et métissé*, 24 (January–March 2010). *Manifeste pour l'égalité*, ed. by Lilian Thuram (Paris: Autrement, 2012). For analysis of the former text, see my article, 'The Postcolonial Manifesto: partisanship, criticism and the performance of change', in *Transnational French Studies*, ed. by Hargreaves, Forsdick and Murphy, pp. 67–86.

<sup>34</sup> Thuram, *Mes étoiles noires*, p. 9.

<sup>35</sup> Sarkozy's speech in July 2007 provoked an angry response from many African artists and intellectuals. To cite just two examples, see *L'Afrique de Sarkozy: un déni d'histoire*, ed. by Jean-Pierre Chrétien (Paris: Karthala, 2008), and Makhily Gassama, *L'Afrique répond à Sarkozy: contre le discours de Dakar* (Paris: Philippe Rey, 2008).