#BeyondTalkingBack: Maboula Soumahoro: The Hexagon and Triangle

Things feel a bit strange to me. The brief presentation I made occurred in Paris. The ensuing discussion took place in France, a nation-state that has fully taken part in the imperial projects launched by the West on other continents of the world since the modern times. I stand with the late but eternally relevant Stuart Hall in his use of “societies structured in dominance.” Starting from that premise, I understand contemporary France as a both post and neo colonial republic operating along interconnected social and rachial hierarchies and in which various processes of racialization have impacted all groups composing the nation, be they dominant or dominated. To be clear, Whites and non-Whites are racialized groups. One cannot exist without the other. Furthermore, if one, complex, group can freely exercise its privilege of domination through invisibility and normativity, it has nonetheless been shaped by perhaps subtler processes of racialization.

I should state from the outset that I am not solely a student of the African Diaspora. I am also one of its members. Paris, the 13th district to be more precise, is my birthplace. Although I am not sure this is my home. The new direction I have given to my work lately has grown out of an increased interest in making sense of my own trajectories. Of my own navigation of both the Hexagon and the Triangle, that is to say this transatlantic space that has so immensely shaped the modern times of the West and the rest of the world. So let me start with a little genealogy, a brief presentation of my personal roots.

In the late 1970s, I was born in Paris, France, to an Ivorian couple who had migrated from the country of their birth in the 1960s. My parents had left Ivory Coast shortly after national independence. They established themselves in Paris initially to study and work, but with the all so common desire and hope to eventually return “home”. Then life happened… My father ultimately did return “home”, where he eventually died and was buried; my mother is still living in France today, along with almost all of her children and grandchildren.

I grew up in a staunchly conservative Ivorian/Dioula environment according to which metropolitan France was a temporary residence. I was brought up in the desire and hope to return “home”. Meanwhile, France, the site of my alleged temporary residence, did everything in her power to match my parents’ vision of the situation: I was not perceived as French and I should, sooner or later, “go back” to my country. Thus, I was not born French. I carried an Ivorian passport until age 13, when my family was informed that we, French-born children, could apply for French citizenship as our parents had been born in colonial Ivory Coast, that is to say before the independence of 1960. In this fashion, in the late 1980s my brothers and sisters became French citizens by “reintegration”, to use the bureaucratic jargon. This may be a technicality, but

reintegration is different from naturalization. Indeed, the term reintegration seems to imply that we actually had a *right* to the French citizenship on the basis on some previous, colonial, political order that had unfortunately been unsettled at some point and could now been restored.

To return to the French treatment I received when I grew up, retrospectively I can safely say today that it was very much informed by the way French society viewed several elements: race/phenotype/skin color, name, religion, class, and nationality. Indeed, in the French space, I was understood as both black and African, sometimes as Ivorian. My first and last names were definitely exotic. My religion, Islam, was in total opposition with Christianity, secularism or the atheism that France cherishes and professes -- at times. Islam also put me in direct proximity and conversation with multiple African communities, North and Sub-Saharan. And finally, class came heavily into play as we were incredibly destitute, which automatically made my family eligible for housing projects and myriads of social aids, just like other recent immigrants such as Italians, Poles, Yugoslavian, Turkish, Spaniards, Portuguese, along with other destitute White French and those hailing from the overseas territories. We all seemed to inhabit the same areas.

In the specific case of my family, we were constantly in relation with French institutions. Those seemed to be constantly reminding us of a logical relationship between our poverty, the color of our skin and our foreign origins. According to those bureaus and agencies, we just needed to go back "home". Regularly, we were made fun at, had troubled encounters with the police, were denied jobs and other professional or academic opportunities. These are not myths. These are the commonly undocumented or overlooked experiences of our reality. These experiences contrast sharply with the nationally upheld ideal of republicanism staunchly anchored in the color blindness of our constitution. These experiences bring into light the invisible, inaudible, un-addressable paradoxes of embodying race and facing racism in the alleged land of colorblindness.

One institution where things played out differently was school. We were great students. I was a great student. We were extraordinarily, unexpectedly great students. We snatched all kinds of prizes and awards. We graduated from high school. We continued to obtain college degrees. I got a Ph.D.

I think this rather lengthy introduction is quite necessary to understand my scholarly interests and the not-so-hidden reasons that have fueled my research for all these years. When undertaking college education, I chose English as a major. I studied with great interest U.S. and U.K. history, with special attention paid to the history of minorities (U.S.) and colonialism (U.K.). I specialized in African American Studies then in Africana Studies. My first thesis was written on the making of Liberia. I wanted to explore black nationalism and religion in the Black Americas. I wanted to explore the possibilities or impossibilities of the materialization of a "return back home" for Afrodescended populations. I sought to study a history that was not mine. So I thought at the time. Later on, my

doctoral project was a comparative study of the early years of the African American Nation of Islam and the Afro-Jamaican Rastafari.

What were the reasons for the Afrodescended populations, predominantly products of the transatlantic slave trade and the slave-based plantation economies of the Americas, to desire and hope for a “home”? What was the role of religion in the strategies of resistance that those populations resorted to in the context of the Americas? Why this need for a black, male, and living God? Why were multiple commonalities to be found throughout the Americas, despite the national borders. Why was I just like all of them – or perceived as such? Did it mean that we all had something in common?

I first defined myself as French when I moved to the U.S. It came automatically, almost naturally. Totally effortlessly. I was in a foreign place and often asked about my origins and I would easily reply that I was French and from Paris. It was the first time in my life. Until then, in France, I had often been asked about my origins as well. Something seemed to indicate that somehow, I did not belong. I was from elsewhere. I could not be French. Nor did I look, nor sound, nor eat, nor pray French. The U.S. changed all of that. This new site made me realize that my “home”, my place of “eventual return” was first and foremost France. That came as a complete surprise. Until then, I had thought of myself as having a “home” in the Ivory Coast I could return to anytime.

On the one hand, much has been written about the African American migration to Europe in general, and to France in particular. Most of those studies are devoted to the wonderful experiences of those African American soldiers, intellectuals, and artists who found in France a refuge, an asylum so remote from the stinging racism and segregation of the United States. However, less has been published about the treatment of other populations of color in both France and overseas territories in relation and comparison to those African American expatriates. This has left aside and made overwhelmingly invisible the way France has dealt with race when it comes to her own peoples. In addition, oftentimes, such studies fail to move beyond the colonial period. Most commonly, they turn a blind eye to the postcolonial developments in French demography and the articulation of the racial question in contemporary and metropolitan France with current and recurring public and political discussions and debates around the national identity and the meaning of citizenship. In other words, I never rarely read about my experience.

That being said, as much has been missing from the expatriation experiences of postcolonial French of color in the United States, where, paradoxically, some of these new citizens have had positive experiences precisely because of more openly discussed processes of racialization.

I was initially trained in U.S. and African American Studies. Back in France in 2009 after about 10 years in New York, I experienced firsthand the racial *décalage*, the different ways of dealing with race in both places. Indeed, I had returned to France as a Ph.D., teaching at a university and my body

constantly seemed to contradict my status. I could not be a professor. I could not be a tenured professor. I could not have a Ph.D. At most, or more readily acceptable, I could be a substitute professor, an ABD graduate student, a student, or a secretary.

There were questions that begged answers: what does blackness mean in the French context? Can that identity be limited to phenotype? Or should blackness be expanded to include a commonality of experiences? Can and should Blacks and Arabs be separated by this too-narrow definition of blackness, when those postcolonial populations and members of the most recent French citizenry most commonly reside in the same areas and face the same exclusion, marginalization, and racism? And finally, what about the persons originating from the Overseas territories, who, for most of them have been French theoretically since 1848 and the second abolition of slavery?

In closing, the questions I am currently grappling are the following: How can anyone conduct their own research when their body is also the object of study? Then, how can one gain legitimacy and avoid being accused of "lacking distance and objectivity"? Finally, how and where can we teach and circulate forms of knowledge production that seek explore those issues?

The locale I am writing about and sometimes from is France, a place where black, non-white, poor, marginalized lives do not seem to matter either. I am talking about France, where "Muslim has become the new Black", if we want to use easy shortcuts and bypass intersectionality since, in reality, you can simultaneously be Muslim and Black. I am talking about France where your female, destitute black body can be declared racist by a dominant white male body on national television. During a debate over racism and anti-racism. I am talking about France where, in schools, decolonization is taught, but not colonization. I am talking France failing to understand the difference between post-racialism and post-racism.

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She first taught at Bennington College for the MATSL program in 2003, and has since taught at Barnard College, the Bard Prison Initiative, and Columbia University where she was also invited as a Visiting Scholar. She recently contributed to the collection of essays, Toward an intellectual History of Black Women (UNC Press, 2015).

Based in France, Soumahoro is president of the Black History Month organization and an appointed member of the National Committee for the Memory and History of Slavery. She returns to Bennington as a visiting faculty member for the 2016-2017 academic year.

- See more at: http://www.bennington.edu/academics/faculty/maboula-soumahoro#sthash.U8p1Hk3E.dpuf