

Color blindness and minority representation in French media

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### **Abstract:**

France's failure to acknowledge its historic and present divisions in race and nationality has caused the country to develop often ineffective anti-discrimination and equality policies. These policies have produced a culture of color blindness in which racialized tropes about people of color, particularly black French citizens, and negative stereotypes based on colonial ideology are promoted. The main question I seek to answer in this study is how French identity construction and concepts of equality and color blindness effect how people of color are portrayed in French media. Throughout my research, I found that the plot and characterizations employed within film reflects the larger themes of neocolonialism, color blindness, and concepts of "French-ness". These intersect with concerns about assimilation, the hidden racism behind color blindness, overcoming internalized stereotypes, and learning to acknowledge both native and French heritages. I conclude that in order to address the issues of representation in media and truly live up to its national cry of *liberté, fraternité, et égalité*, France must increase the participation of black French actors and writers in creating and performing more diverse representations of black French citizens.

Keywords: media, France, minority, racialized representation, neocolonialism

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## **I. Introduction**

During the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, while wars were raging and black people were legally segregated from whites in American public and private spaces, Paris became a place of escape for scores of African-American artists like James Baldwin, Josephine Baker and Richard Wright, who are still lauded and visible in a French society. Yet, this same French society that denounced the American racial divide and elevated African-American artists, also ignored its own historic and present divisions in race and nationality. Indeed, within the country itself, anti-discrimination policies and national pride about equality has led to a culture of color blindness. Colorblindness, in this context, is the effective removal of minority identity for the purpose of official equality. While this culture of color blindness creates benefits for disadvantaged people of color, it can also produce stereotypes, racialized representation, and a conception of French identity that is grounded in whiteness. The main question of this study is: How does French identity construction, concepts of equality and colorblindness affect how people of color are portrayed in French media? How people are represented in media is an especially pertinent topic amidst a globalized world where, as explained by Nordine Nabili, “The media realm has taken place of the physical realm: if you do not exist in the media, you do not exist full stop and have no social identity.” Concerns about representation of people of color are also pertinent as the racialized controversy rages throughout the Western World. Countries like the United States and Great Britain, whose combined histories of slavery, colonialism, and police brutality are also experiencing the resulting backlash of turning a blind eye to their continuing legacy of racism, imperialism, and oppression against people of color. Throughout this study, I examine how concepts of equality, colorblindness, neo-colonialism and French identity construction contribute to the

role minorities play in mainstream French media. In order to explore these themes in a larger context, I look at two French films, *30° Couleur* (2012, Lucien Jean-Baptiste and Philippe Larue), and *Qu'est-Ce qu'on a fait au Bon Dieu* (2015, Philippe de Chauveron).

## II. Methods

Aside from the Senegalese woman whom I saw once a week for a meal with seasoning and hibiscus juice, all of the black people I met in France during my study abroad were American. There was a student from Howard and a student from Syracuse in my immediate friend group, along with three other students from Syracuse and Duke whom I talked to in class. There was also a man who I met on the tram who heard me speaking English and asked for directions to the black hair shop. Even the advertisements in print and television featured African-American celebrities, but rarely black Frenchmen. In fact, the only black person I saw regularly in advertisements was a half-naked Nicki Minaj saluting in an American flag tank top announcing the monthly “Black Nights” at local clubs. Upon returning to the United States, I realized that I did not meet any black Frenchmen during the entire four months abroad.

I decided to pursue this topic of research after I realized that I probably had met many black French citizens, but, like most French citizens and foreign visitors, had assumed they were immigrants. French media tends to frame people of color in two limited ways: as immigrants, troubled street youths, foreign nationals struggling to realize what it means to be French, or as idealized blacks whose lives are the picture of equality and fraternity whose small film roles merely highlight the benevolence of white French protagonists who don’t see color. It is often within these frameworks that the French genre of *Beur* and *Banlieu* cinema emerges. This type of cinema seeks to depict people of color in their “natural state” in the ghettos or low-income suburbs outside of major cities, mostly as citizens struggling with an identity crisis between France and their country of origin or as troubled youths.

The first movie considered for this study, *Qu’est-Ce qu’on a fait au Bon Dieu*, roughly translated as “What have we done to God”, depicts a traditional French couple

(white, middle-class, middle-age, catholic) who must adjust as their daughters are married off to non-traditional men; one to a Chinese man, another to a Jew, and the third to a Muslim. The plot twist is revealed when their final daughter manages to find a catholic husband who just happens to be black

*30° Couleur*, roughly translated to “30 degrees of color”, depicts a modern black French man travelling back to his place of origin. Patrick is a well-respected historian of Caribbean ancestry whose ascent into the elite, i.e. white, class in France is threatened and questioned when he confronts his family and black ancestry as he visits his dying mother during Carnival. Patrick, whose real name is Lucien Jean-Baptiste, both acts and directs the film. This “dramedy” film pre-supposes and exemplifies a disconnect between how the main character identifies as a black man versus who they are as a Frenchman. This disconnect is a common theme in French media and furthers the false dichotomy between being a person of color and being truly French.

I have chosen these two films to demonstrate the disconnect between how mainstream French culture views their acceptance of minorities versus actual patterns and discourse that prevent true integration of people of color into French society. These films embody the contrast between an idealized “French citizen,” the “otherization” of anyone who doesn’t fit neatly within the concept of “Frenchness” based in whiteness, and the cultural color blindness heralded as the foundation of modern French equality but actually promotes the racialization of people of color in French media.

It is important to state that these films are not representative of all French media, however, they do reflect a prevailing pattern within French depictions of “blackness” and “Frenchness”. In fact, I chose them because of their relation to the themes that I am exploring. I chose to focus on the medium of films because, aside from news, films are the

most widely seen media that contain depictions of people of color. The films I have chosen to analyze are fairly recent, all released between 2011 and 2015. *Qu'est-Ce qu'on a fait au Bon Dieu* was still in theaters when I studied abroad, and I learned about it when my white host mother suggested that I should see it.

The year 2015 was the 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary of one of the most famous race riots in modern French history. The 2005 riots started after three teenagers of Maghreb (French Arab) and African descent were chased by police and electrocuted as they hid in an electrical substation. Their deaths sparked civil unrest not just in the nearby suburbs, but around the entire country, leading to a declared state of emergency. The riots brought out a French discourse that mirrored Samuel Huntington's "clash-of-civilizations," which pitted "French citizens" against the "other," in this case, disenfranchised minority youth. The riots were used to justify increasingly aggressive forms of state interventionism and policing that not only stigmatize the *banlieues* (public housing projects) as places of lawlessness but as "sensitive neighborhoods" mostly populated by undesirable *immigres* (immigrants)" (Tshimanga, Gondola, Bloom 5). Though the riots had a positive effect with the eventual hiring of the first black news anchor for a major French television network in 2007<sup>1</sup>- as the media realized they had no "insiders" who could relate to race issues or go into the riot areas without suspicion-, they were also detrimental in that hostile sentiments against immigrants grew at a time when France saw an increase in immigration from former colonies and the Middle East. Arguably, this sentiment resulted in the rise of the French far right party *Front Nationale*, which grew exponentially in popularity as Syrian refugees began to pour into France. Each of the two films were developed within the resulting anti-immigrant, pro- "French" atmosphere.

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<sup>1</sup> "Black France." *Special Series*. Al Jazeera, [July 24, 2014]. Viewed November 20, 2016. <http://www.aljazeera.com/programmes/specialseries/2013/08/201382894144265709.html>



Throughout this research, I will use the term black French to describe French people of African descent. I do not use the term *Noires*, meaning “blacks” in French, because of the racial history of the word. To some, it contains the same negative connotations as the “N-word” because of its association with French colonialism. Although the primary focus of this study is French film, because film-making is so often influenced by current events and public discourse, some attention will be paid to the role played by French news media in reinforcing racial and nationalistic stereotypes.

### III. Discussion

An Anna Lindh/Gallup poll taken in 2010 found that, in a survey of average European citizens, few people agree that the media is showing minorities in a positive view or that the media has helped to shift their view of minorities positively. Films were responsible for the highest number of shifting views at 49.1% (region 2010). French films that feature minorities often present them in the role of sidekick, if not total subservient roles, assisting the white French protagonist and providing comic relief or emotional support. *Les Intouchables* and *À Vif*, both starring Omar Sy, the most prominent French minority actor are recent examples. Other popular films like the 2014 independent film *Les Filles* document the struggles of living in a *banlieu*, (what would be considered the ghetto in America) and obstacles faced by those trying to find a place for themselves in a world of racism and discrimination (O'Shaughnessy 2005). These types of films are categorized as *banlieu* and *beur* cinema because the majority are created and acted by people of color in these neighborhoods. The Anna Lindh/Gallup poll also includes an analysis based in the premise that due to the limited degree of minority visibility, the emergence of stereotypes created during slavery and colonization are the representations that many people see in France. Instead of being depicted as other, which is rightly considered to be discrimination, black people in French film are merely ignored or patronized.

The news media manipulates the public's views of minorities with their stigmatized portrayal of city neighborhoods and minorities. This, in turn, contributes and reinforces the hidden racism and xenophobia that is present in France. It is also the main reason why accurate and nuanced representation in media is so important. Many people in France still frame immigrants and their offspring, even after generations of living in France, as outsiders. Because discrimination is banned at the constitutional level it becomes very hard to argue, for or against, the hidden racism that pervades French society. Because of these laws a racial

census is constitutionally banned in France, meaning that there are only estimates by private organizations on the number of black people in France (Chakrabarti 2009). In a vicious circle, the lack of numbers of actual ethnic minorities means there is little accountability for the actual numbers of representation in the media, and the lack of minority representation in the media contributes to the ignorance and ostracization from French society surrounding minority populations. By attempting to create equality through anti-discrimination laws in the country have created a system of colorblindness that means that the issues that minorities face from racism, ostracization, integration, and representation are delegitimized by the concern for a cohesive and equal nation. It is this system that allows French media to perpetuate the ideals of a society that supports their dominant view of French identity based on whiteness and that lack accurate representation of the non-white ethnic communities or portrays them in ways that contribute to immigrant stereotypes.

## **A. Neocolonialism**

The Global North, was built on the backs and resources of those from what we now call the Global South. Centuries of slavery, imperialism, and other systems of economic dependency took resources from countries in the Global South and established racial and socioeconomic hierocracies within the colonizing host countries towards the colonized natives. It is in this post-colonial world that former colonizers like Great Britain and France are now experiencing the largest growth of immigration in generations. These migrants in large part hail from their former colonies whose natives are experiencing a myriad of economic and political problems resulting from the political upheaval of revolutions and other abrupt removal of colonial governments. For France, this means that since the mid-twentieth century, migrant influx has been coming and going from places like the French Caribbean and West Africa. Because of their refusal to properly address issues that stem from their previous histories of colonialism, contemporary French culture has become defined by color blindness, which effectively masks racism, rather than eliminating it. The racism and economic hierarchy embedded in neocolonialism within the French context leads to two important concepts for the purpose of this study: 1) the widespread culture of colorblindness and 2) the idea of the French citizen as white.

## **B. Colorblindness and Anti-discrimination**

European anti-discrimination laws and the principles behind their creation serve as the basis for the concept of colorblindness critiqued within this study. While studying in Strasbourg, I learned from a European Human Rights course that World War II is credited for the development of the European model of human rights and equality. This European concept of equality is also traced by Bruno de Witte in his essay “From a Common Principle of Equality to European Antidiscrimination Law” (2010); and by Daniel Sabbagh in his essay, “The Collection of Ethnoracial Statistics: Developments in the French Controversy” (2008). Both consider the aftermath of World War II and genocide, as well as the current cultural manifestation of color blindness. It was during the transition and reconstruction period following the war, as countries tried to make sense of the resulting chaos, that antidiscrimination became a high priority for the newly created intergovernmental organizations. In an effort to prevent another Holocaust anti-discrimination began to play a very central role in the state and eventually the European Union’s treatment of minorities.

The European Court and the European Convention on Human Rights both contain language designed to protect against discrimination of sex, racial or ethnic origin, religion or belief, disability, age, or sexual orientation (DeWitte 2010). This same language is also translated into the national or state level by many European countries, including France, which have articles in their constitutions that are meant to ensure equality without discrimination. Although these policies were created with the intent of producing a more tolerant society, the language calls for equality by forbidding the designation of “minority” characteristics as a separate entity. As a result, discrimination against and concerns unique to minorities are often ignored in order to maintain the façade of cohesion and equality.

Using again the example of statistics, though many estimate that the black population in France is the largest colored minority in Europe, the French policy of anti-discrimination and color blindness means that there is no numerical count of the black population because a census identifying race is illegal. This means there are no statistics to lean on when addressing the proper ratio of diversity in politics and media to accurately represent the ethnic make-up of France (Chakrabarti 2009). Instead of creating laws that deal with the history and culture of racism stemming from neo-colonialism, antisemitism, and how it affects the way people think and act, they covered the issue by making any act of racial designation illegal. Not only are hate crimes illegal, but any policy or action that has taken place because of race, creed, religion, or so on is unlawful. The issue, then, becomes how people of color, as supposed “minorities”, can prove and seek to address disparate treatment and how the non-minority citizens of the country can understand and address the embedded racism when many aspects of the conversation are banned.

In his conclusion, De Witte explores one problem associated with this common principle of equality by saying, “One problem with antidiscrimination laws is that they insist upon the granting of relative rights, whereas some social ills may be better tackled by the granting of absolute rights and by social or cultural policies that do not take the form of individual rights...It would be wrong to jump to the conclusion that a society with the most sophisticated antidiscrimination laws will necessarily be a society where social justice reigns” (DeWitte 2010: 1725).

When anti-discrimination laws are designed only to produce a “colorblind” discourse, they become ineffective pieces of legislature that allow countries to appear post-racial. In this way, antidiscrimination laws produce a colorblind discourse that affects the ways in which people of color are seen. De Witte fails to link the concept of colorblindness to the systematic ignorance that leads to inaccurate representation of minority populations in the media as well

as the media's attempts to paint minority communities, especially Afro-descendent ones, as racialized tropes and stereotypes that fit into the white man's burden.

In his work on administrative violence and transgendered politics, Dean Spade uses Critical Race Theory to explore anti-discrimination law and colorblindness as harmful factors resulting in the, "neoliberal politics of denying that unequal conditions exist, portraying any unequal conditions that do exist as natural or neutral" (Spade 2011: 28). Within French media this idea translates into the racialized stereotypes of minorities. Media becomes the medium through which most people begin to understand the "other" citizens that they are not in regular contact with because of various economic and social reasons. When minorities cannot fully assimilate into a preconceived French identity, which is nearly impossible for Muslim and darker skinned immigrants, they are portrayed in ways that conform to the larger society's stereotypes. Because the images of the racialized other in media roles conform to your stereotypes your biases are no longer considered discriminatory but an assessment of their natural condition.

In the context of this neo-colonialism and colorblindness, visual scholar Nicolas Mirzoeff's theory of the dominant global gaze offers more context into the racialized stereotypes of people of color in European media. Mirzoeff's theoretical framework centers on the idea that visual cultural images are reproduced to the benefit of the dominant culture (Mirzoeff 1999). In this context, the images of people of color and migrants in France are produced by and for white French citizens. These views of the dominant gaze are largely shaped by France's history of colonialism which leads to racialized stereotypes that question the idea of a cohesive French and foreign identity and play into stereotypes of violent and ungrateful immigrants living in ghettos.

### **C. Concepts of French-ness**

The French Revolution produced ideas of *liberté, fraternité, et égalité* that are still present ideas in French society today. These ideals were meant to empower the lower classes of French society that had risen above convention and deposed their long reigning monarchy in favor of a democracy. In effect, the French revolution only reproduced the same concepts of French-ness that had been present before, but this time extended it across socioeconomic lines to allow the average, or low-class, peasant French citizens, visibility. The original revolution quickly brought about social change that prided the French on becoming a place dedicated to universal human rights extended to people of all races, genders, and socioeconomic status, but these ideals, essentially the precursors to universal human rights, were quickly abandoned in practice throughout the subsequent revolutions though their ideas remained a pillar of French identity.

The connotation of Frenchness as whiteness has recently been challenged as more and more white French citizens move into low-income *banlieues* where they are forced to view themselves as “othered” among a majority of the dark - skinned Maghreb (French Arab) and African descended citizens. The term for these individuals are *les petits blancs*, or “little whites” (Patricot 2013). They are the French equivalent to U.S notions of *white trash*. They are roughly the same socioeconomic status as many of the so-called minorities that they are surrounded by in their poor communities, but maintain a racial hierarchy as a white French citizen. Aymeric Patriot explores this concept as well as the conscious racial implications for white citizens in his book Les Petits Blancs (2013). Patriot asks how, over 200 years after the French revolution, does the poor, underprivileged, white French citizen maintain status as they experience the same ghettoization as racial minorities? Using Patriot’s analysis along with my own analysis for the purpose of this study, I reason that the realized versions of



white and black French citizens' in media affects both parties, some more than others. Although their existence is evidence of the cracking socio-economic system due to the presence of so many immigrants and people of color, *les petits blancs* remain a small minority of the population who are still indoctrinated about ideas about what it means to be French.

France maintains a romanticized view of colonialism that can be seen in the education system where colonialism is taught as a humanitarian good. For example, a majority of citizens of the French republic, my Strasbourgeois host-mother included, believe that during colonization, France was one of the few countries to allow the colonized to become French citizens. But in fact, France did not allow many of its colonized to become citizens. It was only after former colonies became French departments that citizenship was granted to them (Al Jazeera 2014). The result of this mis-education is that many French citizens, my host mother included, are dumbfounded and angry at the unpatriotic colonies who still hold resentment towards France. It is within this atmosphere that, in 2012 former French President François Hollande visited Algeria to speak on shared history and publicly acknowledged that colonialism was a crime against all of humanity, but maintained that current French citizens have nothing to apologize for<sup>2</sup>.

Mirzeoff's "dominant global gaze" is present not only in notions of what it means to be black in France, but also what it means to be French. The stereotypes about the French are not limited to a Western romanticism, but also very prevalent in French movies and media, where the quintessential French citizen is portrayed as stylish, sophisticated, and white. Parts of this conception of French identity stem from colonialism described by Rudyard Kipling as

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<sup>2</sup> "Hollande reconnaît les souffrances infligées à l'Algérie par la colonisation." *Gaëlle Le Roux, France 24*. [Décembre 20, 2012]. Viewed November 20, 2016.s  
<http://www.france24.com/fr/20121220-france-algerie-hollande-discours-parlement-passe-colonial-repentance-excuses-memoire-histoire>

the “White Man’s Burden.” Where Kipling painted the racialized “other,” previously the native Africans, as backward and savage and in need of salvation by the sophisticated white colonizers, French movies and media impute that same fantasy to contemporary French citizens and current immigrants and people of color.

This post-colonial romanticization combined with the French ideals of *liberté, fraternité, et égalité* contribute to a false, but widely accepted notion that “real” French people are white while black French are not “real” French people. The portrayal of black French people in media plays on these ideas that French-ness is white and sympathetic, while blacks are often characterized as immigrants living in poverty on the outskirts of town in the *banlieus*. I heard about this fact first-hand when I interned at the Raben Group and was fortunate enough to meet Rokhaya Diallo, a French-Senegalese journalist and filmmaker, at a film screening about global racism. While in conversation, she remarked, “White French people often ask where you are from, especially if you are black. They ask it not to understand your heritage, but as a way of confirming that you are not French. That you have come from somewhere else.”

#### IV. Film Discourse

##### a. *Qu'est qu'on fait au bon Dieu*

In the first film that I reviewed, *Qu'est qu'on fait au bon Dieu*, the concept of French identity is embodied by the respectable, white, Catholic, bourgeois Verneuil family. They interact with their white, Catholic, bourgeois friends and, like any family, want their four daughters- who live outside of the house with their own careers- to marry respectable men to show off to their friends during mass and brunch. Instead, the first few sequences of the film show Claude and Marie watching in growing horror as their daughters marry David, a Jew; Rachid, an Algerian Arab; and Chao, a Han Chinese man. While all three of the men have fully integrated into French society, are well-off, show few outward signs of their ethnic background, and speak French perfectly without a foreign accent, they still present a challenge to the Verneuil's perception of "Frenchness" and their cohesive family identity amongst their friends and neighbors. The film's title comes from a line where Marie asks her husband what they have done to God to deserve their daughters marrying such inappropriate men. They begin to place all of their hopes of retaining the family name on their youngest daughter, Laure, to marry a "Catholic" man. It is, then, the ultimate irony that the last straw for Claude is when Laure chooses to marry a black Catholic man. It is at this point that both the movie and the family starts to descend into madness.

Claude and Marie's perception of "Frenchness" mirrors dominant views of Frenchness wherein a concept of French identity is not based upon nationality, or even the ability to assimilate into the dominant culture, but is inherently about race, religion, and socioeconomic status. To be truly French, you must be born French. More specifically, you must be born white to French parents. It presents a system of hierocracy wherein under the presence of equality, theoretically under the French ideals of *liberté, fraternité, et égalité*,

anyone can become French upon the acceptance of a French way of life and French values. But historically, and presently, factors such as financial stability, income level, education level, stance on political issues, and retention of non-European cultural heritage have been used to deny people of color from becoming truly French, no matter the level of assimilation.

The film further plays on the presence of colorblindness, and the dormant racism that underlies it, by exploring those themes within its comedic subtext. The family is outwardly tolerant of other races, as one could argue is seen in their daughters' openness and acceptance of their husbands, but for the parents, their daughters have gone above and beyond the French notion of equality in a way that threatens to expose their hidden prejudices and disorient their view of what it means to be French. The movie's focus is not on the diverse sons-in-laws themselves, but on the father, Claude, who is the most opposed to his daughter's marriages outside of their religious and ethnical backgrounds. Though he repeatedly clarifies that he is not and cannot be a racist because he is a Gaullist<sup>3</sup>-- Claude continually engages in a series of microaggressions throughout the movie with covertly racist commentary. For instance, at a Jewish circumcision ceremony, when he is presented with the foreskin of his grandson by the Rabbi and told of its significance, he snaps back that it can't be that important if they cut it off. While burying the box in his back yard, as per the custom, he refuses to pick it back up when it falls out of the box and allows his dog to eat it. Throughout the movie, Claude continually looks down, not only on the individual sons-in-laws, but also their cultures and how cultural differences contribute to what he perceives as disrespectful behavior.

Beyond the snickers, judgements, and snide comments from Claude, his wife, and their neighbors, the only characters who use openly racist language are the sons-in-laws and Charles' African father André. By having the people of color use blatantly racist language,

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<sup>3</sup> Gaullist: a political supporter of the Gaullism political movement supporting Gen. Charles de Gaulle

the film has not technically crossed the boundary into the type of discriminatory language that would be barred by French law. This establishes French society's assumption that racism is not offensive and can be funny if the marginalized are the people saying the lines. It is even more telling that it is the kind, post-racial daughters and wives of these characters who frequently chastise their men and warn them to not say anything that could be considered stereotypical or racist. They also caution that if someone else does, to just keep quiet. The affect is a softened representation of Kipling's concept of "the white man's burden" wherein the gentile white femininity acts as a foil to both the intolerant white male subject and the crude non-white male subject.

In one of the film's sub-plots, Charles, the Cote Ivorian fiancé, tells his white fiancé that Africa is post-racial and colorblind, and that his family won't have any problem accepting her. All the while knowing that his father would be equally, if not more than her father Claude, opposed to their interracial marriage. André angrily remarks that it was bad enough that his son, who went to France to finish his baccalaureate, had dropped out of school to become a comedian. That his son also came back home with a white woman was beyond disappointing. André often makes bitter comments about how racist the French are, blaming the white officers as the reason he was never promoted to Colonial in the army (to which his wife says it was his bad attitude and lack of respect). André even cites the French chocolate mousse dessert, *Tete d'negre* (head of a Negro), as proof of French racism and tells his son that the white parents must pay for the wedding because they had stolen so much from African that they needed to give some back. André represents the "angry Negro" trope of the formerly colonized that most, if not all, French citizens begin to believe after years of studying colonialism as a humanitarian good in school. The film comes to head as Claude and André, the two fathers, continually bicker amongst themselves, to their wives, and to their children about their opposition to the marriage. Days before the marriage, Claude is driven to

the edge and tries to sell his family's house and leave his wife in search of an exotic mistress of Tahitian or Papuan descent since "that's what this family seems to do best" (de Chauveran, *Qu'est qu'on fait au bon Dieu*). In an odd and comedic turn of events the two fathers bond during a fishing outing, as they realize that they are both completely against the marriage of their children. Both men take comfort in the realization that they are both Gaullists, though André says he disagrees with Charles de Gaulle's African policies (de Gaulle was in power after the height of anti-colonialism demonstrations and the Algerian War of Independence), and both agree that neither is racist for wanting their children to marry within their race and place of national origin. In the process of coming up with plans to cancel the wedding and explaining how white and black people don't mix well together, the two become friends and end up saving the wedding as they realize their unfounded prejudices are negatively affecting their children's happiness. In the end, both Claude and André learn to appreciate the mixing of culture and understanding of race that they have learned through their children. The Kumbaya-esque ending of the movie, while beautiful and heartwarming, recalls the euphemistic phrase "there is no race, except the human race" wherein the fathers' newfound acceptance stems from an acknowledgement of similarities rather than appreciation of the value of differences. In many ways, this type of understanding can be considered progress for accepting racial and cultural diversity. However, it undermines true progress by excluding many people who do not share the privileges of relative prosperity, elite political views and education that allow for "seamless" assimilation.

### **B. 30 °Couleur**

The director and star of this film, Lucien Jean-Baptiste, is a French man of Martinican descent. He plays the principle character of Patrick, who is well-mannered, educated, affluent and Parisian. Patrick is contrasted throughout much of the film by the people of his native Martinique, who are shown at the height of their cultural festivities during Carnivale. One of the most telling scenes in the film takes place in the beginning when Patrick is celebrating with his colleagues after he is awarded a prestigious grand prize for his work as a historian. Patrick stands out as the only black person amongst glamorous shots of his posh lifestyle and champagne toasts with his Japanese girlfriend on his arm. He is surrounded by his flush-faced white friends who toast Patrick for proving how progressive France is and how much the government values diversity that he, as a black man, has won such a prestigious prize. The comments infuriate Patrick, who angrily asserts that it was his work alone and not his color or any progressive policies that won him the award. This outburst is one of many that Patrick has throughout the movie as he continually faces comments demonstrating that he is still not seen as equally French, despite his assimilation into the upper echelons of white French society.

This scene in particular evokes the idea of an angry black man, as Patrick's loud and aggressive tone draws a hush over the once lively crowd. When the conversation tentatively starts up again, after his colleague remarks that his parents must be proud and asks where they are from, Patrick coldly responds that they are dead which draws a hush back over the crowd. It is telling that rather than affirm their assumption that he is an immigrant or the child of immigrants, Patrick instead chooses to lie and say that they have died, effectively ending the conversation.

In the film, black French characters often embody racist stereotypes that reinforce neocolonial beliefs about black people in France. The problematic stereotyping begins when Patrick encounters problems at the airport that lead him and his daughter to be seated in the economy. The first scene where the main character is surrounded by people of color is chaotic as Patrick tries to adjust being regulated to a lower income level. People are screaming, babies are crying, and he is jostled back and forth as people pay little regard to his personal space. As soon as he calms down after leaving the plane, he is accosted by his childhood friend Zamba, dressed in heels and feathers, as he picks him up and sloppily kisses him on the lips.

The viewers experience the stereotypes through Patrick's eyes, who is returning to Martinique after 30 years of privilege in Paris, and seeing his friends and relatives now that he has adopted the "dominant global gaze" in viewing poor black French citizens. Throughout the movie, the viewer is introduced to the people of Martinique as they practice superstitious Voodoo beliefs, participate in non-traditional forms of gender expression as men comically cross gender and sexual lines running about in corsets, fishnets, and heels with the other hypersexual festival goers. Patrick's mother, even in death, requests to be buried in Paris near the Eiffel Tower because she has suffered so much in Martinique. In contrast, the light-skinned Martinicans that the viewers encounter when Patrick leaves his home to stay in a fancy hotel, are calm, polite and well-dressed. Even during Carnivale.

The characters in Martinique embody exaggerated versions of Caribbean stereotypes, in part because of the cultural impact of Carnivale, but it also serves as a visual connection to the journey that Patrick experiences. Jean-Baptiste's portrayal of the stereotypical roles of French-Caribbean people aids the viewer in identifying with Patrick, who has distanced himself from his native culture in order to fully assimilate in France. A continuing theme that was also present in *Qu'est qu'on a fait*, is that as an assimilated person of color, Patrick



continually perpetrates racial microaggressions through his facial expressions and off-handed comments. As the movie progresses, both Patrick and the viewer come to understand how their assumptions about the other characters have been influenced by a racist ideology.

Throughout the movie, several of Patrick's friends and relatives question if he realizes that even with the prestige and money that he has earned, no matter how hard he tries to deny it, his colleagues will always see him as a Negro. It appears as if everyone but Patrick understands that no matter how much money and prestige Patrick earns in Paris; he will always be a person of color who will always remain partially outside the realm of the French elite. It is a theme that is present throughout the movie as Patrick struggles to reconnect with his family and continually looks down on traditional practices that he left behind in Martinique. Away from the dominant French society where Patrick and other people of color struggle to maintain their elite status even after assimilation, in Martinique Patrick has become the elite that poor people of color look up to.

The turning point in the movie comes when Patrick confronts his sister for refusing to acknowledge him in his return home. In a moment of raw truth, Patrick loses control of his emotions and begins screaming that being sent to France was a punishment. He had no money to travel like the other students so he stayed home and studied harder because he felt isolated. He asserts that he assimilated in order to be accepted by his peers. His sister reveals that his mother sent him to France not as a punishment, but to give him the best opportunity to live and raise himself out of poverty. She also tells him that his mother was also sad that he left and angry that he forgot them in Martinique, only sending letters and postcards for thirty years until her death.

It is at this climax that Patrick begins to reconcile the two parts of his identity, French and French-Caribbean, realizing that he does not have to deny being a person of color from the

Caribbean to be French. It is after this revelation and during his aimless wandering around Carnivale, trying to physically and mentally orient himself in his native land, that the portrayal of the city in the midst of Carnivale shifts from comedy to cultural understanding and Patrick gains an appreciation for the symbolism and meaning behind his traditions. When Patrick finally finds his way back home, he is able to attend his mother's funeral, reconcile with his family and friends, and celebrate their traditional culture.

## V. Conclusion

The plot and characterizations demonstrated in these movies intersect within the larger themes explored in the beginning in this paper: neocolonialism, color blindness, and concepts of French-ness. In the course of analyzing the two films, I observed the common themes of assimilation, the hidden racism behind colorblindness, and overcoming internalized stereotypes. Similar to W.E.B. du Bois' notion of a double conscious identity divided between "American" and "African-American" that opposes a cohesive identity for a black American, the characters also struggle with adopting a French identity that seemingly cannot include elements of their native heritage.

France is an assimilationist country that has policies in place, legally binding for those seeking citizenship, to ensure that all immigrants practice French culture (Joppke 2007). Instead of valuing the rich cultures that its citizens bring, France makes an effort to assimilate each immigrant and minority ethnic group into white, French society. When people of color and other immigrants still fail to assimilate, French critics then place blame on the individual's failure to integrate and accuse them of being more likely to start riots and complain of economic stagnation. Assimilation played a major role for the black, and other characters of color, in both movies. Both Charles in *Qu'est-ce qu'on a fait au Bon Dieu* and Patrick in *30°* were fully assimilated and had family still living in French Departments overseas. Even though they were able to interact with the French elite, they were still seen by many to be outside the realm of what it meant to be truly French. This inability to fully attain notions of Frenchness led to the hidden racism, and stereotypes (internalized and experienced) that the characters of color experienced in the movie.

Assimilation, especially in the context of French colorblindness, is another way of confirming French identity as white and playing into the fears of a racialized "other" who

cannot accept society's values and culture. People of color are forced to conform to a concept of French-ness that they can never attain, and as a result, are forced into a discourse that pits the French vs. The other. This dichotomy is further exacerbated by the French mainstream media's failure to have accurate and nuanced representations of people of color that neither conform nor seek to actively change the dominant white society's view. In order to truly become a country worthy of the mantle of universal human rights and *liberté, fraternité, et égalité*, French society as a whole will need to examine and understand the historical racism of their country before they can truly understand and address the ways in which they have marginalized the French of African descent. As the 2005 riots resulted in more newscasters of color, increased visibility and expanded roles for French actors, writers, and directors could help to undo the damage caused by France's official assimilationist and colorblind policies.

## VI. Glossary

1. Colorblindness: a racial ideology that believes in treating people equally without consideration to race, gender, etc.
2. Othering: In the French context it is an imagined dichotomy between a white French citizen and those who are not (people of color, non-Catholic religion, etc.)
3. *Banlieu*: low-income housing projects in the suburbs of France
4. Gaullist: a political stance grounded in the ideas of Charles de Gaulle characterized by high regard to national sovereignty and national unity

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