

ICWA LETTERS

Since 1925 the Institute of Current World Affairs (the Crane-Rogers Foundation) has provided long-term fellowships to enable outstanding young professionals to live outside the United States and write about international areas and issues. An exempt operating foundation endowed by the late Charles R. Crane, the Institute is also supported by contributions from like-minded individuals and foundations.

TRUSTEES

Bryn Barnard
Joseph Battat
Carole Beaulieu
Mary Lynne Bird
Sharon F. Doorasamy
Peter Geithner
Gary Hartshorn
Pramila Jayapal
Cheng Li
Steven Butler
Dasa Obereigner
David Z. Robinson
Carol Rose
John Spencer
Edmund Sutton

HONORARY TRUSTEES

David Elliot
David Hapgood
Pat M. Holt
Edwin S. Munger
Richard H. Nolte
Albert Ravenholt
Phillips Talbot

Institute of Current World Affairs

The Crane-Rogers Foundation
Four West Wheelock Street
Hanover, New Hampshire 03755 U.S.A.

KAD-4
FRANCE

Kay Dilday is an Institute Fellow studying relationships of the French and North African immigrants in France – and North Africa.

Particularism

By K.A. Dilday

JULY 1, 2006

PARIS—For the last two weeks or so, a fellow journalist from my old newspaper has been traveling back and forth to France from New York working on an article about the travails of immigrant youth in the French suburbs.

He thinks that people of color in France are too focused on issues of representation in the public sphere to bring about systemic changes such as increased access to jobs and services that will actually improve their lives. This idea of separating the issues of identity and representation from a practical and political agenda had never occurred to me.

Believing in the inherent merit of one's community is the first step to demanding equal treatment and that often begins with simple self appreciation, which is strongly affected by visible measures of equality. The landmark study that provided crucial evidence that the policy of separate but equal education for blacks and whites in the United States was inherently damaging was a simple matter of showing that black children viewed dolls that looked like them as inferior and less desirable. And today, in France, the lack of visibility is the connecting theme for people of color. People speak knowledgeably about particular issues such as immigration and employment but the most prominent theme is the invisibility of black and brown faces in the media.

When I talk to people, from teenagers to successful adults in stable white collar jobs, they repeatedly mention the lack of non-white faces on the television news, in political parties and on television programs. From some black teenagers I met during one of the CPE demonstrations, to Samir, a late 20s coach in Clichy Sous Bois, to Messouda, a secretary of Algerian ancestry in Lyon to Kamal, a 40ish Algeria-born journalist for a French economic magazine, to Tex, a 39-year-old white hip-hop promoter, they all say it is as if black and brown people don't exist in public arenas except in news stories about strife or in sports or music. These are the same the black community in America might have said 80 years ago.

The concept of nonrepresentation by race or ethnicity directly clashes with the idea of France. According to the French concept of equality, any French person should be able to see him or herself in the achievements of any other French person. No commonality matters beyond French identity. Jacques Chirac should have as much relevance for a young French person of Senegalese or Moroccan descent as he does for any French person. But as numerous studies have shown, the psyche doesn't always process things this way. And in France, the separate but equal way of life that was ruled so damaging in the United States is unofficial practice. It is something that cannot be challenged in courts.

This spring a French news channel announced that France's most watched nightly news program would be presented by Harry Roselmack, a black man from Martinique, when the regular white anchor, a 20-year fixture in the position, went on summer holiday. The news was of such magnitude that it claimed the front page of French newspaper reports and, although with less fanfare, space in foreign papers, so renowned is France for its monochromatic broadcasting in

contrast to its fairly diverse population.

It's not that people cannot see themselves in successful people of different races and colors that seems to be the issue: it is that France professes to be color blind, and hews to that legally. Yet, studies by groups such as the Montaigne Institute, an independent research institute in Paris, have found that people in France see race very clearly, particularly when they are filling positions, and when it comes with a dark face or a North African name, they don't like it all.

This newsletter is in many ways prompted by what seems like a frivolous topic: my hair. My hair has been in demi-braids for several years: half-braided, half free and loose. I mentioned in my first six-month report that I wanted to change my hairstyle. I felt too common and I felt that I was treated in a certain way, dismissively, which is the way it seems that people treat African immigrants. When I dressed casually, I noticed that people reacted differently. It began almost immediately on my arrival. French banks have a protective entry of double doors closing off a small antechamber. To enter, you must be buzzed first into the entry chamber, where someone may, if they choose, question you about your intent. If the answers are sufficient, you are then permitted to pass through the second door into the bank.

When I arrived in Paris and tried to open an account, the first bank I visited would not let me in. The woman demanded to see my passport and my bank card. At that time I wasn't certain if that was standard procedure so I hung outside and waited to see who would be let in. An Asian fellow was quickly buzzed in. Perhaps he was known to them but I still felt singled out. I went home, put on high heels and my nice coat and tried another bank, which let me enter. Once inside a bank official very kindly told me what documents I would need. The official had spent time in New York where I am from and he was eager to talk about the city and his old haunts. I wonder if the reception would have been as positive if I was African.

Later I read in a newspaper account that the Minister of Equal Opportunity, Azouz Begag, a man of Algerian descent, was not only refused entry to a bank, when he tried to enter wearing a knit wool cap during the winter, but bank personnel trapped him between the doors and called the police. This past month I went into a grocery store, but after looking at the length of the line, I decided to put up my few items and leave. About two minutes later as I was walking down the street I felt someone grab at my bag. I yanked it, of course, and turned around screaming instinctively in English and saw that it was a female worker from the grocery store. She was obviously convinced I had stolen something. I don't know if she was able to get a good enough look in my bag to see that I had no groceries or she realized from my cries — "Crazy woman, thief, what are you doing?" — that I was American. But she backed away looking at

me with a strange expression of either fear or confusion. She realized that she had misjudged the situation. That was clear. I was wearing a simple pink dress that day, not dissimilar from something that all French women would wear and not the typical immigrant wear. It must have been my hair, I decided.

Hair is a constant topic in the African community in Paris. On the platform of the metro at Strasbourg St. Denis, men of African origin loiter trying to get people to visit the many hair salons that line Blvd Strasbourg. The salons sell both real and fake hair, pomades, skin-lightening creams, all sorts of potions, many of them designed to make women of color look more like European women.

One quite popular chain of salons are called the "Fair and White," — I counted three locations along Blvd Strasbourg — its name in English. In addition to hair extensions, it sells its own brand of lightening cream. I went into one



An advertisement for skin lighteners on Boulevard Strasbourg

and asked one of the black women behind the counter if she knew what the name meant and how she felt about what it said. I got a confused look and no answer.

I also noticed that the legends on the doors usually read: "Specialists in the *defrisage* (straightening) of black and mulatto hair." In the United States, a mulatto person would be considered a part of the black community, but with skin color being of extreme importance, blacks and browns in France take care to set themselves apart, something reminiscent of apartheid-era South Africa, post-colonial Haiti, and modern-day Brazil. I wasn't sure quite what to do, but I began to contemplate both straightening my hair and getting extensions weaved in to make it longer, something I had never contemplated in the United States, but here the pressure to look a certain way was so intense, that it made me consider doing things I had never done before.

I also started to feel that I was overweight, something I rarely feel in the United States, a country that, while obsessed with trimness, focuses on healthy bodies as much as slim ones. According to American height and weight charts, I am fairly average and perhaps a bit on the slim side for my height. But here in France, I have almost been convinced that I am overweight and that my shape is an undesirable one. A waif-like, straight-haired aesthetic that is the ideal here is not just the ideal, it is really the only acceptable look.

Recently I bought *Elle* magazine, one of the most popular publications for women in France. It's an easy



African mothers protesting potential expulsion

magazine to read and the slang is invaluable. This particular issue focused on getting into shape to wear a swimsuit, and in particular on women's bottoms — *fesses*, in French. As I idly flipped through the spread I noticed only two photos of black or Latino women in the entire 15-page story, both of whom were American stars. Their photos were examples in a segment on how to best camouflage an undesirably large bottom.

Since I am just running out of the products I brought from home, the other day I bought a face cream, a sunblock, which is what all dermatologists recommend for all clients regardless of skin color. I read the carton carefully and when I was preparing to leave the next day, I squirted a bit into my hand. It was tinted a color that would be appropriate for someone white. I took the box out and scoured it to see what I had missed. In the store, I had skipped over the boxes reading "natural tint," knowing that the color considered natural would not be mine. And obviously no one had ever thought to put the shade or even the fact that it was tinted on the box. I suppose that it never crossed the maker's mind that black women would be buying sunblock.

So now I realize that not only am I not fair and white, but that my hair is not straight enough, my skin is the wrong color for cancer preventing creams, and my bottom is too big. These seem like very small and superficial qualities but the fact is that France has a large black community — French people who have moved here from the DOM-TOM, an abbreviation for the islands that are overseas departments and territories of France, and the thousands of immigrants who enter from sub-Saharan Africa each year.

If this sense of being all wrong simply by being black can so easily affect me, (coming from America where concepts of beauty and normalcy while flawed have a much wider range), how do immigrant boys and girls, and young men and women here feel?

When I happened upon the magazine *Respect* at an event I got a clue. I had stopped at a little stand where

two men who looked to be in their early 20's were standing. It's a very eager magazine; as I read it, it began to remind me of magazines like *Ebony* or *Essence* in the 1970s: the articles encouraged people to be proud of their skin color, how to work with their hair, where they could find makeup for black women. These are topics that were prominent during the black-power movement of the late 1960s and 1970s in America, before publications began to make conscious efforts to show the range of people in America. In France, people of color are still almost entirely absent from any of the mainstream publications unless the article is about some sort of disadvantage or plight in the community.

I remember a North African woman angrily telling me that most people of North African descent were middle class, they were not thieves or rioters. At first I bristled at the equation of working class people with society's miscreants, but the longer I have been here, the better I understand what she really meant. It is uncommon to see articles or news stories about people of African descent in France that do not focus on a crime or a social ailment.

Respect magazine was created to emphasize that there is no real divide among kids. "The media always talks about youth in groups, but we wanted to show that we are not so divided, that we all get along," the two young editors prattled eagerly, happy, I think, to talk to a Black American.



The latest issue of Respect Magazine focusing on discrimination in employment

"Did you know that 96 percent of the kids in the cities hadn't heard of Tommie Smith?" one of them asked.

Ah, who is that?" I said.

Disappointed, they took out an issue of *Respect* and showed me. He is one of the two black American runners who gave the black-power salute from the medal-winners platform during the 1968 Olympics in Mexico City. While I knew of the incident, I did not remember the names. It had all happened before I was born and I suspect that many parents of kids in the cites weren't born yet either in 1968. I am also pretty sure that most Black kids in Harlem, my old neighborhood, couldn't place Tommie Smith either.

I bought several issues of the magazine and was able to arrange to attend an editorial meeting. The magazine receives money from the government, from the ministries of justice and equal opportunity and also from private organizations dedicated to combating racism.

The articles in the magazine reflect the tremendous



Poster and audience at an American-style block party.

level of interest in black American popular culture among youth in France. Although France has always been welcoming to black Americans, for youth it borders on the obsessive. The United States seems to represent a place where minorities have carved out a distinct space both in social life and in the public eye. The split is so distinct that it occurs even within families: I am friends with a couple here who have three daughters. The oldest is adopted and of North African origin. Life is harder for the oldest daughter, her mother says, and thus the girl has taken to venerating all things American, fancying America as a place where she might feel freer than she does here.

Yet I've had several experiences with *Français de souche* who are eager to have me confirm how much better life is here for a black person than in America. It is as if they are eager to look at the problems in other countries, but beyond the superficial examination, their own country's social barriers seem almost to be off limits. Whenever I bring up race, people get distinctly uncomfortable. French society eschews separation and talk of issues pertaining to race and ethnicity, yet leaves immigrants with no alternative but to focus on precisely those issues by locking immigrants out of the concept of the norm and as a result out of jobs and homes.

So these politics of identity are the first step in finding a place in society. Even now, the people of color whom I speak with can recite the names of non-whites in prominent positions. Audrey Pulvar, a Martinique-born nighttime national news anchor, Rachid Arhab, a midday national news presenter, and among educated North Africans, Azouz Begag, minister of equal opportunity, the highest ranking North African official in France, is simply referred to as Azouz, even by those who haven't met him. His legend is such that he needs only one name.

But the politics of identity can also backfire. France's most famous racist and xenophobe, Jean Marie Le Pen, the founder of the National Front Party, has complained several times about the abundance of dark faces on the French national soccer team. Before the recent magical World Cup quarterfinal match where France beat the favorite team, Brazil, he commented that French society cannot recognize itself

in the team because it has so many black and brown players, most of whom have origins in France's former colonies or current overseas departments in the Caribbean.

Mr. Le Pen's sentiments do not seem to be shared by the rest of France, which voted Zinedine Zidane, the team's captain, a man of Algerian origin, one of the three most popular Frenchman of all time in a poll by a prestigious right-leaning paper. But the biographical data about Mr. Zidane makes clear that very early on, he had to learn to stop fighting other players over

the comments they made about his origin and humble background from a poor neighborhood in Marseille.

So, to return to my hair: at the last moment I canceled the appointment I had made to have it straightened and to get extensions. All of a sudden one day I woke up and realized that I had almost succumbed to the pressure and I resolved that I wouldn't let the pressures change me.

Thus, my hair is still relatively short and curly; despite losing in the World Cup final, upon the French soccer team's return, France cheered them and even forgave the Mr. Zidane for getting ejected from the game. And, on a lazy evening in July, Harry Roselmack presented his first news broadcast on TF1. I and the rest of France think he did just fine. □

Institute Fellows are chosen on the basis of character, previous experience and promise. They are young professionals funded to spend a minimum of two years carrying out self-designed programs of study and writing outside the United States. The Fellows are required to report their findings and experiences from the field once a month. They can write on any subject, as formally or informally as they wish. The result is a unique form of reporting, analysis and periodic assessment of international events and issues.

ICWA Letters (ISSN 1083-4273) are published by the Institute of Current World Affairs Inc., a 501(c)(3) exempt operating foundation incorporated in New York State with offices located at 4 West Wheelock Street, Hanover, NH 03755. The letters are provided free of charge to members of ICWA and are available to libraries and professional researchers by subscription.

Phone: (603) 643-5548
Fax: (603) 643-9599

E-Mail: icwa@valley.net
Web address: www.icwa.org

Executive Director: Steven Butler
Program Assistant and Publications Manager: Ellen Kozak

©2006 Institute of Current World Affairs, The Crane-Rogers Foundation.

The Information contained in this publication may not be reprinted or republished without the express written consent of the Institute of Current World Affairs.