

The Backlash to CRT in France

Transcript

[Church bells; “J’ai Deux Amours” by Josephine Baker]

ANNAH AKHOUN-MURAT: On Tuesday, November 30, Josephine Baker [became the first black woman to be inducted into the French Pantheon](#), the tomb of France’s heroes. On that gray afternoon, soldiers from the Republican Guard carried the coffin up the red carpeted stairs to join the other seventy five men and five women, such as Victor Hugo, Aimé Césaire, or Marie Curie. Later in the night, you could see projections of Josephine Baker on the emblematic monument along with the French flag. In parallel, that date, the iconic Empire State Building in New York was [lit with the colors of the French flag](#).



As he stood by her coffin, [Mr. Macron, the French president, declared](#), “France is Josephine. She did not defend a certain skin color. She had a certain idea of humankind and fought for the freedom of everyone. Her cause was universalism, the unity of humanity, the quality of everyone ahead of the identity of each single person. This unique event and Macron’s statements could not be more symbolic. In fact, the French government has lately been attacking the alleged [Americanization of French universities](#) with critical race theories.

(Photo Credit: New York Times)
Emmanuel Macron speaks at the induction ceremony.

These American imports are set to undermine and fragment the French Republic. But as Josephine Baker engaged in the French Resistance, she was equally very much a visible figure of the civil rights movement in the United States [alongside Dr. Martin Luther King on The \[Washington\] Mall](#).



(Photo Credit: Blackpast) Josephine Baker at the 1963 March on Washington.

Together with [Professor Soumahoro](#) today, we will embark together on a journey to explore the linked fates between the US and France. We will also aim to tell you a story of racism à la française, drawing some comparisons with a debate here in the US. To do so, we will rely on Professor Soumahoro's book and experience as a French black academic who has lived on both sides of the Atlantic. We will discuss why, in contrast with the US, race as a word, a concept, is still a taboo and under attack in French politics.

As we introduced, Josephine Baker's induction to the-- to the French Pantheon, this has obviously also resonated a lot on this side of the Atlantic in the US. Could you share with us some thoughts drawing from your academic research and experience on how we feel-- how you feel-- about that induction of Josephine Baker?



(Photo Credit: Paris Match) The Empire State building lit in French colors for Josephine Baker.

MABOULA SOUMAHORO: Yes, first, I didn't know that the Empire State Building had, you know, flown the French colors on the 30th. I wish I would have seen that. It would be-- it would have been interesting to see it with my own eyes. It's really interesting to see this transatlantic celebration of Josephine Baker from, you know, both places, both perspectives.

On the one hand, it's interesting to see that even in New York City, so even in the US, there was this celebration of Josephine Baker, who was for the most part during her life, you know, ignored by her country of origin-- by the United States. So now to see that, you know, like such a significant building in New York City, in the state of New York, the Empire State. So this Empire State Building is showing the French colors. Putting forth this long, you know, relationship and this long friendship that is true to a certain level.

As we said earlier, Lafayette was dispatched by the French to help, you know, the American Revolution. So that this-- there's this long history of alliance and support between France and the United States.

But Josephine Baker, originating from St. Louis, I believe, had to leave the United States precisely because she didn't have enough opportunities in our country. We're talking about the

interwar period. We're talking about Jim Crow. We're talking about the pre-civil rights-- I mean, active civil rights, not active. It's not true. Winning civil rights movement, right, because the victories occurred in the 1950s and the 1960s.

The large demonstration, the protests, but also the decisions made by the Supreme Court of the United States-- that's the 50s and the 60s-- which doesn't mean that the activism along those questions were not discussed, debated and fought for in the 40s in the 30s. And actually, since the end of the Civil Rights-- no, the end of the Civil War, right? Let alone the resistance during the period during which slavery was legal in all parts of the United States. We tend to restrict it to the South, but [there was also slavery in the North](#).

So Josephine Baker is a black woman, African American, from the United States, who decided that, you know, she would travel to Europe and to France in particular, that she would pursue a career. And she, she reached a level of stardom in France and in Europe that she simply would have never achieved in the United States. That is to say that in France in particular, she really was a mainstream icon, right? [She was a superstar](#). She was a fashion icon. She danced, she performed, she was an actress. You know, women wanted to look like her. And I'm talking about, you know, all women and many white women, [they wanted to have her hairstyle](#), they wanted to have her clothes.



(Photo Credit: DW) Crowds of fans gather outside of a theater in Paris for Josephine Baker.

She married several times, you know, white French men. I think she had married in the United States when she was, you know, younger, but she had, you know, like, she was Beyonce. You know? She was the Beyonce of the time. And this was only possible in the French context, right? She did try to have a career in the United States, but [in the United States she was never able to achieve this level of stardom](#). So this is interesting to see that now in 2021, the Empire State Building, is paying tribute to Josephine Baker when she, you know, consistently depicted how she was segregated, how even when she was a superstar in France, she could not be, you know, served food in a restaurant, even in the North. But my take on Josephine Baker, as a, you know, black French person of African origin, somebody who has lived in France, you know, most of her life.

At first, I didn't know who Josephine Baker was, when I was growing up. I didn't know her. This is a conversation that I've had with, you know, colleagues from the United States, African American or black women teaching in the United States, or, you know, being based in the Americas. And having conversation with those colleagues was very enlightening in terms of our perspective, within the diaspora.

The colleagues that carried out work on Josephine Baker were for the most part, you know, historian or cultural studies, you know, specialists. They were feminists, and they were on their, you know, like their mission was to unearth, right? To uncover the silenced, lost histories of black women throughout the world. And one of those black women was Josephine Baker. And they were, you know, happy and willing to dig into Josephine Baker's experience in France, and to celebrate her as this, you know, black woman who had overcome all the obstacles, you know, the narrative.



(Photo Credit: Vogue) Baker in her famous banana skirt outfit.

And I find it interesting. I found it interesting. Only when I met those colleagues in Paris or in New York or other places. I kept telling them, I don't know, Josephine Baker, and I'm interested in African Americans and unearthing and covering and, you know, dealing with all those silenced histories in the United States, but I would have never thought about Josephine Baker. And my perspective is so much different from yours, because she's not my icon. She's not a “[shero](#)”. She's not like...

And I did not know her until I think I was thirteen or fourteen. And I saw a comedian on French TV, who there was a whole thing about, you know, past histories and past artists. And at some point, this comedian of, you know, I think of a Caribbean origin, partly like he was mixed race. He impersonated Josephine Baker with, you know, a banana belt and making faces and dancing. And I thought that this humor was part of the comic setting. I thought he was just doing something crazy and that was supposed to make us laugh. And I didn't know that this person was a real person.

So that was my first encounter with Josephine Baker and then growing up and hearing about her because she was celebrated in France as this icon, I totally...yes, at first, naively rejected her. I was like...I don't look up to her. I don't see like if—if to reach stardom is about accepting to make faces, dance half naked, you know, [sporting a banana skirt](#), then I don't understand.

But I've noticed over the years that Josephine Baker has street name-- I mean, [streets named after her](#). There's a big [swimming pool in Paris](#) that's named after her that-- she's a very common name. And I use the term “naively” rejected her because now I understand more things, but there are still questions to be, you know, posed regarding this elaboration of an acceptable form of blackness for the French mainstream.



(Photo Credit: Paris Tourist Office) Piscine Joséphine Baker in Paris, France.

So Josephine Baker was at first an American citizen, right? That's a fact. She was an American citizen. And blacks from—I mean, African Americans are a different type of black people. African Americans are not tied to the colonial history of France, African Americans are associated with the United States, which is perceived, particularly in the 20th century, as a powerful country, as the country that has helped both France and other European countries during the two World Wars, right?

So in the beginning of the 20th century, the United States of America that had been, you know, a very isolationist country throughout the 19th century comes to the international stage, right, gets involved in international affairs, and gets involved in a position of power-- industrial power, right? Even though we're on the way to the 1929 and the crash, but it's still the, you know, the Gilded Age, like from the late 19th century to the early 20th century, there's a development of the US Army, right? So the United States in the 20th century is a mighty country, right?

And Josephine Baker, even though she's an African American, and even though she's being segregated within the United States, outside of the United States. She can paradoxically benefit from her US citizenship, right? But outside. She will be respected as an American-- as a black American. And in that particular, in that particular order. She's black, but she's a civilized black. She's an American black, right? Even though, domestically, she's not-- she's treated as a second class citizen, right?

And so that's the thing with, you know, the many forms of blackness. You can be a black person, but it all depends on geographically where you come from and to what are you associated with? Are you associated with an independent country that has now grown into being a powerful country? Or are you a black person coming from the French colonial empire? And that's not the same black.

So I think that in the French context, she was, you know, celebrated precisely because she was not from the colonial empire. So that's my issue with Josephine Baker. And I think I mean, may

she rest in peace and good for her she was inducted. But if the price to pay to be inducted in the Pantheon-- that have no interest in, anyway. If the condition to be inducted is that, then I can...no. As a French person, as a black French person, she's not any kind of black.

ANNAH AKHOUN-MURAT: And this is so fascinating, Professor, because this really ties in to that discussion, lengthy discussion in your book about this perception of blackness on where you are situated and really drawing on your own experience. As you mentioned, the link of being black from French colon-- the French colonial empire in the US is a very, is a very different experience than living and experiencing it in France.

MABOULA SOUMAHORO: Exactly.

ANNAH AKHOUN-MURAT: And can you tell us maybe a bit more about how when you came to the US, you were sort of-- you said you were associated with a sort of French, golden prestige?

MABOULA SOUMAHORO: Exactly, and that was a surprise because I was coming from a context where I was, you know, systematically or at least frequently asked, "Where are you from? Are you really French?" And all those questions about my citizenship status, or you know, my origins is really-- were really questions about, "Why are you black? Why are you black *in this context?*" Right? "You're not really one of us. You're, you know, something else."

And then I cross the Atlantic. I go to the United States, and people asked me, "Where are you from?" And this is okay because I'm an immigrant to the United States. I'm not home, right? And so I had to make a choice. I didn't know what to answer. I was coming from Paris, so I couldn't say, "I'm Ivorian," which was the answer that I would provide when I was asked this question in France, right? "Where are you from? I'm from the Ivory Coast." My parents were from the Ivory Coast. I was actually born in France, and I had grown up in France. But when I come to the United States, geography again, it's like, "Where are you from?" So...can I say I'm from the Ivory Coast? Because people will start telling me, "Oh, [Abidjan](#). How nice. I know that." I don't know Abidjan. I grew up in Paris.

So I started saying for the first time I come from France, and France became my home, or there was this realization that my home was actually France because my family was living in France, because I was born there, and because this was the place that I knew the most. And when I said I'm French or I'm from Paris, people did not question me. I mean, from time to time, they would say, "Oh, there are black people in France?" But most of the time, they were like, "Okay," and it was believable.

And it was the first time in my life that I presented myself, that I understood myself, or that I accepted myself and was accepted as a French person. And that took place outside of France. So I totally understand the situation in which Josephine Baker found herself. Because on this side of the Atlantic, I was immediately and easily associated with [the image of France](#) that is projected, you know, throughout the world. So fashion haute couture, you know, the arts and letters, and, you know, the, you know, like the long...I don't know-- cultural history, the castles, the wine, the cheese.

And then you understand that you are a particular kind of French because I'm Muslim, I don't drink. So I don't know anything about wines. Like, I couldn't help anyone, but I do eat cheese. And then you're Muslim, but I'm a smoker. So you smoke and you're Muslim. You know, all these things. But that was really an opportunity for me to get a better sense of myself. But I also understood how I could benefit from this association with, you know, the French nation state.

I was myself coming from a powerful and dominant country, a civilized country, a cultural country. And in that regard, there could be a distinction made between me, this black French person, and African Americans and African Americans that could perhaps automatically take you back, as a white American, to the historical feud, to the unresolved issues, to the ongoing racism of the United States.

So I suddenly became this convenient black person that people can talk to. Talk about friends to, be friends with hire, right? Give opportunities because you're still a black person, but you're not *that kind* of black. So that's why I write that, "To each nation, its own black." Right? So what Josephine Baker, let's say. I'm not at her level, of course, but what she benefited from in France, I know that I'm benefiting from in the United States as a French person. If I introduce myself as an Ivorian, it would be a different story. Not only negative, but it would be, you know, different unfolding. But me and the French, it's like, "I'm a real French. I can be an ambassador for France," which is interesting.

When I was teaching here at Columbia, and Barnard, I participated in one of the commencement ceremonies, right? So to me, it was so exotic, so it was like, "I'm gonna-- I'm gonna do it." And had students who are graduating. And then they gave me the robe, you know, that I had to wear. And I was like, "We don't do that in France. Yes, I'll do it." And then, you know, like, the colors you wear are the colors of your university, the university in which you received your PhD. And because my PhD was French, they were like, "Oh, we don't know what color to give you. Because you're not an American. You didn't receive your PhD from an American university." And they gave me the French colors.

So I was the face of France on Columbia campus, and I found this moment to be very interesting. And I thought to myself, *Hmm, I'm representing France*. But in this very, you know, prestigious context-- in this Ivy League university, and now France is claiming me because I'm here. This is interesting, you know. So, I mean, that was back in 2008, or nine and that was interesting because it was the first time that I was wearing the French colors, and that took place in the United States.

ANNAH AKHOUN-MURAT: Now bringing it back to our contemporary era in France. Much of the criticism against critical race theory is that import, that [Americanization of French universities](#) and bringing, you know, identity politics and that danger to the to the French Republican ideal, and the French universalist model that Macron referred to in his speech he made for Josephine Baker. What do we mean maybe quickly by "French universalism" and, and to-- what do you think about this pretty--?

MABOULA SOUMAHORO: Yeah, [French universalism](#) is really this idea that [France does not recognize racial categories](#), unlike the United States. That France does not recognize ethnic or religious groups. That you are French national and that's it. In public, in the public sphere, the Republic should not take into account your, let's say community affiliation. So these would, you know, this non-recognition of communities has been sometimes labeled *communautarisme*, which was for the longest time, impossible to translate in English. So now more and more we say here, communitarianism.

But the concepts-- you know, it's interesting to see how translation matters. There was no word because the concept of the vision did not exist in the United States, right? But in French, the anti-model model was the United States. And the model of the United States was based on communities. And France do not want communities, but France has communities, and the communities that are referred to in the French perception of *communautarisme* is also interesting, we could find we could we could talk about that.

Because when the French talk about, you know, communities in the United States, they are talking about the minority groups, right? That's what they are talking about: minority groups, you know, racial groups or, you know, visible ethnicities. They're not talking about the founding communities of the United States. That is to say, the Pilgrims of New England, right, or the businessmen of the people who were working for, you know, joint stock companies that founded, you know, the colonial Virginia in 1607. And that was a colony that was set up to, you know, for economic purposes, right? They're not talking about the Quakers of Pennsylvania, they're not talking about all these groups of different settlers who populated North America at the time for different reasons. And then all those colonies became states, and built this country that became, you know, nation states, named the United States of America.

This workaround is like if we talk about WASPs, you know, so White Anglo [Saxon] Protestants. We're talking about an immigration that is very different from the Irish immigration, the workers, poor workers, people who were, you know, escaping from famine in Ireland. We're not talking about the 19th century, and, you know, people who went through Ellis Island, and who came from Eastern Europe and southern Europe and who were no longer, you know, protestant, but they were, you know, Catholic, or they were Jews. You know, Russians, all these things. It's a history of minorities.

When the French talk about the minorities, they're not talking about-- they're talking about the visible, the negatively racialized minorities. So I think that this is a distinction that needs to be taken into account.

The second thing that I wanted to say about this threat of the Americanization of French universities, of the French psyche is it is [a myth that is so easy to debunk](#). This is such a display of bad faith.

We spoke about the lingering ties connecting France and the US from the foundation of the US: the military support, the political support from Lafayette, Jean de Crèvecoeur, who wrote about, you know, like this American Revolution, as early as 1782. We can talk about Tocqueville, who traveled throughout the United States in 18-- I think it was in the 1830s or 1820s, who was

talking about, you know, like the, you know, the issue of slavery, the race relations in the United States.

And when Crèvecoeur or when Tocqueville wrote and spoke and reflected upon this, you know, the evolution of this newly established nation, it was not the Americanization of France. So when today we are talking—I mean France is talking and denouncing the importation of, you know, of a U.S. analysis of the French context as if they did not apply. Nobody said that they applied, literally, because France is not the United States and everybody is clear on that.

First, it's sheer ignorance of U.S. academia, because they should know that within U.S. academia, you can find faculty coming from all around the world. So if I teach in the United States, and I stay forever in the United States, would I become immediately an American having an American view on French matters? Are we-- is it possible to erase all my precedent years as a French citizen, you know?

So you find people from Europe, you find people from Asia, from the Caribbean, from the African continent from, you know, south or even South America or Canada. So these are the people who are producing knowledge within U.S. academia. So how American is it? You still have Americans, of course within U.S. academia, but you have also a lot of people who are doing work on France and the French context who come from elsewhere, and who have simply found better working conditions in the U.S. context because the U.S. is wealthy and the U.S. has, you know, like a number of universities that can, you know, offer significant salaries, let's just say, and who will leave you alone, and not accuse you of being, you know, like, obsessed with race and things like that. So that would be the second point.

So accusing people to import things from the United States is, is simply a misunderstanding and a non...I don't know. A terrible knowledge, first, of the United States history because the French think that they know the United States. And you talk about, I mean, you hear about the United States on the-- at the mainstream level, everywhere every day. But I don't think they are familiar with the geography, the history, and the evolution.

How this country that began with thirteen states has grown to become this nation state, encompassing fifty states and other dependent territories. Like I'm talking about Puerto Rico, the Virgin Islands, and Guam, you know, all those-- those spheres of influence. How the United States occupied, you know, Haiti in the early 20th century, and all the things. There's this vision of, you know, *The U.S. do this and the U.S--*

So once again, it's just the [most recent weapon](#) that has been, you know, found and brandished to attempt at maintaining the silence. And if the silence is to be broken because, I don't know, the authorities can understand that the silence can no longer continue to operate in that form, then [the French government is] going to find a way to control the narrative.

And [the French government is] going to find a way to frame the conversation, and will decide how the conversation will be framed. So you want to talk about race? You want to talk about blackness? We are going to induct Josephine Baker in the Pantheon. And that's our answer. And that's the end of the conversation.

This is the blackness we accept. Dance in banana belts, be American, be an actress, be a performer, and that's the blackness we'll accept. And people are still fighting and they have things to say and the silence cannot continue, you know? Like it's even, the irony that I'm using for the induction of Josephine Baker in the Pantheon can also be perceived as a form of progress. They still have to do that. They still have to induct her. So the next step will be somebody else.