

PREFACE: BLACK GIRL IN PARIS

Why Paris?¹ Why France? I've been asked those questions more times I can remember—even before I entered graduate school. I always think my interest in France is a boring or ordinary story. I quickly fell in love with the French language as a middle school student, even though the language was somewhat difficult to master. I continued to study French throughout high school. I became very curious about visiting France and getting an opportunity to speak French with French people living in France. I finally got that chance when I enrolled in a study abroad program my junior year in college. And for someone who did not have the opportunity to travel much growing up, my world opened. Not only did I become fluent in French by living with a family in Paris and taking courses at Paris 7 (one of the University of Paris campuses in the Latin Quarter) and the Institut Catholique de Paris, I felt a new sense of independence.

I quickly realized that I was in France not only as an American citizen but also as a black American. I saw this in the way I was treated, the questions people asked me. I remember being one of the only African-Americans in my study abroad program. I remember struggling to find a salon where I could get my hair relaxed. And I thought about the complexity of my experiences—having simultaneously the privilege of being American and the complications of being black. The French, influenced by various stereotypes and images (both positive and negative) circulating in the media, asked me questions about being American, while shopkeepers followed me around in stores. One day when I was on one of my long walks across the city, I came across Tyler Stovall's *Paris Noir: African Americans in the City of Light* (1996) and began to appreciate how I was part of long line of African-Americans living in Paris for long periods, such as James Baldwin, Duke Ellington,

and Richard Wright, and how being Black in Paris made apparent many of the contradictions of the French Republic.

My fascination and interest in Paris, and France more generally, only deepened as I started to apply my “sociological imagination” to my experiences and observations about race, ethnicity, and identity in France. Such observations stayed with me long after my study abroad experience, to when I entered graduate school and started to consider what other scholars had written related to these topics. I found my population to study—children of North African immigrants, or descendants of the French colonial empire in the Maghreb, who were born and had known only France yet were positioned outside of it. Through my ethnographic research, I learned about much more than this population. Among other things, I learned fundamentally about how race and ethnicity continue to separate and mark individuals as different in both the United States and France.

I hope that the following pages do justice to the long history of black scholars writing about other communities on the margins.