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GUEST ESSAY

In Paris, I Get Judged on What I Speak, Not How I Look

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By Euny Hong
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I moved from New York back to Paris in the summer of 2020, partly to get away from the spate of anti-Asian assaults that had emerged with the Covid pandemic. The last straw was when I became the victim of a drive-by yelling: Two white guys driving past me stuck their heads out of a car window to shout a racial epithet plus the word "coronavirus."

I thought: I tried, America. And then I started packing.

"But isn't there just as much racism in France?" ask my U.S.-based friends, who need to believe they are living in the world's most enlightened nation. Yes, there can be — sometimes horrifically so. The pandemic also saw a rise in anti-Asian incidents in France, as in many countries. France is a former colonial power that has significant ongoing racial tensions, as evidenced most recently by a Paris police officer's fatal shooting of Nahel Merzouk, a 17-year-old Frenchman of Algerian and Moroccan descent. The killing led to nationwide riots.

So, no, France is not free of racism. But Paris does afford a person like me, occasionally, the chance to feel maybe I'm free of it, in ways that my experience in America rarely does.

Sometimes — and I don't expect to make friends with this statement — all you have the energy for in this life is to go where you are most likely to be treated like a white male. For me, that's France. In the United States, I am an Asian female, an invisible minority, until we're not and we're being harassed. Meanwhile, my life in France, as a somewhat assimilated fluent French speaker, is the closest I've ever come to the luxury of feeling like a privileged member of the dominant majority. It happens, in particular, when I am surrounded by non-French-speaking Americans.

High tourist season is a witching hour for Paris residents. The demographic makeup of the city is turned on its head as Parisians flood out and foreigners pour in. The collective height and body weight of the city increases; French gives way to English as the language you're likely to hear. Most topsy-turvy of all, I get whisked to the front of the line. At one restaurant, a friend and I asked for a table on the terrace and were seated right away, even though an American couple ahead of me had just asked the same question and were told, "No room." The only difference was that I had asked in French.

I admit it: I find this satisfying.

This is the privilege of being a Francophone in Paris. You are afforded the benefits that come from what some consider an overzealous linguistic chauvinism, perhaps best expressed by the French historian Fernand Braudel, who wrote in Le Monde in 1985, "La France, c'est la langue française." ("France is the French language.") Or as the existentialist writer

Albert Camus is reputed to have said, “Oui, j’ai une patrie: la langue française.” (“Yes, I do have a homeland: the French language.”)

In other words. if you speak our language, you’re one of us.

Does that in practice mean that all French speakers are treated equally? Categorically not. Many of the citizens of Paris who speak fluent French run up against all kinds of prejudice. But it does mean that a French-speaking expat like me, living in Paris, is afforded an elevated status that’s not available to non-French-speaking visitors, e.g., my fellow Americans, with little regard to my sex, ethnicity or tenure in France.

I’m hardly the only American expat of color to feel more at ease in France than in the United States. There’s a century of evidence of Black Americans relocating to France to pursue their art and find a refuge from American racism — Josephine Baker, James Baldwin and Nina Simone, to name a few.

It’s not as simple as all that, of course. It never was. Some people in France say those days of inclusiveness are over. Some have observed that diasporic Africans in France often don’t enjoy the same treatment as do Black Americans, let alone Black American artists of renown.

France has its own history of linguistic subjugation, forcing French language instruction on students in its colonies and attempting to eradicate other languages. As for the former colonies of France, their relationship with the language is complicated. In some, like Algeria, the French language is losing ground as their leaders consciously try to shed the remnants of their countries’ colonial pasts.

My attachment to French comes down to some parallels between the history of France and my Korean heritage. At various times during the 19th and 20th centuries, Germany and France wrestled over Alsace-Lorraine and thus which language would be spoken there. Koreans are well versed in language-based conflict and linguistic dictums. Japan’s government forbade the use of the Korean language during that country’s occupation of Korea from 1910 till the Japanese surrender in World War II. In South Korea we learned about the banning of the French language through a storybook that was assigned in elementary schools, Alphonse Daudet’s “La Dernière Classe” (“The Last Class”). I read it in school, and the story also appeared in my parents’ sixth-grade textbook in the 1950s; that’s how deeply it resonates.

“La Dernière Classe” is about an idle schoolboy, Frantz, who lives in Alsace around the time of the Franco-Prussian War, circa 1870. He turns up late for school one day and finds his teacher Monsieur Hamel looking grave. The teacher explains that Germany has taken over the region, that he will not be seeing them again and that all instruction commencing the next day will be in German. “This is the very last French lesson you will have,” says the teacher, “so I entreat you to pay attention.”

Frantz listens to his French grammar lesson for the very first time, wondering why he never appreciated the elegance of the past participle. He tells the reader, “Monsieur Hamel told us that French was the most beautiful language in the world, the clearest, the most solid: that we should protect it and never forget it, because even if a people become enslaved, as long as they retain their language, it’s like a key to the prison.”

At the end of the class, Monsieur Hamel writes in big letters on the blackboard, “Vive la France!”

A lover of words, I was captivated by the idea of a language being part of your humanity and identity, driving every cell in your body. Reading “La Dernière Classe” made me vow to one day learn the French language. And I did.

Frankly, I feel more comfortable in French. English is a beautiful, haunted language, but to my ear, it is aggressive and hegemonic. French, by contrast, is soft, romantic; it articulates the seemingly contradictory forces of logic and emotions like no other language I know. It allows people to complain all day long (a stereotypical French pastime) and somehow manage to keep it within a civilized range. It is a language that connects me to my true and best self. It binds me to the people who in turn feel that the language binds me to them.

French is, as Monsieur Hamel said, a key. And if it occasionally grants me a chance to cut the line and grab a waiting table on the terrace, well, I think I've earned it, at least as much as any white male ever did.

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