Foreword

In the fall of 1970, I entered the fifth grade in the public schools of Marseille, in France, where I grew up. At the same time, continuing inflows of non-European immigrants were creating a new ethnic and cultural pluralism in the suburbs. Whether from former colonies in North Africa, Southeast Asia, or sub-Saharan Africa, the visibly nonwhite population was growing so fast that Marseille began to assume a substantially different face than that of the prewar era. Although such a large scale of immigration was not unusual in the region, the ethnic and social origin of the migrants provoked intense political conflict and sometimes violent resistance, and it was impossible for a ten-year-old pupil of Caribbean descent, whose main preoccupations were soccer and the ever-tragic fortunes of his beloved Olympique de Marseilles, to avoid confronting the meaning of such turmoil. My parents told me, although I do not remember the incident, that one day I went back home very anxious because at school I had trouble writing an assigned essay on the question, "What does it mean to be French for you?" I surely knew, even if at ten I would hardly have expressed it in this way, that French identity was formed around notions of shared culture, territory, and language, all organized by the state, understood as an expression of the sovereign people. At the same time, I certainly knew by intuition that race did matter in daily experience of life, that the color of a French citizen could make him not quite French, that although color-blind in theory, the French idea of the nation had been racially coded in practice. This was likely the main reason for my anxiety. What could being French possibly have meant to me? Little surprise that years later, I was given the opportunity to turn what would have been a sort of existential crisis into a scientific questioning about identity, culture, citizenship, and race in a comparative perspective.

It is fortunate that scholars on both sides of the Atlantic have begun to investigate the historical and contemporary meanings of race in France. Contrary to deep-rooted academic views and popular opinion, racial thinking in France has its own original history. Recently, social scientists have shown how under certain condi-

tions, the universalistic idea of the nation became in fact intertwined with culture and heritage as part of the definition of Frenchness, creating a contradiction between global and particularistic perspectives on citizenship and social membership. Thus they have turned their attention to the plasticity of race, pointing to the arbitrariness of racial categorization and illuminating how race became a social marker throughout France's history, while never being officially endorsed as such. From the 1789 revolution to the colonial era, from the Third Republic to the Vichy regime, from the Fifth Republic up to now, many authors have already shed some light on the so far hidden sides of the French "color-blind" model, which appears far more an ideal than an empirical reality.

From this perspective, the collection of essays remarkably selected by Tyler Stovall and Sue Peabody, makes for a timely contribution to this rich new interdisciplinary scholarship by bringing together some of the very best groundbreaking recent research on the history of race in France. Collectively, the essays assembled tend to unveil, from a specific but complementary angle, some of the critical tensions between the ideal and practice in the making of modern France, generating a dynamic that has challenged both. Traced over almost four centuries, the concept of race is no longer presented as the outcome of France's difficult adjustment to post-imperial order. Race, as a socially constructed category, if not as a practical device for policy implementation, appears deeply rooted in the particularities of French history—despite the continuing official denial of this fact. Indeed, race did not happen by accident in the last quarter of France's twentieth century. In that respect, the book's broader purpose is to explain the odd configuration of French racial politics over time, namely the combination of *grand moments*, celebrated as great successes (1789—the universal Declaration of the Rights of Man, 1804—the Code Civil, 1870—republican legislative acts, 1905—the separation of church and state, etc.), with great failures (the persistent exclusion of colonial subjects from the status of citizen, the permanence of socioracial inequalities between full and equal citizens by law, anti-Semitism under the Vichy regime, the constant interplay of ethnic consideration in French policy of nationality, and the possibly growing racial hostility). How can both occur simultaneously? Why this particular combination of successes and failures? How come the former have been so much trumpeted, while the latter so far have remained silenced? This is a good set of questions, and *The Color of*

Liberty tackles it with accuracy and significant empirical raw materials. Despite the fact that each essay stands alone, collectively they show perfectly how the historiography of race constitutes an intimate part of modern France. Anyone interested in French studies and in contemporary dilemmas surrounding issues of equality, cultural diversity, and the practice of citizenship should no longer ignore how a thoughtful historical approach on race matters can deepen our understanding of both French political ideals and public policy. The analysis of the challenge of color blindness as a core element of the French universalistic idea of nation and, in turn, the practical impact of race throughout France's modern history will certainly be recognized as a *passage obligé* for any scholarship on France. The present collection is well-researched, conceptually original, and full of new insights. It also provides well grounded, sometimes provocative views, which anyone concerned about the relationship between race, identity, citizenship, and social membership must come to terms with. Beyond academia, it will also be sure to invite controversy, especially once translated into French.

For many reasons, which have to do with the weakening of the social fabric in France, race as a concept has never been so much present in the society at large as it has in the past twenty-five years—even if it still remains somehow hidden. The "race-neutral" approach happens no longer to prove as effective as it was once presumed to have been in ensuring every citizen full and equal rights, regardless of origin, race, or religion. If not in theory, there is in practice growing evidence of the racial factor's recognition. Why, then, is France still so reluctant to change official policy? Why does the state keep on rejecting officially what it increasingly accepts in practice? These two questions lead to a third one: how does race change politics and, reciprocally, how does politics change race? These three questions come together in the lucid and stimulating readings provided by *The Color of Liberty*.

Last but not least, this book is about history and power. It deals with the many ways in which power operates in the making and recording of history, and it rejects both the naïve proposition that we are prisoners of our past and the pernicious suggestion that history is whatever we make of it. Thus to tell the story of race in modern France is to reconsider the crucial issue of membership, of exclusion and inclusion, namely to deal with the recurrent question piercing my youth—what does it mean to be French? It also means attending to its even more compelling corollary: what can we do to

reconcile France's official self-representation (i.e., Frenchness) with the extraordinary anthropological diversity of the country's population? By raising such issues of intense dispute, the contributors to *The Color of Liberty* have definitively met the challenge that Michel-Rolph Trouillot evoked so forcefully in his acclaimed book, *Silencing the Past*: "The ultimate mark of power may be its invisibility, the ultimate challenge, the exposition of its roots."

FRED CONSTANT
Université Senghor, Alexandria, Egypt