

The Wrong Side of the Tracks

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As far as I knew, the world of my childhood was defined and divided by class, and as far as I was concerned, I did not live on the right side of the tracks. From 1963, when I was born, to 1986 when I left for the United States at the age of twenty-three, I lived in a big rectangular block of concrete in the northeastern suburbs of Paris, right outside the Périphérique, the freeway that contours the city and separates it from the banlieues. The building where I and my family lived sat on a hilltop, and from there overlooked not the beautiful sights for which Paris is known but its far less attractive working-class neighborhoods.

Paris and its environs are divided by the Seine. The river runs through the city from the southeast to the southwest curving upward toward the middle. L'Île de la Cité—the site of the Notre Dame Cathedral—is the official center of the capital. South of the Seine lies the so-called “Left Bank” or “Rive Gauche,” historically the place of artists and intellectuals; to the north lies the “Right Bank” or “Rive Droite.” The terms are a bit misleading, suggesting an east/west division rather than a north/south one.

When I was growing up, only the Rive Gauche seemed to matter. That's where the rich lived. In 1971, Yves Saint Laurent launched his famous women's perfume—*Rive Gauche*—named after his boutique in Saint-Germain-des-Prés on the south side of the river. Ever since, brands the world over have borne the same name to denote luxury: *Rive Gauche Shoes*, handcrafted shoes and leather products by an Italian designer in Florence; *Rive Gauche—London*, interior design “for a discerning clientele”; *Rive Gauche Jewelry* from the heart of New York's diamond district. In contrast, few products have ever been named after the Rive Droite, and those that have usually give off a “casual-but-nice” air, catering to a more middle-of-the-road clientele. The Rive Gauche was a powerful status symbol. Unfortunately, my world was clearly on the Rive Droite, if even that, more to the right of the right side—outside of the city's periphery.

In the United States, people often ask me where I come from. Paris, I tell them, because it is a short and convenient answer. You're from Paris! My reply never fails to elicit an enthusiastic response that no exclamation mark or other form of emphasis can convey. Yes, Paris, I confirm, at which point the interlocuter will inevitably launch into old or recent memories of trips to the city. I may be in the middle of getting a tooth pulled, undergoing an X-ray, or speaking with the bank teller, it does not matter. My personal business is suddenly tossed aside—teeth and all—and the wondrous tales of Paris start to flow. I might as well have said, I'm from the moon. But I'm not from the moon, and in fact, I never really lived in Paris proper. The real answer to the "where are you from" question is that I come from a place called Le Pré Saint-Gervais that in all likelihood people have never heard of because tourists just don't go there. At best, a visitor driving on the Périphérique might zoom by without knowing the place even exists. Nothing would draw their attention to it. From the freeway, the landscape on that side of town is studded with modern gray tenements, a view that does not jive well with most people's image of Paris and its surroundings. So, I stick to my generic answer: I'm from Paris.

The building where my family and I lived was the product of 1950s urban development in response to the need for more affordable housing outside the city. We knew it as "The Little Waffle"—"La Gaufrette"—a nickname that somehow got attached to it when it was first built. The inside and outside balconies did make the concrete structure look a bit like a waffle. Perhaps the name was meant to make it sound like "Home, Sweet Home," but the place did not instill tender feelings in me. It was unattractive, I thought, and with the windows open, noisy. The balconies were blue, yellow, and red—cheap left-over paint for which no one had better use. Low-income housing.

My parents had moved in as a young couple. My mother worked from home as a typist for a dating agency (a precursor of online dating services), while my father worked on car parts in various factories. Neither made much money. Le Pré (as we called it for short) was a good fit: La Gaufrette was brand new, close to the metro, right outside Paris, and affordable. The freeway was built soon after they moved in and opened to traffic in the early 1970s. What more could a family on a small income hope for? First,

my parents moved into a studio where they still lived when I was born three years later; then into a two-bedroom apartment where we still lived when my brother was born eight years after me; and then finally into a three-bedroom apartment on the eleventh floor of the building where I spent the rest of my childhood and where my parents remained until they retired in the late 1980s. We were a working-class family aspiring to be middle class, and both Le Pré Saint-Gervais and La Gaufrette were key to our social mobility.

But from the balcony of our eleventh-floor apartment, there was little to inspire the imagination of a young person. The endless stream of cars from the freeway down below smelled up the place. Women—always women, it seemed—labored up the hill with their market carts and their baguettes. Buses too labored up the hill. Men, leaning against old walls, lingered around smoking cigarettes or tinkered with their motorbikes, while stray cats meandered around looking for prey. By far the happiest sight was that of children coming in and out of school down the hill, the school that I attended through the eighth grade.

Le Pré felt more like an intersection than a destination; La Gaufrette, like an island without a true sense of place, adults and children alike crossing paths mostly in silence and anonymity. Only the pigeons gathered on the anemic patches of green that lined the street, thanks to the old woman who came out every day to feed them with bread crumbs.

What I could not see at the time, from my limited perspective, was that right around me were people much worse off than me whose lives told of a world and a French experience far less privileged than mine.

In the 1960s, Le Pré Saint-Gervais not only attracted people like my parents, it also drew recent and not-so-recent immigrants—mainly from North Africa. The neighbors right below us on the tenth floor were Jews from Tunisia (a former French protectorate that gained its independence in 1956) and below them on the ninth floor was a Muslim family, also from Tunisia. The two families, perhaps because of their religious backgrounds, did not get along, and we especially did not get along with the family on the ninth floor, the Muslim family. Trouble usually erupted at night over apparent trivialities. Someone was making too much noise somewhere. A TV was too

loud. “Bang! Bang! Bang!” Across all three floors, we took turns at hitting the steel radiators, easy targets for anyone wishing to vent their frustrations on others loudly. My mother retaliated with the handle of a sturdy spatula wrapped in a kitchen towel to keep the radiator from chipping. My father had painted it after all.

My parents often lay the blame on the Muslim woman from the ninth floor for “starting it.” Who had started what and why, I will never know, but what I do know now is that these fights were symptoms of deeper problems that remained unaddressed. Our ninth-floor neighbor often sarcastically called my mother “la Chrétienne” (the “good” Christian) as a way of saying that my mother thought she was superior; to which my mother retorted, without missing a beat, that she was Christian and proud of it. Truth be told, my mother hardly ever went to church, never carried a Bible, and never prayed, but in that moment she wasn’t about to relinquish her pedigree, and I suspect that she did feel a little superior, more civilized than the woman she always called by her last name instead of the more common and more polite “Madame,” which she used for the other women around her. Our ninth-floor neighbor was also keen on reminding my mother and my father that she was as French as they. Whatever prompted such reminders, it is clear to me now that these were borne out of a sense that she did not belong in the way my parents did. How many times did I hear my mother say, “Mais ces gens-là, ils ne veulent pas s’intégrer!” But those people, they don’t want to integrate! *Ces gens-là*. Those people. Short for those who don’t belong and whose fault it is if they don’t. “If they want to live here, they have to do it the French way!” The TV, the kids running across the floor a little too loudly, were only the surface manifestation of a difficult social reality: Our families embodied different social experiences, different histories that for some created a sense of inequality not shared by others.

My parents, like many of their contemporaries, held “Arabs” in contempt, especially Muslims whose religion was distrusted. The name itself, “les arabes,” was used to cast aspersions on that population. Arabs, the argument went, wanted it both ways—they wanted to be independent from France, but, when in France, they also wanted to live as if they were still at home—*à la casbah!* The word “casbah” is still commonly used to refer to a very loud and chaotic place. Arabs, the argument went on, should either adjust to the French way of life *or* go home. “Moi, si je pouvais, je les

enverrais tous chez eux.” I’d send them all back home if I could. The disdain was palpable. No one ever asked, how would I feel if my country had been colonized? What would I do if my country was impoverished as a result? Would I stay home? Would it be easy for me to adjust?

But I too inherited some of my parents’ prejudices. I didn’t like Arabs either. They had names I couldn’t pronounce, languages I couldn’t understand, clothes that looked foreign. At least some did. Some of the women wore henna tattoos on their faces and henna in their hair, which—I am loathe to say—I thought was unbecoming. Some of the women and men wore long white garbs that harkened back to a distant land that felt very different from mine. These were not the sights or sounds of home.

Early in my life, an unconscious association between whiteness, Europeanness and Frenchness had taken shape in my mind. Our neighbors had been in France for some years, and their children had grown up in France; yet I did not see them as French—to me, they too were foreigners, outsiders. My neighbors did not look white or European the way I did. My family, on the other hand, was all white European.

The insidiousness of these associations is especially evident now when I consider how I responded to the ethnic diversity of my family on my mother’s side versus how I responded to our neighbors’. My mother’s family is French born but has deep Germanic roots. My maternal grandmother, her siblings, and most of their children are from the Alsace region, a part of France steeped in German culture as a result of repeated periods of Germanic rule. I spent a few summers at my grandmother’s house. Most of the year, she lived in Paris where my mother was born and grew up, but in the summer, she returned to her birthplace. Everyone there, my grandmother included, spoke Alsatian rather than French. Alsatian is an Alemannic German dialect related to Swiss German. It is similar to the dialect spoken by the Swiss Amish. The children I met in Alsace spoke Alsatian *before* they spoke French, even in school! I could not play with them because I couldn’t understand them and they couldn’t understand me despite the fact that Alsace is very much a part of France. Alsatian and standard German were default languages everywhere—in stores and restaurants; on trains and buses; on television and the radio. No one spoke French as their main language except in the larger cities like Strasbourg. My grandmother’s village was forty miles away from that

city, the region's capital. My father often said that Alsace felt like a foreign country. It did. Yet, somehow, I never questioned the Frenchness of Alsatians. Despite everything, I knew they were French in the same way that I was. Part of it was probably the fact that they lived within our national boundaries. But, by that token, I should have considered young Algerians born in France who clearly spoke French to be French. Yet I did not. To be French meant that you looked like me. They did not.

Our ninth- and tenth-floor neighbors had children, but the only children with whom my brother and I spoke or mingled were the ones who lived upstairs. Like us, they and their families were culturally Christian, white, European—and not immigrants. We went to school together, which is how our parents knew each other. The school system in my town was clearly divided between the private Catholic school that I attended and the secular public ones which were said by those around me to be underfunded and not as good. The children downstairs went to public school. Class, religion, and ethnic origin created a social divide. There were virtually no students of North or Sub-Saharan African origin in my school. Likewise, with the teachers. In all the years that I was in school, from the start of kindergarten in 1966 when I was just three years old to the end of my graduate student years at the Sorbonne in 1986 at the age of twenty-three, I never once had a teacher who was something else than white European.

French history lessons did not help bridge the divide between my world and the world of my neighbors (or that of other North Africans around me). We did not learn about French colonialism. We did not learn about Algeria. I never heard of the work of Frantz Fanon until I was in the United States. When Fanon's critique of French colonialism, *The Wretched of the Earth*, first came out in France in 1961, it was banned. When the war in Algeria ended in 1962, the French textbook approach to French colonialism "evolved" from the blatant extolling of French colonizers to a somewhat less biased interpretation; one, however, that still failed to include the perspectives of the colonized.

In literature classes, I read the famous works of Albert Camus, *The Plague* and *The Stranger*, both of which are set in Algeria. But Camus was what the French call "un pied-noir," a French person of European origin who lived in French-occupied Algeria before 1962. Camus's Algeria, in real life as in fiction, was that of colonial France. It's no

surprise that the people described in his novels—who are also “pieds-noirs”—did not strike me as being much different from Parisians.

More revealing would have been William Gardner Smith’s novel, *The Stone Face*, published the year I was born. Smith, a black man from Philadelphia, had settled in France in 1951 after serving in Germany during World War II. His main character, Simeon Brown, is also black from Philadelphia and has moved to France because he feels that something terrible will happen to him if he stays in the United States. In Paris, he starts to feel like a man again but sees Algerians being targeted by the French police. One day, he gets into a scuffle with an Algerian man, ironically thinking that he’s white. The two are arrested. He, who is black but from America, is let off the hook, while the Algerian is thrown in jail, though innocent. Much to Simeon’s dismay, another Algerian man who witnessed the incident later confronts him and says: “How does it feel to be a white man?” “We’re the niggers here!” the man exclaims. Simeon is stunned but comes to understand that, while France is a haven to him, a foreigner who does not represent a threat to French interests, it is not safe for those who live under the yoke of French imperialism. In France, William Gardner Smith became a serious critic of French colonialism and a staunch supporter of Algeria’s National Liberation Front.

I was born one year after the war in Algeria ended. The only war-related story I have is of my father choosing to “miss the train” when his time to serve came because so many of those who’d already left had either died or suffered severe wounds. For those who served, the bitter defeat in Algeria was nothing to brag about. Algeria gained its independence. The era of French colonialism came to an end. And we, the colonizers, went home. Unlike the dead of World War I and World War II who were widely commemorated, those of the Algerian war were not. One author has aptly called it “the impossible commemoration.” There was no shortage of films about the two world wars when I was growing up, so many that even now I tire of the idea of watching any other, but how many films were there about the war in Algeria?

Algerians lived on the periphery of my world. “L’Algérien” was what we called the man who owned a small grocery store in the center of our suburban municipality. The only times we shopped there was when all other stores were closed. We knew most merchants by name, Madame this, Monsieur that, but the Algerian was just that—

"l'Algérien." Recently, I was thumbing through letters that my brother sent me after I'd left for the United States. In one of them from 1989, I was intrigued to read that he and my parents had gone to a new Algerian restaurant on the occasion of his birthday. The restaurant, he wrote, located in the center of our town, had just opened and the couscous was delicious. Maybe we'd all go there the next time I was home? Try hard as I may, I cannot picture my family—my parents especially—sitting in this Algerian restaurant, which, it turns out, was not new. Le Royal Couscous, I later discovered, had first opened in another part of town in 1980 (six years before I left), then closed, then relocated in 1989. I'd never known that the restaurant was there, and I could only imagine that it was my brother's idea to try this "new place."

Perhaps most striking, as I look back, is how little I knew of how the vast majority of Algerians around me lived. In 1965, about 40,000 resided in shantytowns around Paris. These settlements were called "bidonvilles." "Bidonville" literally means "can-shaped town," referring to the half-can shape of dwellings that characterized some of these makeshift settlements. Most dwellings looked more like shacks or tents. Whatever the shape, none had running water, electricity, or a toilet. These camps were just far away from Paris and its immediate suburbs (mine included) to be hidden from view. The one closest to where I lived was about ten miles away, far enough for me to not know that it was there. Had I caught even a glimpse of the "bidonvilles," I, who thought I was living on the wrong side of the tracks, would have felt that I lived in the lap of luxury. La Gaufrette was a huge step up from such poverty. A tenement building like ours was where many Algerians dreamed of living.

On a recent visit to my hometown, I returned to the streets of my childhood for the first time in over thirty years. La Gaufrette still stands by the freeway. I recognized the roads easily. As I approached the back side of the building, I could see that it looked different: Some of the balconies had been enclosed and a new red brick surface replaced the old paint. I made my way down the hill and round the street to the front of the building and looked up to where we used to live on the eleventh floor. There was the kitchen window from which my mother used to wave goodbye when I left for school in the morning. There was my bedroom balcony from which I contemplated what life might

have in store for me. I lingered a while, then started to make my way farther down the hill to see what had happened to my school. Right then, a man about my age who'd seen me looking asked if I needed something. "No, thank you," I said and explained that this was where I'd grown up. I was visiting. It turns out that he too had grown up in the neighborhood—but he'd never left. He got very animated and told me all about the new construction. "You won't recognize the place!" he exclaimed. I was glad to chat with him. But while he talked, pointing this way and that, I looked mainly at him. He was North African, and in that moment, it struck me that he and I who had lived in such close physical proximity had existed in completely separate worlds. I thanked him for his help and went on my way, wishing that I could say more, wishing we had more memories to share.



Claire Alexander-Joly is a Humanities professor, originally from France, with an academic background in African American Studies. For over thirty years, she has lived in the United States where she had to come to terms with what it means to be white in America. She is now at work on a memoir entitled, "'You're White Now': A Tale of Immigration, Adulthood, and Race in America."

"The Wrong Side of the Tracks" is based on the first chapter of her book.