

**Borough of Manhattan Community College  
City University of New York  
English Department**

“Acting French”<sup>1</sup>

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I spent the majority of this summer at Middlebury College, studying at l'École Française. I had never been to Vermont. I have not been many places at all. I did not have an adult passport until I was 37 years old. Sometimes I regret this. And then sometimes not. Learning to travel when you're older allows you to be young again, to touch the childlike amazement that is so often dulled away by adult things. In the past year, I have seen more of the world than at any point before, and thus, I have been filled with that juvenile feeling more times than I can count—at a train station in Strasbourg, in an old Parisian bookstore, on a wide avenue in Lawndale. It was no different in Vermont where the green mountains loomed like giants. I would stare at these mountains out of the back window of the Davis Family Library. I would watch the clouds, which, before the rain, drooped over the mountains like lampshades, and I would wonder what, precisely, I had been doing with my life.

I was there to improve my French. My study consisted of four hours of class work and four hours of homework. I was forbidden from reading, writing, speaking, or hearing English. I watched films in French, tried to read a story in *Le Monde* each day, listened to RFI and a lot of Barbara and Karim Oeullet. At every meal I spoke French, and over the course of the seven weeks I felt myself gradually losing touch with the broader world. This was not a wholly unpleasant feeling. In the moments I had to speak English (calling my wife, interacting with folks in town or at the book store), my mouth felt alien and my ear slightly off.

And there were the latest developments, the likes of which I perceived faintly through the French media. I had some vague sense that King James had done something grand, that the police were killing black men over cigarette sales, that a passenger plane had been shot out the sky, and that powerful people in the world still believed that great problems could be ultimately solved with great armaments. In sum, I knew that very little had changed. And I knew this even with my feeble French eyes, which turned the news of the world into an exercise in impressionism. Everything felt distorted. I understood that things were happening out there, but their size and scope mostly eluded me.

Acquiring a second language is hard. I have been told that it is easier for children, but I am not so sure if this is for reasons of biology or because adults have so much more to learn. Still, it remains true that the vast majority of students at Middlebury were younger than me, and not just

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<sup>1</sup> Coates, Ta-Nehisi. “Acting French.” *The Atlantic*. 29 August 2014. <https://www.theatlantic.com/education/archive/2014/08/acting-french/375743/>

younger, but fiercer. My classmates were, in the main, the kind of high-achieving college students who elect to spend their summer vacation taking on eight hours a day of schoolwork. There was no difference in work ethic between us. If I spent more time studying than my classmates, that fact should not be taken as an accolade but as a marker of my inefficiency.

They had something over me, and that something was a culture, which is to say a suite of practices so ingrained as to be ritualistic. The scholastic achievers knew how to quickly memorize a poem in a language they did not understand. They knew that recopying a handout a few days before an exam helped them digest the information. They knew to bring a pencil, not a pen, to that exam. They knew that you could (with the professor's permission) record lectures and take pictures of the blackboard.

This culture of scholastic achievement had not been acquired yesterday. The same set of practices had allowed my classmates to succeed in high school, and had likely been reinforced by other scholastic achievers around them. I am sure many of them had parents who were scholastic high-achievers. This is how social capital reinforces itself and compounds. It is not merely one high-achieving child, but a flock of high-achieving children, each backed by high-achieving parents. I once talked to a woman who spoke German, English and French and had done so since she was a child. How did this happen, I asked? "Everyone in my world spoke multiple languages," she explained. "It was just what you did."

There were five tiers of French students, starting with those who could barely speak a word and scaling upward to those who were pursuing a master's degree. I was in the second tier, meaning I could order a coffee, recount a story with some difficulty, write a short note (sans verb and gender agreement), and generally understand a French speaker provided he or she talked to me really slowly. The majority of people I interacted with spoke better, wrote better, read better, and heard better than me. There was no escape from my ineptitude. At every waking hour, someone said something to me that I did not understand. At every waking hour, I mangled some poor Frenchman's lovely language. For the entire summer, I lived by two words: "Désolé, encore."

Compared with my classmates on the second tier, my test scores were on the lower end. Each week, in my literature class, we were responsible for the recitation of some French poems (Baudelaire, Verlaine, Lamartine) from memory, and each day we had to recite a stanza. This sort of exercise may well be familiar to readers of *The Atlantic*, but the rituals required to master it were totally new to me. I had never been a high-achieving student. Indeed, during my 15 or so years in school, I was a remarkably low-achieving student.

There were years when I failed the majority of my classes. This was not a matter of my being better suited for the liberal arts than sciences. I was an English minor in college. I failed American Literature, British Literature, Humanities, and (voilà) French. The record of failure did not end until I quit college to become a writer. My explanation for this record is unsatisfactory: I simply never saw the point of school. I loved the long process of understanding. In school, I often felt like I was doing something else.

Like many black children in this country, I did not have a culture of scholastic high achievement around me. There were very few adults around me who'd been great students and were subsequently rewarded for their studiousness. The phrase "Ivy League" was an empty abstraction to me. I mostly thought of school as a place one goes so as not to be eventually killed, drugged, or jailed. These observations cannot be disconnected from the country I call home, nor from the government to which I swear fealty.

For most of American history, it has been national policy to plunder the capital accumulated by black people—social or otherwise. It began with the prohibition against reading, proceeded to separate and wholly unequal schools, and continues to this very day in our tacit acceptance of segregation. When building capital, it helps to know the right people. One aim of American policy, historically, has been to insure that the "right people" are rarely black. Segregation then ensures that these rare exceptions are spread thin, and that the rest of us have no access to other "right people."

And so a white family born into the lower middle class can expect to live around a critical mass of people who are more affluent or worldly and thus see other things, be exposed to other practices and other cultures. A black family with a middle class salary can expect to live around a critical mass of poor people, and mostly see the same things they (and the poor people around them) are working hard to escape. This too compounds.

Now, in America, invocations of culture are mostly an exercise in awarding power an air of legitimacy. You can see this in the recent remarks by the president, where he turned a question about preserving Native American culture into a lecture on how we (blacks and Native Americans) should be more like the Jews and Asian Americans, who refrain from criticizing the intellectuals in their midst of "acting white." The entire charge rests on shaky social science and the obliteration of history. When Asian Americans and Jewish Americans—on American soil—endure the full brunt of white supremacist assault, perhaps a comparison might be in order.

But probably not. That is because fences are an essential element of human communities. The people who patrol these fences are generally unkind to those they find in violation. The phrase "getting above your raising" is little more than anxious working-class border patrolling. The term "white trash" is little more than anxious ruling-class border patrolling. I am neither an expert in the culture of Jewish Americans nor Asian Americans, but I would be shocked if they too were immune. Some years ago I profiled the rapper Jin. As the first Asian-American rapper to secure a major label contract, he often found himself enduring racist cracks from black rappers abroad and the prodding of fence-patrollers at home. "Yo, what is this? You really think you're black, Jin?" he recalled his parents saying. "Bottom line—you're not black, Jin."

Pretending that black people are unique—or more ardent—in their fence-patrolling, and thus more parochial and anti-intellectual, serves to justify the current uses of American power. The American citizen is free to say, "Look at them, they criticize each other *for reading!*" and then go about his business. In that sense it is little different than raising the myth of "black on black crime" when asked about Ferguson.

I will confess to having very little experience with fence-patrolling, and virtually none with the idea that if you are holding a book, you are “acting white.” The Baltimore of my youth was a place where white people rarely ventured. It would not have occurred to anyone I knew to associate reading with white people because very few of us knew any. And I read everything I could find: *A Wrinkle In Time*, *David Walker’s Appeal*, *Dragon’s of Autumn Twilight*, *Seize The Time*, *Deadly Bugs and Killer Insects*, *The Web of Spider-Man*. I had a full set of Childcraft. I loved the volume *Make and Do*. I had a full set of World Book encyclopedias. I used to pick up the fat “P” edition, flip to a random page, and read for hours. When I was just 6 years old, my mother took me to the Enoch Pratt Free Library on Garrison Boulevard and enrolled me in a competition to see which child could read the most books. I read 24 that summer, far outdistancing the competition. My mother smiled. The librarian gave me candy. I was very proud.

For carrying books in black neighborhoods, in black schools, around black people, I was called many things—nerd, bright, doofus, Malcolm, Farrakhan, Mandela, sharp, smart, airhead. I was told that my “head was too far in the clouds.” I was told that I was “going to do something one day.” But I was never called white. The people who called me a nerd were black. The people who said I was going to “do something one day” were also black. There was no one else around me, and no one else in America then cared. This was not just true of me, it was true of most black children of that era who were then, and are now, the most segregated group in this country. Segregation meant many of us had to rely on traditions closer to home.

And at home I found a separate culture of intellectual achievement. This is the tradition of Carter G. Woodson, Frederick Douglass, and Malcolm X. It argues for education not simply as credentialism or certification, but as a profound act of auto-liberation. This was the culture of my childhood and it gave me some of the greatest thrills of my youth.

I was a boy haunted by questions: Why do the lilies close at night? Why does my father always say, “I can dig it”? And who really killed the dinosaurs? And why is my life so unlike everything I see on TV? That feeling—the not knowing, the longing for knowing, and the eventual answer—is love and youth to me. And I have always preferred libraries to classrooms because the wide open library is the ultimate venue for this theater. This culture was reinforced by my parents, and the politically conscious parents around me, and their politically conscious children. The culture was so strong that it could be regarded as a kind of social capital. It was so old that it could also be regarded as a legacy. This legacy is more responsible for my presence in these august pages than any other. That is because a good writer must ultimately be an autodidact and take a dim view of credentials. My culture failed to make me into a high-achieving student. It succeeded at making me into a writer.

I have never had much of an urge to brag about this. I have always known that in failing to become a scholastic achiever, I forfeited knowledge of certain things. (A mastery of Augustine comes to mind.) But what I did not understand was that I had also forfeited a culture, which is to say a tool kit, a set of pins and tumblers that might have unlocked the language which I so presently adore.

Scholastic achievement is sometimes demeaned as the useless memorization of facts. I suspect that it has more to offer than this. If you woke my French literature professor at 2 a.m., she could recite the deuxième strophe of Verlaine's "Il Pleure Dans Mon Coeur." I suspect this memorization, this holding of the work in her head, allowed her to analyze it and turn it over in ways I could only do with the text in front of me. More directly, there is no real way for an adult to learn French without some amount of memorization. French is a language that obeys its rules when it feels like it. There is no unwavering rule to tell you which nouns are masculine, or which verbs require a preposition. Memory is the only way through.

At Middlebury, I spent as much time as I could with the master's students, hovering right at the edge of overbearing. On average, I understood 30 percent of what was being said. This was, of course, the point. I wanted to be reminded of who I was. I wanted to be young again, to feel that old thrill of not knowing. It is the same feeling I had as a boy, wondering about the lilies and dinosaurs, listening to "The Bridge Is Over," wondering where in the world was Queens.

And I was ignorant. I felt as if someone had carried me off at night, taken me out to sea, and set me adrift in a life-raft. And the night was beautiful because it held all the things I would never know, and in that I saw my doom—the time when I could learn no more. Morning, noon, and evening, I sat on the terrace listening to the young master's students talk. They would recount their days, share their jokes, or pass on their complaints. They came from everywhere—San Francisco, Atlanta, Seattle, Boulder, Hackensack, Philadelphia, Kiev. And they loved all the things I so wanted to love, but had not made time to love—Baudelaire, Balzac, Rimbaud. I would listen and feel the night folding around me, and the ice-water of youth surging through me.

One afternoon, I was walking from lunch feeling battered by the language. I started talking with a young master in training. I told her I was having a tough time. She gave me some encouraging words in French from a famous author. I told her I didn't understand. She repeated them. I still didn't understand. She repeated them again. I shook my head, smiled, and walked away mildly frustrated because I understood every word she was saying but could not understand how it fit. It was as though someone had said, "He her walks swim plus that yesterday the fight." (This is how French often sounds to me.)

The next day, I sat at lunch with her and another young woman. I asked her to spell the quote out for me. I wrote the phrase down. I did not understand. The other young lady explained the function of the pronouns in the sentence. Suddenly I understood—and not just the meaning of the phrase. I understood something about the function of language, why being able to diagram sentences was important, why understanding partitives and collective nouns was important.

In my long voyage through this sea of language, that was my first sighting of land. I now knew how much I didn't know. The feeling of discovery and understanding that came from this was incredible. It was the first moment when I thought I might survive the sea.

My personal road to this great feeling, to these discoveries, to Middlebury, was not the normal one. I was raised among people skeptical of a canon that had long been skeptical of them. I needed some independent sense of myself, of my cultures and traditions, before I could take a mature look at the West. I wanted nothing to do with Locke because I knew that he wanted little to do with me. I saw no reason to learn French because it was the language of the plunderers of Haiti.

I had to be a nationalist before I could be a humanist. I had to come to understand that black people are not merely the victims of the West, but its architects. The philosophes started the sentence and Martin Luther King finished it. The greatest renditions of this country's greatest anthems are all sung by black people—Ray, Marvin, Whitney. That is neither biology nor a mistake. It is the necessary cosmopolitanism of a people, viewing America from the basement and thus forced to take their lessons when they get them—absorbing, reinterpreting, refining, creating.

Now it must never be concluded that an urge toward the cosmopolitan, toward true education, will make people stop hitting you. The inverse is more likely. In the early 19th century, the Cherokee Nation was told by the new Americans that if its members adopted their “civilized” ways, they would soon be respected as equals. This promise was deeply embedded in the early 19th century approach to this continent's indigenous nations.

“We will never do an unjust act towards you. on the contrary we wish you to live in peace, to increase in numbers, to learn to labor, as we do,” Thomas Jefferson said. “In time you will be as we are; you will become one people with us; your blood will mix with ours; & will spread, with ours, over this great Island. Hold fast then, my Children, the Chain of friendship, which binds us together; & join us in keeping it forever bright & unbroken.”

The Cherokee Nation—likely for their own reasons—embraced mission schools. Some of them converted to Christianity. Other intermarried. Others still enslaved blacks. They adopted a written Constitution, created a script for their language and published a newspaper, *The Cherokee Phoenix*, in English and Cherokee. Thus the Native Americans of that time showed themselves to be as able to to integrate elements of the West with their own culture as any group of Asian or Jewish American. But the wolf has never much cared whether the sheep were cultured or not.

“The problem, from a white point of view,” writes historian Daniel Walker Howe, “was that the success of these efforts to ‘civilize the Indians’ had not yielded the expected dividend in land sales. On the contrary, the more literate, prosperous, and politically organized the Cherokees made themselves, the more resolved they became to keep what remained of their land and improve it for their own benefit.”

Cosmopolitanism, openness to other cultures, openness to education did not make the Cherokee pliant to American power; it gave them tools to resist. Realizing this, the United States dropped the veneer of “culture” and “civilization” and resorted to “Indian Removal,” or The Trail of Tears. The plunder was celebrated in a popular song:

All I want in this creation  
Is a pretty little wife and a big plantation  
Away up yonder in the Cherokee nation.

The Native Americans of this period found that America's talk of trading culture for rights was just a cover. In our time, it is common to urge young black children toward education so that they may be respectable or impress the "right people." But the "right people" remain unimpressed, and the credentials of black people, in a country rooted in white supremacy, must necessarily be less. That great powers are in the business of using "respectability" and "education" to ignore these discomfiting facts does not close the book. You can never fully know. But you can walk in the right direction.

The citizen is lost in the labyrinth constructed by his country, when in fact straight is the gate, and narrow must always be the way. When I left for Middlebury, I had just published an article arguing for reparations. People would often ask me what change I expected to come from it. But change had already come. I had gone further down the unending path of knowing, deeper into the night. I was rejecting mental enslavement. I was rejecting the lie.

I came to Middlebury in the spirit of the autodidactic, of auto-liberation, of writing, of Douglass and Malcolm X. I came in ignorance, and found I was more ignorant than I knew. Even there, I was much more comfortable in the library, thumbing through random histories in French, than I was in the classroom. It was not enough. It will not be enough. Sometimes you do need the master's tools to dismantle his house.

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