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# Presidential Address

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## Tyler Stovall

Distinguished Professor of History  
Dean of Humanities  
University of California, Santa Cruz

President of the  
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# Tyler Stovall

**By Michael G. Vann, California State University, Sacramento**

In the summer of 2017, hordes of superheroes fought for domination on the screens of multiplexes across America. Though he never fled a dying planet or stood subject to a malicious government conspiracy, the career of Dr. Tyler Stovall—president of the American Historical Association; dean of humanities at the University of California (UC), Santa Cruz; and distinguished professor of history—resonates with heroic themes. Stovall’s life and work are defined by a sustained struggle for historical truth, social justice, and a better American way. One glance at his prolific list of publications and service could lead anyone to believe that Stovall possesses unusual powers. Undergraduates inspired by his witty and informative lectures would agree, as would the audiences in attendance for one of his many nuanced and provocative talks. On the streets outside American movie theaters this summer, citizens struggled over unresolved issues of race, history, and memory, bearing witness to bloodshed from Portland to Charlottesville. The tensions at the core of this unrest play a central role in Stovall’s life as a scholar, teacher, and activist. Let us begin with his origin story.

## **Stovall, Origins**

Gallipolis, Ohio, was founded in the 1790s by a group of émigré aristocrats and merchants, known as the “French 500,” who fled the growing chaos of revolutionary France to establish an earthly utopia based on Enlightenment principles. Despite idealistic intentions, the project was enmeshed from the outset in settler colonialism, manifested in war with indigenous people and land fraud. Brutal winters helped put a quick end to this transnational experiment in social justice.

Aside from the name, little remains of the city’s French legacy. Stovall’s parents, Tyler Edward Stovall and Barbara Fuller Stovall, decided to cross the river into Gallipolis from Lakin, West Virginia, for two reasons: Ohio had a better hospital, and the Stovalls did not want their child born in a former slave state. In 1954, the same year that saw *Brown v. Board of Education* decided by the United States

Supreme Court, one of America's foremost historians of global French history was born in a city whose legacy of social idealism clashed with the brutal realities of race and colonialism.

But the Stovalls were soon drawn to Columbus, a state capital and university town, and a place replete with public-sector professional opportunities then an important factor for black middle-class families. Both of Stovall's parents had graduate degrees. His father practiced child psychology; his mother held a master's in social work and directed the South Side Settlement House, a social and economic justice-focused community center modeled on Chicago's Hull House. The family's active political life revolved around Settlement House and the NAACP, with visiting speakers and activists welcomed into the home by Stovall's outgoing mother. He jokes about never knowing who he might find sleeping in the basement: demonstrators heading to the 1968 Democratic Convention in Chicago on one occasion; on another, James Baldwin.

Nearly every summer, the young Tyler Stovall headed to summer camp in the Catskills. Twin Lakes Camp (later known as Camp Hurley) was run by the United Community Centers of Brooklyn and brought a decidedly left-wing, even Marxist, ethos to the summer camp experience along with more traditional activities like canoeing and archery. Summer camp shenanigans surely ensued, but more formative to Stovall's later scholarship were the long hours of discussion devoted to oppression and resistance. Campers put on plays by Bertolt Brecht. One summer, Stovall served on the script committee for an original musical about the Industrial Workers of the World. Eventually, he became a counselor and forged friendships that broadened his intellectual, cultural, and political horizons.

## **Educating the Historian**

Stovall attended Columbus public schools, where he excelled in his studies but suffered through courses that left him with the impression that American history was boring. He took four years of Russian language; kept up on current events; and said he was fortunate to have a college counselor who did not just tell young black men to go to Ohio State but encouraged them to think nationally. A National Merit scholar, Stovall set his sights on what he was told was the best university in the country: Harvard. Even as a high school student, Stovall was politically engaged, participating

in anti-racist organizations such as the Race Relations Club. In 1972, he gave his first public speech at a rally against the American war in Vietnam. As a university town, Columbus attracted numerous speakers; Stovall had opportunity to hear Jessie Jackson and Stokely Carmichael, among others.

In 1972, he began his undergraduate studies at Harvard, an experience he recalls with ambivalence. Having regarded history as merely a default major, Stovall failed to find anything more compelling and started an intellectual journey almost by accident that would one day lead to his presidency of the AHA. As part of the first generation of significant numbers of students of color to attend Ivy League schools, Stovall experienced serious culture shock when faced with the practices of a traditional bastion of a privileged white elite. He recalls some of his classes as interesting and challenging; others not. He continued his political activism, attending antiwar and anti-racist events. During his last two years at Harvard, violent anti-busing demonstrations and riots rocked Boston. One evening, Stovall was attacked on a public street by an assailant who sprayed some sort of acid in his face. The hate crime left no permanent physical damage and Stovall did not report it to the police, noting that such things were happening in the streets of Boston. In 1976—April of Stovall's senior year—a Pulitzer Prize-winning photograph captured one such event. *The Soiling of Old Glory* shows civil rights activist Ted Landsmark being assaulted with an American flag by a violent member of the anti-busing movement. It was neither the first time, nor the last, that the flag would become a flashpoint of controversy over race and violence.

After graduating *cum laude* with a degree in history, Stovall went straight into graduate school at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, a public school whose history of antiwar activism and participation in various radical politics proved quite a contrast to Harvard's preppy culture. Stovall met one of the bombers of Sterling Hall and lived for several years in an alternative communal housing society. Active in labor organizing, Stovall also served as the shop steward for the graduate student union. His years in Madison occupy a special place in his memory as he made many deep and lasting friendships, including with a few future historians—Laura Hien, Christine Harrington, Margaret Headstrom, and the late Bob Frost.

Possessing German and French language skills but uncertain what aspect of European history to pursue, Stovall wound up as a student of historian, social activist, and famed lecturer Harvey Goldberg. He had heard of Goldberg from a friend at the United Community Center in Brooklyn, who told Stovall that Goldberg was a socialist but did not say much about his research. Among Goldberg's contributions to French history was a definitive biography of the great socialist leader Jean Jaruès. This made him a perfect fit for Stovall who, to this day, praises Goldberg as an inspirational educator who never lost sight of the importance of history to struggles for social justice. Stovall is proud to say that he was the last of Goldberg's doctoral students.

After earning his MA in 1978, Stovall spent a year teaching high school at the Nichols School in Buffalo, New York, but soon returned to Madison, where he developed a research proposal on the working-class neighborhoods of the Parisian suburbs. Stovall earned several awards and grants during graduate school, including a Fulbright for research in France, a Goethe Institute fellowship in West Germany, and a research fellowship at the École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales in Paris. In 1982, he completed the majority of his archival research on Bobigny, and returned to Madison to write up his findings. His work was particularly attuned to the ways in which the French Communist Party used grievances about municipal infrastructure in the rapidly growing suburb to build a solidly reliable electoral base. He found the term "sewer socialism" an apt description for party activists more concerned about sanitation, clean water, and public lighting than they were about revolutionary seizures of power. He filed his dissertation, "The Urbanization of Bobigny," in 1984, earning a PhD in modern European/French history with a minor in Latin American studies.

From Madison, Stovall traveled west to California for a Chancellor's Minority Postdoctoral Fellowship at UC Berkeley, which allowed him to refine his dissertation and move it towards publication. He was fortunate to have Susanna Barrows and Lynn Hunt as mentors. Barrows even set him up with Denise Herd, a scholar studying alcohol in African American communities. They fell in love, and in 1988, they married. Stovall also taught in the Golden State and became a research fellow at Berkeley's Emma Goldman Papers Project. Arriving just after French philosopher Michel Foucault's

time there, Stovall recalls Berkeley as an intellectual culture shock. Trained as a traditional social historian in Madison, in California he encountered cultural history. The contrast between the two schools is reflected in the differences between his first and second books.

### **Today Bobigny, Tomorrow the World**

Stovall returned to his hometown in 1986 as an assistant professor at the Ohio State University. In Columbus, he continued to revise his dissertation for publication and wrote the first of more than two dozen articles. “The Working Class and the Paris Housing Crisis, 1914–1924” appeared in the 1987 issue of the *Proceedings of the Western Society of French History*. The piece drew from his dissertation research and was soon followed by “Friends, Neighbors, and Communists’: Community Formation in Suburban Paris during the Early Twentieth Century” in a 1988 issue of the *Journal of Social History*, and “French Communism and Suburban Development: The Rise of the Paris Red Belt” in *Journal of Contemporary History*, 1989. They might lack the catchy titles of his later work, but these excellent pieces of social history demonstrated the ways in which living conditions of working-class neighborhoods in suburban Paris structured the growth of the French Communist Party. In Columbus, Stovall also refined his teaching skills, learning that he could not cram the contents of five monographs into every lecture without exhausting himself and his students.

Fortunate to find a job in his hometown, Stovall still flew back to California regularly to see Denise Herd. And after two years in Ohio, he returned to the West Coast, joining the history department at UC Santa Cruz, one of a series of new hires that included Takashi Fujitani, Cynthia Polecristi, and David Anthony, soon to be followed by María Elena Díaz, Gail Hershatter, Marc Cioc, and Lynn Westerkamp. The new faculty represented a wave of diversity breaking on Santa Cruz’s sandy white shores. Stovall developed a reputation as a dynamic and engaging lecturer who managed to humanize the study of history in courses on modern France, Europe since 1914, and race and ethnicity in Europe. He also began to mentor doctoral students with an interest in French history outside of the hexagon.

I became his advisee in 1990. After patiently listening to my rambling and unfocused research ideas—ideas that I secretly hoped would somehow take me to Tahiti—he shot down my suspiciously

enthusiastic suggestion of Papaete and politely suggested an alternative: an urban history project set in a colonial city. As former French possessions in West and North Africa were well covered, we decided that I should pick a city from French Indochina, setting me on the path that eventually led to Hanoi. Years later, when he became a visiting professor *en mission* at Université de Polynésie Française in Tahiti, I silently envied his luck. In addition to his work with Driss Maghraoui's research on Moroccan soldiers in the First World War, Stovall's mentoring of doctoral students in the 1990s was evidence of a shift in his thinking about French history. He increasingly saw France in a global context.

In 1990, the University of California Press published the revised version of Stovall's doctoral dissertation as *The Rise of the Paris Red Belt*. The book made an important contribution to the history of the French Communist Party and to greater Parisian history. Using Bobigny as a case study, Stovall demonstrated how the patterns of daily life shaped the political views of the French working class. With an analysis of French communism that was free of Cold War ideological dogma, Stovall developed the agency of the French voter as a rational decision maker concerned about the quality of life in his (French women did not secure the vote until after this study's conclusion) family's neighborhood. The book represented an important intervention in the field of French labor history that, despite excellent studies of the 19th century, had largely neglected the 20th. *The Rise of the Paris Red Belt* demanded that we acknowledge the important role played by the often disparaged working-class suburbs in the history of Paris.

## **Racing French History**

While Stovall continued his work on the history of the majority white Parisian working class—publishing “Paris in the Age of Anxiety, 1914–1939” in Sidra Stich's 1990 anthology *Anxious Visions* and “Something Old, Something New: Tradition, Moral Economy, and Working Class Activism in the Paris Food Riots of 1919” in a 1995 issue of *Mouvement Social*—he also began to employ a historical critique of race in French history. “Colonial Labor in France during World War I” (*Race and Class*, 1993) signaled a fundamental turning point in Stovall's intellectual trajectory and established him as a leader in a larger paradigm shift in the field of French history: the introduction of critical racial analysis.

When compared to American and British historiography in the 1990s, French histories were remarkably weak on race, with French colonialism a particularly underdeveloped field. Admittedly scholars and the wider public focused on the numerous works marking the bicentennial of the French Revolution at the expense of other subjects, but there was a larger issue at play. The myth of a color-blind France—free of the racism that beset the Anglo-Saxon world, let alone the genocidal impulses east of the Rhine—was central to French self-image. It was a vision of France that blissfully ignored or willfully silenced brutal realities of the colonial empire and French participation in the Shoah. Despite Robert Paxton’s intervention, Henri Russo still diagnosed France with a bad case of “the Vichy Syndrome” in 1994, or a recurrent collective amnesia for those historical events that would challenge France’s reputation as the home of the most progressive aspects of the Western tradition.

Furthermore, most American historians of France were dyed-in-the-wool Francophiles. Unlike postwar scholars of Germany or Cold War Russia experts, few American academics were critical of France. Seduced by the language, art, literature, cuisine, and above all, by Paris itself, France proved irresistible to American academics, many of whom cherished memories of study abroad programs in an era when the US dollar was king and students and faculty in French studies were overwhelmingly white. When faced with troubling examples of xenophobia and racial violence, even informed Francophiles could be dismissive. After all, how could the nation that made Josephine Baker the toast of Paris, shielded Richard Wright from the horrors of Jim Crow, and gave refuge to James Baldwin be racist?

### ***Paris Noir***

By directly engaging this distinctly French paradox, Stovall’s next book—*Paris Noir: African Americans in the City of Light* (1996)—became an immediate success. Well respected in academic circles, it was also widely reviewed in the popular press and prompted a variety of media appearances. *Paris Noir* offers a chronological appraisal of African Americans in 20th-century Paris. Beginning with the arrival of black troops during the First World War, the narrative includes the influx of black performers to Montmartre during the Jazz Age; the difficult years of the Depression and the Second World War; the establishment of an African American artistic presence on

the Left Bank; the 1950s as a golden age for African American writers in Paris; and African American engagement with global political activism in the turbulent 1960s. It concludes with an assessment of contemporary Black Paris.

*Paris Noir's* brilliance lies in its combination of a graceful narrative arc with insightful critical analysis. A true transnational history, it argues for the importance of Paris to African Americans and African Americans to Paris. Never a man to repeat familiar platitudes and tired clichés, Stovall deconstructs the storybook image of Paris in the black American consciousness. Combing archival research and interviews, the book explores various life trajectories of African Americans in the city—business people as well as artists. Perhaps its greatest contribution is to call into question the myth of a color-blind France. He notes that the relatively fair treatment of African Americans took place within the context of France's imperial apogee, the bloodshed of the Vietnamese and Algerian wars for national liberation, and the making of a racially divided postcolonial France. Furthermore, Parisians associated African Americans with jazz, enfolded them into an interwar Primitivism that celebrated African American performers and artists as somehow in touch with a primal, inner truth. Welcomed as talented and interesting guests, African Americans stood in sharp contrast to people from France's tropical empire. Postcolonial immigrants, especially Algerians, represented an ungrateful population that had rejected France only to come searching for low-wage jobs in the streets of Paris. Stovall notes that midcentury writer and editor William Gardner Smith was not alone in realizing that his status as a black American shielded him from a virulent French racism grounded in the nation's imperial history.

Stovall, like his grandfather during World War I, was an African American in the City of Light. Always an honest and original thinker who detested clichés, he did not fall fast in love with the city itself. He resented being profiled by police as he walked through Barbès-Rochechouart, hated the complicated bureaucracy, and noticed that Arab and sub-Saharan Africans worked the worst jobs. But he also acknowledged that the police who stopped him were nicer than American cops; that he found it easy to make friends in the city; and that many of the city's charms were undeniably irresistible. *Paris Noir* shines brightest when it brings this complexity to life.

Through mini-biographies and personal reflections, the book humanizes the racial history of France. In contrast to the traditional social history in the pages of *The Rise of the Paris Red Belt*, *Paris Noir* is a cultural history. Methodologically, Stovall's first two Paris books are as different as Bobigny and the Left Bank.

From 1998 to 2010, Stovall elaborated on themes raised in *Paris Noir* in a series of academic articles, including "Harlem-sur-Seine: Building an African American Diasporic Community in Paris"; "Civil Rights Meets Decolonization: Transnational Visions of the Struggle for Racial Equality in France and America"; "The Fire This Time: Black American Expatriates and the Algerian War"; "Music and Modernity, Tourism and Transgression: Harlem and Montmartre in the Jazz Age"; and "An African American in Paris." Beyond their engaging titles, these articles deepened Stovall's critique of Paris as a significant site in the global African American experience for readers who would never cross the Atlantic and for whom Paris mattered as a place of freedom denied them in the US.

Elsewhere, he continued to develop a history of race in France. Starting in 1998 with "The Color Line behind the Lines: Racial Violence in France during the Great War" in the *American Historical Review*, Stovall published a series of pieces making a case for the centrality of race to the history of 20th-century France. This series includes "From Red Belt to Black Belt: Race, Class and Urban Marginality in Twentieth Century Paris"; "Remaking the French Working Class: The Postwar Exclusion of Colonial Labor"; "Race in French History"; "The New Woman and the New Empire: Josephine Baker and Changing Views of Femininity in Interwar France"; "Aimé Césaire and the Making of Black Paris"; "Faith, Freedom, and Frenchness? Race, Class, and the Myth of the French Republic"; and "Beyond Dead White Males: Towards a Postcolonial History of Europe." Placing race alongside class and gender in the analytical tool kit of French historians, these contributions brought French historiography up to speed with American and British history and literary studies of the francophone world.

Meanwhile, Stovall encouraged younger scholars of color to study France. Not only did he mentor them; he also created publishing opportunities, shepherding a number of important anthologies that contributed to a postcolonial understanding of French history. In 2003, he co-edited *The Color of Liberty: Histories*

of *Race in France* with Sue Peabody and *French Civilization and Its Discontents: Nationalism, Colonialism, Race* with Georges van den Abbeele. In 2012 Stovall, Trica Keaton, and T. Denean Sharpley-Whiting co-edited *Black France*. Other collaborations included a volume of *Historical Reflections/Reflexions Historiques* with W. Brian Newsome, devoted to French colonial urbanism, and "Intersections of Race and Gender in French History," a special issue of *French Historical Studies*, co-edited with Jennifer Boittin. These books and journal volumes offered a venue for an increasingly diverse cohort of scholars working on a wide range of topics in the field of French history.

## **A Tale of Two UCs**

Stovall developed a deep affection for the UC Santa Cruz campus, but he is only one half of an academic marriage. His wife Denise is a professor at UC Berkeley's School of Public Health. After a decade of commuting the busy 880 Interstate through the East Bay and Silicon Valley and over the Santa Cruz Mountains on the notorious Highway 17, the family decided that a life without commuting would be easier on everyone. Though their son Justin was born in Santa Cruz in 2001, Stovall took up a position at Berkeley that same year. Leaving Santa Cruz was not easy. Those of us who attended his going-away party will remember the dean of humanities begging him to stay and predicting that the campus would one day get him back. Indeed, Santa Cruz, like Paris, is not without its own irresistible charms. In 2015, the City on a Hill managed to win Stovall back, proudly announcing that he would triumphantly return to the campus as distinguished professor and dean of humanities.

In 2012, Stovall had returned to the City of Light, with *Paris and the Spirit of 1919: Consumer Struggles, Transnationalism, and Revolution*. While the book focuses on consumerism and the revolt of an urban population angered by years of war, economic deprivation, and social inequalities, Stovall situates Paris within a global context, skillfully linking race, class, and gender in a discussion of a year that saw a social crisis nearly tip into a revolution. Along with the French women who lost wartime factory jobs, the state pulled Vietnamese, Arab, and African colonial workers out of the labor market and sent them back to the empire. At the same time, a variety of global political forces shook Paris. Bolshevik Russia inspired radical labor leaders, and a new generation of anticolonial activists (including

a young man later known as Ho Chi Minh) voiced their frustration with the imperialist world order. Host to the victorious allies' peace conference, the eyes of the world were on a city that seemed to be veering dangerously close to revolution. In *Paris and the Spirit of 1919*, Stovall vividly evokes a city on the verge of a breakdown yet full of optimistic dreams. The book demonstrates the value of a transitional approach to studying a nation and a city so often considered in isolation.

Both of Stovall's textbooks on French history—*France since the Second World War* and *Transnational France: The Modern History of a Universal Nation*—situate France within a global context. As its title indicates, *Transnational France* provides an especially strong model for taking a world historical approach to France. From imperial expansion to the demographics of postcolonial immigration, Stovall highlights the crucial interactions between France and the rest of the world. His work has shown how we can put France into world history and how world history can better our understanding of France.

In addition to his prodigious publication list, Stovall is a busy and effective administrator. He served as director of graduate studies at both Ohio State and UC Santa Cruz. From 1998 to 2001, he was the chair of his department and the provost of UC Santa Cruz's Stevenson College. When he left Santa Cruz for Berkeley, he became dean of the Undergraduate Division of the College of Letters and Science. In 2015, UC Santa Cruz managed to lure him back as the dean of humanities. Unlike scholars who disappear into the world of deanships, never to be heard from again, throughout these years of administrative service Stovall continued his archival research and published significant work that continues to challenge our thinking about France's position in the world.

## **History as a Political Act**

And he is not done. Currently, Stovall is working on two more transnational projects. *Nègropolitain: Colonial Citizenship and Caribbean Migration to France, 1848–1946*, will consider the longue durée of the making of a postcolonial and multicultural France. *White Freedom: The Racial History of an Idea* will challenge triumphalist narratives of French and American democracy by arguing that liberty for white people was built on the servitude of

black people. In 2016, I had the privilege of hosting Stovall for a talk at Sacramento State University, where he explored the Statue of Liberty's complicated racial history and made clear that he will continue to open new avenues of historical investigation and critical conversation. My graduate students were deeply moved by and the contemporary implications of his comparative Franco-American analysis of race, democracy, and equity. I was proud that they understood the political relevance of the study of history.

A heroic commitment to social justice has been central to Tyler Stovall's life, career, and activism. From rescuing the history of a neglected Parisian suburb to telling the stories of the African American jazz musicians that made Montmartre swing, he has interrogated French history from new and creative directions. His publications and his teaching illustrate the importance of the practice of history to the world we encounter today. Personally, as teacher, mentor, and friend, Tyler has taught me to understand that history can and should be a political act, essential to our struggles to make the world a better place. This should not be understood as promoting agenda-driven narratives, but rather interrogating history from perspectives too often silenced and marginalized by past and present power structures. As a scholar of the highest caliber, Tyler Stovall demonstrates how to use informed historical analysis based upon meticulous research in contemporary politics.

In a year when sober, thoughtful, and informed Americans seriously asked if the nation was sliding into fascism; in a year when Americans shed blood to tear down white supremacist monuments; and in a year when armed men march in the street chanting slogans in celebration of the Confederacy, the Nazi genocide, and the murder of Latin American Marxists, we may be forgiven in asking for a superhero. That these villains engage in the arrogant misuse and misrepresentation of history makes our current political crisis all the more important for the membership of the American Historical Association. In these battles over history, engaged scholars such as Tyler Stovall have more crucial role than ever.

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