

Article about Christiane Taubira written by Scott Sayare and published in The New York Times on August 9, 2013.

Ascending Heights of French Power, Trailed by Her ‘Otherness’

CHRISTIANE TAUBIRA was taken aback, she says, though not altogether surprised, at the “brutality” of the opposition to the same-sex marriage bill she shepherded into French law this year.

“Societies have their resistances,” said Ms. Taubira, 61, a diminutive, fiery woman from French Guiana who serves as France’s minister of justice. “There are those who, for their own sense of security, but also by choice — by doctrinal choice, that is to say by their choice of model — choose to hold on to old images.”

She has been the object of similar resistances herself, she says. She once wrote that she “became black in Paris,” though not by choice, and she has not been made to forget her otherness.

In protest chants this year, opponents of the marriage bill initially identified themselves as “families” — “Taubira, you are beat, families are in the street!” — but later as “the French,” Ms. Taubira recalled, as if to cast her as a foreigner. There were more overt racist slurs, as well, she said.

“I don’t believe there have been other protests, or that it would be conceivable that a protest address another minister with the slogan ‘You are beat, the French are in the street,’ ” said Ms. Taubira, who has tight-braided cornrows and a slight vocal lilt. “There’s a message of exclusion. So, I hear it! That’s all. I want to be lucid. I know what’s going on, I know what a word means, what an attitude signifies, but it is out of the question that a word or an attitude determine my life or my behavior.”

She remains sensitive to her difference, though, an outspoken woman of color in a position of considerable visibility and influence; few have come before her in France.

Her successes have not come without cost, though, and her ambition has alienated some. “I don’t like mediocre people — I’m not mediocre,” she once told reporters, and some family members are said to address her as “Madame Taubira.”

“I have always made my choices,” she said, and accepted their “price.”

MS. TAUBIRA has positioned herself as an advocate for the marginalized or excluded, most recently turning her attention to an effort to expand the rehabilitation of young offenders.

She applied herself intensely to the same-sex-marriage bill, which, though a campaign promise of President François Hollande, received only tepid support from many French officials, Mr. Hollande included. Critics on the right accused her of intransigence.

Eloquent and erudite, she embodies much of the French political ideal; she cites poetry from memory. But the writers she prefers are those who wrote of their otherness in France, the statesmen-poets of the anticolonial movement known as Négritude, including Léon-Gontran Damas of French Guiana, Léopold Sédar Senghor of Senegal and Aimé Césaire of Martinique.

Her willingness to discuss race frankly is a distinction of some note, too, in a nation where such matters remain delicate and often unspoken. The French state does not officially recognize skin color or ethnicity.

She was born the sixth of eight children in Cayenne, the capital of a racially divided French Guiana, an overseas department and former colony of France. Her mother, a nursing assistant, raised the family alone and died young.

Ms. Taubira came of age in the 1960s, idolizing from afar the heroes and agitators of the American civil rights movement, like Angela Davis, Malcolm X and Muhammad Ali, but also Simón Bolívar, Che Guevara and other revolutionaries of her native South America.

She left to study economics and sociology in Paris, where she took up the cause of Guianese independence from France. A proud sense of obligation drew her back to French Guiana, she said, where she held various posts in the local administration. In the early 1990s, her politics having grown more moderate, she won seats in the French and European Parliaments.

In 2002, she ran for the French presidency, one of several candidates in a divided left. She won just 2.3 percent of the votes, but siphoned enough from the main leftist candidate to keep him out of the final runoff. To the horror of many French, a candidate of the xenophobic far right reached the second round, and though he did not win the presidency, Ms. Taubira was viewed by many as an insolent spoiler.

Party politics have never much agreed with her, she said, and she is known within the political establishment as having streaks of authoritarianism and pridefulness.

“I can’t stand having a boss,” Ms. Taubira said. (She serves as minister of justice, it bears noting, at the pleasure of Mr. Hollande.) “My conscience is my boss, and my conscience dictates rules that are extremely, I’d say, grand — they’re rough but beautiful.”

HER taut upper lip most likely contributes to what has been called an air of disdain, but when she laughs, it rises up over her teeth, and her eyes crinkle with a warmth that may or may not be genuine but is unquestionably rare among French politicians. A divorced mother of four, she often rides a yellow bicycle to and from the Justice Ministry, on the Place Vendôme.

With no background in law, she is an anomaly among recent justice ministers, but she has impressed lawyers with her “elegance” and “tenacity,” said Christiane Féral-Schuhl, who heads the Paris bar association. She has an “ease about her that is quite charming,” and has been unabashed in seeking counsel on technical matters, Ms. Féral-Schuhl said.

Ms. Taubira has now turned her focus to the prisons, promoting a politically hazardous overhaul that would institute probation in place of jail time for some misdemeanors, part of an effort to reduce recidivism rates and relieve some of the strain on France’s overcrowded penitentiaries. Opponents accuse her of naïveté. She speaks of a need to educate the populace.

“We’re going to seek out, in the depths of people, their capacity to, firstly, reject a whole series of platitudes, of stereotypes, of clichés,” Ms. Taubira said, and to “understand that justice is not vengeance.”

In what seems a break from the standard philosophy of France’s welfare state, her interest is not so much in protecting the vulnerable, she said, as it is in empowering them.

The slogan of her presidential campaign, “The republic that respects you,” seemed to reflect what she called a deep attachment to an almost libertarian notion of “freedom over yourself,” an uncommon ethic in a nation of often rigid social and political hierarchies.

It has at times proved complex to reconcile her personal ambitions with a sense of pride and duty toward her roots.

“I know that I would gain by playing the Black Woman,” she wrote in her memoir, published last year, but that would mean a “stunted identity.” She asked, “How to embrace what one is without allowing one’s identity to be assigned?”

On a recent visit to a school in Lyon, Ms. Taubira seemed to offer a partial answer. Asked by one student about Mr. Césaire, the poet and politician, she began a brief recitation.

“He says, ‘My négritude is not a cathedral,’ ” Ms. Taubira said. “Négritude is not just pride in being black, it’s the rejection of domination and oppression in the world.”

Later, on the steps above the concrete schoolyard, a visitor spoke with Steve Degbevi, the black 15-year-old who had asked about Mr. Césaire.

To see a woman of color in a position of power, Mr. Degbevi said, is “a source of pride.” Ms. Taubira’s response to his inquiry about the poet was not altogether satisfying, though, he said, laughing in an adolescent’s high tenor.

“She used words I didn’t understand,” he said.