

Disrupting Whiteness in Contemporary France

A Radical, Multifaceted and Intersectional Approach to (De)Constructing French Identity

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Abstract

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This dissertation aims at making visible the pervasiveness of white supremacy in contemporary France. In order to do so, I deconstruct French national identity by critically engaging with the French Republic's universalist and colorblind stance. In the first section, I take stock of France's knowledge production on questions of identity, identifying problems in the conflation of race with immigration studies and noticing the relative absence of racial studies. In the second section, I consider the ways in which the French education system is an ideological apparatus of forceful inclusion by analyzing issues of knowledge production and destruction within the French education system. In the third section, I discuss the racialization of religion in France and historicize the concept of *laïcité*, France's word for its brand of secularism, in order to show how it has become a technology to oppress Muslims and perceived Muslims in France. In the fourth section, I am focused on issues of representation, recognition and state antiracism in

France, questioning and historicizing the French colorblind antiracist institutions through an analysis of two critically acclaimed films, *Intouchables* and *Bande de filles*. In the last section, I look at the place of language in the construction of French identity. I discuss how it became such an essential aspect of French identity by looking at its colonial context, and I address what that context might mean for non-white, non-heteronormative contemporary French speakers.

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Preface

Growing up in France and going through the French education system, there are a number of things I took completely for granted, beginning with the color of my skin. I am a white woman of upper middle class family. I believed skin color doesn't matter. When my parents moved us from the country to a big city and put us in an urban middle school, I excused the kids of North African descent (the Arabs, as we called them) who bullied me by saying they were poor, and I attributed their violent behavior to cultural differences. They weren't integrating because our cultures were at odds. It was 'us' and 'them'. I walked through the playground with my fists clenched, ready to be pushed around and mocked. Blonde, blue-eyed, wealthy-ish: I represented everything that hates them, in a way, but back then I didn't understand why they hated me, why they called me *sale blanche*.

I went to see the school superintendent about it, a tough lady who took a liking to me. I remember a strange feeling of discomfort when she took my side so readily, without question. She told me about how Mohammed (the leader of the group) was very smart and cunning, and that she had been struggling with him for years, trying to find a reason to get him expelled. I remember feeling uncomfortable when, at the end of middle school, she gave me a book about cats because she knew I love them. I went on to high school and spent my three years there trying to be invisible. I don't know what became of Mohammed. My brother, two years younger than me, was bullied, too, and mugged often by 'Arab' kids. He developed a deep-seated hatred for 'them,' a virulent and open kind of racism that has followed him into adulthood and has

influenced every one of his life decisions from where to live, who to marry and where to put his son in school.

I didn't develop the same hatred. I was more of a well-meaning/condescending, unknowingly racist, racist, but I was also confused and uncomfortable when I said the things well-meaning racists say. It sounded wrong, like I didn't have the words to talk about it and I was missing some crucial information. Nonetheless, I went to high school and studied white male European and US authors and never questioned it. It was just what we read. Classics, the canon: to me it meant it was the best literature out there and that's why we weren't reading other texts. I fit very well in the elitist French education system because I liked that it was hard. I liked being challenged, and I loved going to school and learning, particularly literature, languages, and philosophy. I also fit very well in the system because I thought speaking and writing well in French was a sign of intelligence and hard work. I couldn't understand how my more scientific friends could be so good (read 'smart') at disciplines that required so much work for me, and fill their French compositions with grammar mistakes, run-ons, and other such sacrileges to the French language. I wasn't a particularly patriotic person but I feel that it's only because in mainstream France, being a patriot is not something you prove or talk about. It's just something you are because you are French. Saying you are French and a patriot would be redundant.

That said, on some level I understood that my language was extremely important to my sense of self, to my identity as a French person. I didn't question my place in society because why would I? No one questioned it, except those 'Arab' kids in middle school and on the subway, and they didn't count. I never felt like I didn't belong in French society because I

received confirmation of my belonging everywhere I went. On TV, people looked like me and I could always find characters in books I could identify with. In some way, most of the stories were always, easily about me. The few that were not, that were considered 'diverse,' I considered with lukewarm curiosity—the kind of curiosity you feel when something isn't about you and is just a little too different for you to engage with/care. I also knew that the kids who bullied me in middle school didn't feel that way about school, about France, about the French language. My mind wasn't conditioned to think about the racial implications of our mutual positions. In fact, I had completely internalized the Republic's colorblind ideology. It couldn't be about skin color because skin color didn't matter, and yet I couldn't figure out why the cultural argument didn't work for me.

The way I internalized the dominant discourse is by no means special. If anything, the assumptions I had are extremely common. I didn't even realize I was white until I moved to the USA. This project is an attempt to grapple with the confusion and discomfort I felt as a child about my personal encounters with the limits of colorblindness. It is also my way of trying to make sense of my brother's experiences, even if for him this project – that he will not read or hear me talk about – could very well be a betrayal. I have dedicated the past four years to do the kind of real, difficult critical thinking I was not encouraged to practice and didn't practice until I moved to the USA and away from conventional literary analysis to critical social studies. Rewriting my frame of reference has been one of the hardest things I have ever done. I believe it is a lifelong practice, a work forever in progress, and this project is its first iteration.

Introduction

1. French Knowledge Production on Questions of Identity

This project begins with a literature review taking stock of French scholarship on issues of immigration and race. I am concerned with the way this research is framed within discourses of French identity and belonging, which have taken the front of the political stage, particularly since Nicolas Sarkozy's revival of the national identity debate and creation of the Ministère de l'Immigration, de l'Intégration, de l'Identité nationale et du Développement solidaire. My own work will be exploring the gaps in these scholarships with regards to questions of white hegemony and institutional oppression and the way they manifest in so-called 'progressive' spaces such as education and state antiracism.

The Myth of Colorblind France

One way to understand the relative absence of a strong social studies scholarship on racial relations in a country with such a heavy colonial and immigration history is to look at the institution of the French Republic. In France, the concept of ethnic minority doesn't exist as a way of identifying and recognizing certain parts of the population or as a tool to address discrimination because the French Republic does not recognize distinctions of origins, race or religion. France's universalist ideology comes from the 1789 revolution, which set the ground for the idea that all French citizens are equal. Haunted by its role in helping Nazi Germany track down and exterminate Jews during WWII, France considered the collection of racial statistics and the marking of people by race/ethnicity a mistake that it would not repeat, an example of

what could go wrong when a country kept such records. As a result, the universalist ideology conceives the French person as the universal human being and its population a homogeneous group. Discourses on national identity, textbooks, political speeches and academia have been infused with these universalist notions and helped construct and propagate the myth that race is not a factor in the construction of French identity¹.

And yet, its population has become increasingly ethnically diverse, especially since the decolonization began in the 1950s. Right after WWII in particular, the French government needed labor to reconstruct and recruited workers from all over the world (Tapinos). Indeed, in *Le creuset français*, historian Gérard Noiriel notes that the immigrant population starts steadily increasing around 1951 (139). In 1954 there were 200,000 Algerian immigrants in France (Musée de l'immigration), and by 1982 it was the largest immigrant population and growing (*Le creuset*, annexes statistiques). In "Mariage 'mixte' et immigration en France," Michèle Tribalat writes that 5.8% of the French metropolitan population has Maghrebi origins in 2005. According to a report from the Insee², 43.8% of immigrants in France were from an African nation in 2014 and 30% of immigrants are from Maghreb specifically. Racial discriminations are a severe problem in France, and islamophobia is rampant. French people of color's belonging to

¹ Arguably one of the first French intellectual to begin the construction of the concept of national identity as related to ethnicity, Maurice Barrès (1862-1923) wrote three books on the topic that I mention later in a section on national identity. He inspired a number of thinkers on the topic. See Alain Finkielkraut's *L'identité malheureuse* and Pascal Bruckner's *Un racisme imaginaire: islamophobie et culpabilité*. Numerous historians and philosophers have also addressed the issue. See Jule Michelet's *Le tableau de la France* (1875); Ernest Renan's *Qu'est-ce qu'une nation?* (1882); Vidal de la Blache's *Tableau de la géographie de la France* (1903). More recently, see Jean-Yves Guomar's *La Nation entre l'histoire et la raison* (1990) and *L'idéologie nationale* (1974); Paul Ricoeur's *Soi-même comme un autre* (1990); See Fernand Braudel's *L'identité de la France* (1992); Gérard Noiriel's *Population, immigration et identité nationale en France XIXe-XXe siècle* (1993); Pierre Nora's *Les lieux de mémoire, tome 3: Les France – Traditions* (1997); Suzanne Citron's *Le mythe national : L'histoire de France revisitée* (2008).

² Institut national de la statistique et des études économiques.

the nation is constantly challenged, whether it be in their economic opportunities or in conversations, the question of their 'real' origins always coming up.

The idea of a colorblind France propagated around the 1920s and 1930s when Black Americans came to Paris as a way to escape the oppressive racial segregation and violence in the USA under Jim Crow laws. After the destruction and desolation of WWI, Europe had lost confidence in their own civilization and "look[ed] towards other traditions as a way of restoring their shattered faith"(Stovall, 31). The appeal for something other crystallized in the increasing fascination for African art and culture: "African culture seemed to embody a lush, naive sensuality and spirituality that cold rational Europeans had lost. Consequently, Blackness became the rage in Paris in the 1920s" (Stovall, 31). In other words, the white establishment sought an escape, which they found in the art, music and dance of the black community. They welcomed black artists because they filled a need for entertainment. Nonetheless, this tolerance and perceived equality allowed black Americans to experience a degree of freedom and respect unparalleled in their lives so far, and indubitably contributed to their empowerment and to fueling the fight for Civil Rights in the USA. Their art also significantly influenced the music and visual arts worlds in France, leaving a profound mark on French culture³.

However, if the French tolerated and even welcomed black artists, the 1950s and 1960s decolonization quickly revealed that France is not colorblind and has its own 'black people.' The history of violence and segregation of immigrants from North African descent begins at that

³ For more on this period of French history, Joanne Burke's documentary *Paris Noir: African Americans in the City of Lights* offers a comprehensive documentary of the African American migration to Paris and the effects both cultures had on each other.

time and is now deeply embedded in the way the French conceive of their identity. Writer William Gardner Smith fictionalizes in his novel *The Stone Face* this realization that America doesn't have the monopoly of racism and discrimination in the story of Simeon, a Black American who moves to Paris in the 1950s, and uneasily witnesses the violence against the Algerian immigrants. In the story, Simeon is called a 'white man' (61) by one of the Algerian men harassed by the French police, reminding him of his privileged position in French society. A conversation between two French students, Henri and Raoul, is very telling of the kind of debates surround the issues of racial and cultural discrimination in France:

"Is there racism in France?" Raoul said quickly, "Of course not. The French don't believe in racist theories; everybody knows that. Americans feel perfectly at home here. The French don't *understand* racism. Why do you ask?" "What about Arabs?" Raoul hesitated, frowning. Then his smooth voice said, "That's different. The French don't like the Arabs, but it's not racism. The Arabs don't like us either. We're different" (62).

In other words, to their own eyes, the French are not racists; the issues between *français de souche*⁴ and African immigrants is a matter of cultural and religious differences.

Today, the myth of cultural difference is still very present in the difficulty the French face in merely talking about race. In May of 2013, the French parliament adopted a law that removed the word *race* from the legislation. An article from *Le Monde* titled "Ce n'est pas le mot race dans les textes qui alimente le racisme" reads: "Pour ne pas risquer de faire tomber l'incrimination de racisme, les députés socialistes ont fait adopter un amendement affirmant

⁴ The term *français de souche* is problematic and very controversial in-and-of-itself but I'm using it to refer to French people who are not of recent immigration background and who are white. The term also implies that these citizens can more legitimately claim France as their nation because it is where they have their roots. I discuss it more in depth in chapter five.

explicitement, dans l'article premier, que "la République combat le racisme, l'antisémitisme et la xénophobie. Elle ne reconnaît l'existence d'aucune prétendue race" (Béguin). The word *race* is itself a taboo of such proportions that, in France, as Alexander Stille from *The New Yorker* noted in an article dated July 2014, the French government doesn't even have a decent idea of the actual ethnic makeup of its society because it doesn't compile racial statistics. Stille writes:

France is, undeniably, a multicultural, multi-ethnic, and multiracial society, and has been at least since the nineteen-fifties, when large waves of immigrants began arriving from its former colonies. It has significant problems of discrimination, and of racial and economic segmentation, but limited tools to measure or correct them. The obvious answer—to many American scholars and to some French ones—is to begin to gather better data.

For historical and tradition-related reasons, the French are incredibly resistant to the idea of collecting data to better address the problems of discrimination and the racism that plague its society. The idea is that the very fact of recognizing difference in legislation is racist, which is why *discrimination positive* took so long to arrive in France. The very term *discrimination positive* hints at this reluctance and at the ambivalence felt towards the acknowledgment that not all its citizens have, in fact, equal opportunities. Of course, this refusal to acknowledge difference clearly prevents the implementation of *plans d'action* to address the racism that is a part of every day French society but also of its institutions. Inevitably, this also makes it difficult to research and discuss issues of race in the country in any significant way.

The editors and writers of *Black France* address the issue of "the need for and significance of "Afro/Black French Studies" in France and trained scholars in this field" (8)

Indeed, even as they are able to make a relatively long list of post 2005 French scholarship on the role of Blackness in France, it is worth noting that the editors of the book are African-American (Tracy Denean Sharpley-Whiting, Trica Danielle Keaton and Tyler Edward Stovall), not French scholars. One of the larger arguments the book indubitably makes is that the various shapes of France's Blackness already "constitute an integral part of France's national *patrimoine*, even when misrecognized or concealed" (6). Indeed, Blackness, as a constellation of heterogeneous lived experiences within the French Republic, is a social reality that Pap N'Diaye brilliantly analyses in his book *La condition noire* published in 2008. In it, N'Diaye chronicles and analyzes the past (from the 18th century) and present of what he refers to as a French minority. While his work is unique in France as much because of the breadth of its sociological and historical study as because it is politically engaged, there is not yet such entity as a *Département des études noires ou afro-françaises* in French universities.

Given France's profound distaste of the public claiming of identities other than French, I believe that the stigma of *communautarisme*, which I will discuss in depth later, is a powerful deterrent for scholars⁵ not to label their work the way American scholars can do it. More than just distaste for identity politics, however, France's refusal to recognize differences is a process of delegitimizing Blackness (but also sexuality, gender, ethnicity, etc.) as heterogeneous lived experiences. It is not to say that there is no research dealing with questions of race, gender or sexuality⁶, but rather that this situation unique to France and its universalist doctrine makes it

⁵ It is worth noting in that regard that N'Diaye is very careful with his choice of terms. Indeed, he describes *la condition noire* not as a community but rather as a minority; a group of people who share the lived social experience of being perceived as Black.

⁶ Gender and sexuality studies have been slow to develop in France. There are today a few research institutes on the topic. Among others, there is the Centre Louise Labé at the Université Lumière Lyon 2 in Lyon; the Centre d'Enseignement, de Documentation et de Recherche pour les Etudes Féministes (CEDREF), Université Paris 7-Denis

difficult to create an intersectional framework in which to produce knowledge that questions the overarching structures of power deciding what identities matter and which ones don't. As a country that did not experience slavery on its own soil the way the USA did, for example, French institutions of knowledge refused for a very long time to include France's colonial past into its understanding of national construction. Indeed, postcolonial studies don't exist in France the way they do in the USA.

For Jean-François Bayard, professor of African politics at the Institut d'études politiques de Paris, postcolonial studies are unnecessary since French thinkers have already been involved in thinking the colonial and postcolonial (Derrida, Foucault, Sartre, etc.). Part of a movement of works critical of postcolonial studies⁷, he wrote a book titled *Les études postcoloniales: un carnaval académique* to express his annoyance at what he sees as the fad of postcolonial studies unsuccessfully imported from the US. For him, however, it is not that French academia is reluctant to question colonial and postcolonial periods but rather that these studies "sont contestables et conduisent l'étude du fait colonial ou postcolonial dans des impasses, au risque d'une vraie régression scientifique par rapport aux acquis de ces trente dernières années" (43). For Bayard, postcolonial studies are dangerous because they adopt an activist stance. He sees postcolonial studies as confined to a "posture de dénonciation," a "rituel d'affliction plus ou moins doloriste et morbide" (18) that is responsible for confining to colonialism those it purported to take out of it. One of his most virulent accusations is that postcolonial studies

Diderot in Paris; and Association Nationale des Études Féministes (ANEF) in Toulouse. Hélène Cixous (1970s) and Simone de Beauvoir (*Le deuxième sexe*, 1949) are still among the most well known feminists in France. The official face of feminism in France remains white, but outside of mainstream feminist discourse and scholarship, voices from a variety of horizons are finding a platform in feminist webzines such as *Vraies meufs*, *Inside/out Paris*, *Deli Paris Club*, *Les Glorieuses* and *MadmoiZelle*.

⁷ See *L'occident décroché: enquête sur les postcolonialismes* (2008) by Jean-Loup Amselle and *La question postcoloniale: une analyse géopolitique* (2010) by Yves Lacoste.

offer a reading of the social in ethnic and racial terms. For Bayard, there is danger in racializing the social reality of the French *banlieues* and obfuscating issues of class. While I see this particular critique as an expression of France's fear of *communautarisme* and identity politics as well as of its narrow minded understanding of oppression, Bayard is still somewhat interesting to me because he accuses the movement of essentializing colonialism by focusing on representations instead of practices.

Essentializing colonialism and its actors, both colonizers and colonized, is indeed a very serious issue that deserves tremendous consideration. In "Postcolonialisme et immigration: nouveaux enjeux," Catherine Wihtol de Wenden echoes Bayard when she warns against this in what she calls the danger of confining immigrants to a "déterminisme unique, simplificateur et dangereux" and the danger of "cette autodésignation et cette victimisation [...] tendent à renforcer [...] le traitement discriminatoire dont [ces personnes] peuvent faire l'objet" (263). The issue of empowerment and agency is indeed crucial to conversations about colonialism. And yet, Bayard's verdict belies his own essentializing of postcolonial studies. As Achille Mbembe justly notes: "La configuration intellectuelle connue dans le monde anglo-saxon sous le vocable d'« études postcoloniales » ou de « théorie postcoloniale » se caractérise par son hétérogénéité, et il est difficile de résumer en quelques mots ce qui en constitue l'originalité" (Mbembe). Nicolas Bancel echoes this thought in "Que faire des postcolonial studies?" when responding to the criticism that postcolonial studies are guilty of presenting history in a determinist and linear fashion:

[cette critique] ne rend pas compte de la complexité des observations portées en des configurations historiques coloniales et postcoloniales très différentes et, d'autre part,

néglige l'argument central des postcolonial studies, à savoir que le moment colonial est fondamental pour comprendre l'émergence de la modernité, que ce soit dans les anciennes colonies ou au sein des ex-métropoles" (Bancel).

Postcolonial studies can be and have been problematic, if only because its semantics suggest that colonialism is a fact of the past, but I am more interested in the fact that it triggered such strong negative reactions in France and I agree with Bancel et al.'s understanding of the origin of the virulent criticisms leveled at postcolonial studies.

In the introduction of *Ruptures postcoloniales*, Bancel et al. accuse the detractors of postcolonial studies of finding issue with the field in great part because "elle perturbe les institutions en place, y compris celles qui se présentent comme "réformatrices" et "avant-gardistes"" (15-16). We remember Bayard's critique of postcolonial studies, which he views as mired in representation and lacking scientific rigor. But one of the strengths of postcolonial thought, as Edward Saïd carefully and irrevocably proved, is to expose the discursive structure that underlies the colonial project and enabled both physical and epistemic violence. In their introduction, Bancel et al. write: "La pensée postcoloniale déconstruit ainsi la prose coloniale et ses mensonges, et conduit à une inversion des perspectives: de la "double conscience" vers la duplicité de l'arrogance civilisatrice, la prise de conscience de l'incohérence de principe entre universalisme occidental et arbitraire colonial" (18-19). In short, "le paradigme postcolonial reste globalement interprété comme un symptôme de repli communautariste" (26). The threat of *communautarisme* is a uniquely white French negative conception and fear of the expression of identities other than nationality.

Academia's Role in the Construction and Perpetuation of this Myth

Notwithstanding the lack of data and the fact that French scholars have been reluctant to engage in postcolonial research, one can find a significant wealth of works on immigration and national identity, but comparatively little academic exploration has been devoted to issues of race alone, particularly in social studies. In *The Arena of Racism*, Michel Wieviorka notes that “it is not that there is a lack of interest in the victims or targets of racism; the existence of the sociology of immigration, undistinguished (but for a few exceptions) as it may seem, proves that this is not the case. But the production of racism itself, the social relations and changes it feeds on, have barely been studied, and there has been far more denunciation of the evil than real analysis of it” (*The Arena*, xiii). It is not to say, however, that social sciences have always been removed from the phenomenon altogether. In fact, Wieviorka traces a brief history of the direct involvement of the emerging field of social sciences⁸ in what he calls “the invention of racism, its formulation as doctrine and scholarly theory” (*The Arena*, 3).

Colette Guillaumin's thoughts on race stand out in particular since they are still incredibly pertinent today. She was one of the first to remind the field of social studies that the concept of 'race' has zero scientific value but tremendous social value. In *L'idéologie raciste: Génèse et langage actuel*, Guillaumin debunks essentialist discourses that legitimize discriminations. Her understanding of racism was in complete dissonance with the way French social studies at the time approached the issue since it was completely dominated by the colorblind stance. She shows how the humanist ideology, which is at the base of French

⁸ The ways in which (social) sciences and education have both contributed to and participated in the continued production of racist structures is an issue this project will address. It will do so in two major ways: by questioning and reconsidering what counts as a legitimate source of knowledge production, and by questioning the ways in which the French education system operates to exclude certain types of knowledges.

universalism, is intricately tied to racist ideology, and she argues that racism, which she conceives of relationally, breaking away from a purely political and moral understanding of racism, is not a product of heterogeneity and that it is merely using difference as an alibi to hide “un système d’antagonisme” (Guillaumin, 72).

A few French scholars in the social sciences investigating race seriously nowadays are Pap N’Diaye, whom I have mentioned earlier, but also Eric Fassin and Didier Fassin, among others, who edited and wrote in *De la question sociale à la question raciale? Représenter la société française*, of which I will talk later. Sylvie Tissot is also an important figure in this area. An activist and a filmmaker, her scholarly focus is on urban policy and public housing. Christine Delphy, who overall focuses on women and sexuality, wrote an illuminating little book, *Classer, dominer: qui sont les autres?* that focuses on the problematic concept of ‘tolerance’ and its anchor in a discourse of hierarchizing otherness/difference. In it, she highlights the power dynamics governing and regulating class, race, gender and sex relations. Sociologist Saïd Bouamama, who specializes in the study of intersectional oppression, has written numerous publications examining colonialism both in France and in its former colonies. In his latest book *La Tricontinentale, les peuples du Tiers Monde à l’assaut du ciel*, he analyses how their relationship of domination has morphed into neocolonialism, that is, the way colonialism is still practiced without military presence/visible coercion in the form of establishing a relation of dependence. I will discuss later the works of Eric Macé and Nacira Guénif Souillamas, who are also prominent figures of a movement of social studies whose work is politically and socially engaged towards social justice.

Philosophers, on the other hand, have been vigorously involved in the study of racist ideas and ideologies. Most recently, Pierre-André Taguieff and Etienne Balibar have contributed to expand its study. In *La Force du préjugé – essai sur le racisme et ses doubles*, Taguieff analyzed several different types of racism. For the purposes of my essay, the most interesting types he identifies are the 2nd and 3rd types. The second type of racism is the one hosted by the Enlightenment philosophy of universalism: its dream of unity of mankind may bring it, in specific and extreme cases, to the will to annihilate all cultural differences, amounting to effective genocide or ethnocides. Taguieff's point is not in declaring that the Enlightenment philosophy is racist in itself, but extreme forms of universality may lead, in practice, to the destruction of the plurality of cultures and to the rejection of even moderate forms of multiculturalism. The third kind he identifies is the more recent type that has integrated the cultural relativists' attacks against racism. This new form of racism has reversed the famous anti-racist arguments of ethnologist Claude Lévi-Strauss. According to Lévi-Strauss, different cultures are incommensurable, and, because of this, each one thinks progress and superiority is on its side⁹. Therefore, ethnocentrism is a necessary optical illusion, which, in turn, racist discourse uses to justify itself.

Despite being one of the few French scholars to have dedicated time to the question of racist thought, Taguieff is a rather controversial figure in more radical scholarly circles. First of all, his conception of what racism is and what it does is a very white conception in the sense that he refuses to question the very system that has bred it: the Enlightenment. Taguieff has also taken positions in favor of the French laws against the Muslim veils, revealing the

⁹ Claude Lévi-Strauss, *Race et histoire*, 1952.

limitations of his progressive thinking and his allegiance, first and foremost, to the traditional, unquestioned ideals brandished by the nation. His most recent work, *L'islamisme et nous: penser l'ennemi imprévu* argues that there are strong ties between Islam and Islamism, claims that hatred of whites is rampant, particularly with groups such as the Parti des Indigènes de la République (PIR), and that we (whites) are in danger of being destroyed.

A philosopher more aligned with the radical dimension of my project and who questions the very concepts the French nation relies on is Etienne Balibar. In "The Nation Form: History and Ideology," Balibar critiques modern conceptions of the nation-state. For him, "thinking about racism led us back to nationalism, and nationalism to uncertainty about the historical realities and categorization of the nation" (329). Balibar contends that it is impossible to pinpoint the beginning of a nation or to argue that the modern people who inhabit a nation-state are the descendants of the nation that preceded it. Because no nation-state has an ethnic base, every nation-state must create what he calls "fictional ethnicities" in order to project stability on the people:

the idea of nations without a state, or nations 'before' the state, is thus a contradiction in terms, because a state always is implied in the historic framework of a national formation (even if not necessarily within the limits of its territory). But this contradiction is masked by the fact that national states, whose integrity suffers from internal conflicts that threaten its survival (regional conflicts, and especially class conflicts), project beneath their political existence to a preexisting 'ethnic' or 'popular' unity (331).

In order to minimize these regional, class, and race conflicts, nation-states fabricate myths of origin that produce the illusion of shared ethnicity among all their inhabitants. In order to

create these myths of origins, nation-states scour the historical period during which they were 'formed' to find justification for their existence. France's story about itself relies heavily on this notion of shared origin as a necessary criterion for belonging. This notion seems at odds with the universalism touted by the Republic ever since its inception in the 18th century, and with its motto *liberté, égalité, fraternité*. However, it is important to remember the history of France's universalism, which was selective from the start and excluded former slaves from belonging at the same time as it advocated against slavery¹⁰. Balibar is useful to my project, which questions the role and place of the republican model in the construction of racial realities. He also co-wrote *Race, Nation, Class: Ambiguous Identities* with historian Immanuel Wallerstein, in which they emphasize the relations between modern racism, capitalism and class. Wallerstein's analysis of the connection between universalist ideology, racism, sexism and capitalism (30-31) was particularly useful to the thinking of my project.

While other countries such as the USA and Great Britain developed tools and theories in postcolonial studies and critical race theory studies in order to understand racial formation in their respective countries, French thinkers have not done so, for the most part. In fact, they are also profoundly averse to British or American thinkers analyzing racial questions in France using the tools and the language they have developed in order to examine their own countries. Loïc Wacquant and Pierre Bourdieu, in "On the Cunning of Imperialist Reason", present a point of view that is very defensive: "From being an analytical tool, the concept of racism becomes a mere instrument of accusation: under the guise of science it is the logic of the trial which asserts itself" (Bourdieu et al, 44). This response is characteristic of the way conversation,

¹⁰ See Laurent Dubois "La République métissée: Citizenship, Colonialism and the Borders of French History."

intellectual or otherwise, is shut down because accepting to discuss race as a social reality questions the narrative that France is colorblind. I will discuss this particular position more in depth later.

Last but not least is the current hyper visibility of academic nationalist thought in political discourse and the invisibility (or negative visibility) of radical antiracist thought. Intellectuals in France are generally respected and given a prominent voice in political discourse and the media. Over the years, however, the power of intellectuals to influence political decisions has dwindled. The relationship between intellectuals and politics has changed a lot. On *France Culture's* French podcast "L'atelier du pouvoir: les intellectuels ont-ils encore du pouvoir?" British historian Sudhir Hazareesing explains that, on the one hand, political elites have been less and less interested in maintaining that relationship. On the other hand, intellectuals have voluntarily removed themselves from the public sphere. The intellectuals who do have a public platform share views that are increasingly conservative and anchored in Republican nationalism. Those who currently are the most vocal and present on the public scene are indeed traditional, conservative voices such as Elizabeth Badinter, a white feminist who vociferously denounced the Muslim veils, Alain Finkielkraut, and Taguieff, who all share a blanket conception of Islam as a religion intrinsically oppressive to Muslim women. Badinter is quoted in *Mediapart's* article "Burqa: les non-dits du débat sur le voile" as practicing a form of Sarkozy's "La France, on l'aime ou on la quitte":

À «celles qui portent volontairement la burqa», la philosophe propose, quant à elle, de quitter la France:«Pourquoi ne pas gagner les terres saoudiennes ou afghanes où nul ne

vous demandera de montrer votre visage, où vos filles seront voilées à leur tour, où votre époux pourra être polygame et vous répudier quand bon lui semble?» (Couteau).

Additionally, the academic world has become silent concerning important political questions in the name of the so-called neutrality of knowledge. For fear of being instrumentalized and through a scornful refusal to engage in activism, scholars have withdrawn from the political sphere, increasing the gap between intellectual elites and political groups who could make use of their knowledge. The notion that knowledge isn't political is one that is both detrimental to the sharing of this knowledge, and a relic from Enlightenment universalism, the cost of which was exclusion and epistemicide. And yet, the knowledge produced by many of the scholars I will cite has not made its way onto the political scene. My question then is the following: how do we bridge the gap between the more radical thinking of a Guénif-Souillamas, Bentouhami-Molino, El-Tayeb, Tévanian, etc. and the public who is fed a daily diet of nationalist, universalist, and islamophobic propaganda?

I don't have an answer to this, but I am interested in disrupting the notion that activism and rigorous scholarship cannot mix and produce meaningful work—work with the potential for policy change. For example, the work of Houria Bouteldja, Saïd Bouamama and other scholars and political activists in the form of the controversial political group “Les Indigènes de la Républiques” (PIR) has been indiscriminately vilified and discredited despite the fact that it is grounded in legitimate and serious scholarship in colonialism and race studies. Bouteldja in particular has been accused of being anti-Semitic (Finkielkraut), racist and homophobic¹¹. I

¹¹ See for example the *Marianne* article “Indigènes de la République : Thomas Guénolé démontre le racisme, la misogynie et l'homophobie de Houria Bouteldja.” Also see *Libération* and *Le Canard enchaîné* for outraged and disparaging receptions of her book *Les Blancs, les Juifs et nous* (2016).

believe that the main reason for this treatment is the fact that for the past 13 years, the PIR has been disrupting the field of the antiracist left, which thinks of itself as very liberal but is in fact quite conservative, as I will explore in my project. In an anthology of essays titled *Nous sommes les Indigènes de la République*, the PIR practices radical public scholarship in the form of an innovative approach to activism. Indeed, the social justice goals of the PIR immediately inform and are in turn informed by critical race, feminist, and (post)colonial studies scholarship. Supported by engaged scholars such as Sadri Khiari, author of *Pour une politique de la racaille* and one of the thinkers of the PIR's ideology, the PIR is a vital but unpopular, inconvenient party doing the work of re-valuing the emotional, political and intellectual labor of French people of color by re-historicizing national identity while staying connected to the marginalized communities it seeks to empower.

To conclude this section, I think it is useful to think of the rift between the scholarship and activism of people of color and of their white allies, on the one hand, and the scholarship and activism of the traditional antiracist left, on the other hand, in terms of white innocence. I think that the violent reactions to the PIR are also a response to a questioning of white France's self-representation. In *Discourse on Colonialism*, Aimé Césaire wrote: "no one colonizes innocently, [...] no one colonizes with impunity either; [...] a nation which colonizes, [...] a civilization which justifies colonization – and therefore force – is already a sick civilization, a civilization that is morally diseased..." (4). The story that France tells itself about colonization is that it 'meant well,' it meant to enlighten and civilize. France thinks of itself as the cradle of human rights and as having invented equality. Claiming that race is a meaningful political, social and economic category disrupts this self-representation by debunking the idea that France is

colorblind, which is the ideology its state antiracism is built upon. For white people and nations that self-represent as white, it is uncomfortable, scary, and maybe even dizzying, to consider the local and global implications of accepting this disruption. In *White Innocence, Paradoxes of Colonialism and Race*, Gloria Wekker explores a central paradox of Dutch culture: the passionate denial of racial discrimination and colonial violence coexisting alongside aggressive racism and xenophobia. The paradoxes she lists in her book regarding the Dutch relation to race and racism are strikingly similar to the French situation. She writes:

Forgetting, glossing over, supposed color blindness, an inherent and natural superiority vis-à-vis people of color, assimilating: those are, broadly speaking, the main Dutch models that are in operation where interaction with racialized/ethnicized others is concerned. Persistently, an innocent, fragile, emancipated white Dutch self is constructed versus a guilty, uncivilized, barbaric other..." (15).

France also tends to outright deny and disavow accusations of systemic racism, and to claim colorblindness. The very idea of a colonial 'civilizing mission' (also the purpose of education in France) speaks to France's profound belief in its cultural and intellectual superiority. Finally, France's 'integration' politics look more like forced assimilation given that the expression of 'difference' is required to stay private. France has constructed itself as an innocent victim in two ways: first, by rejecting the notion of repentance in what is often referred to as a "guerre des mémoires"¹² and second by appropriating the language and means of defense of people of

¹² 2005 is a year that Benjamin Stora in his article "Entre la France et l'Algérie, le traumatisme (post)colonial des années 2000" the year of "la guerre des mémoires." Nicolas Sarkozy, then *ministre de l'intérieur* and later as president, will uphold a policy of non-repentance towards colonial atrocities committed by France (Le Monde). On the subject, his successor François Hollande said in a speech during his visit in Algeria that he had not come to apologize but to state the truth of France and Algeria's shared history (Le Monde Afrique). In an interview on TraceTV in March 2017, current French president Emmanuel Macron expressed the following position on the issue:

color in the form of so-called 'anti-white racism'. I will explore both of these phenomena more in depth in my project and the implications of building a national identity on the refusal to apologize for colonial violence.

If scholarship conceiving of France in racial terms has been relatively sparse, scholarship on immigration has been particularly abundant. In these next sections, I give a brief overview of some of the most visible scholars working on immigration and race. Arguably, my decision to separate issues of immigration and issues of race can seem very arbitrary and somewhat unfounded. After all, issues of race are addressed in French works about immigration, even if only briefly. Meanwhile, racism is often tightly connected to migrations. However, this decision is two-fold. First, always addressing issues of race only in the context of immigration is problematic because it implies that skin color and ethnicity are systematically linked to immigration, when in fact a very large portion of French-born citizens are not white. The consequences of this systematic association are highly problematic for the concerned populations. In *De la question sociale à la question raciale?*, Didier Fassin explains that immigration and race are two different, if sometimes overlapping issues. In merging the two, we run the risk of talking about xenophobia, which is a way of « oublier tout simplement que les victimes des discriminations sont le plus souvent françaises » (28). Second, associating race with origin and therefore consolidating a vision of French identity that is rooted in a notion that to be French you have to have shared origins is a notion used to exclude from French society those who do not share the same origins.

“ni déni, ni repentance mais réconciliation (des mémoires).” The question of reparations is not on the table with Macron either.

On Immigration

Even though France has been a country of immigration for well over a century, immigration became a serious subject of research only recently, in the 1980's, with the simultaneous rise of racism and anti-racism, and xenophobia. Gérard Noiriel is a key scholar on French immigration. He is particularly interesting because of his insistence that immigration is not a fact that is exterior to France but rather an integral part of its national makeup and sense of self. In *Le creuset français*, Noiriel exhorts historians to weigh in on current events and consider immigration a topic worthy of research, not only to bring out the "truth" but because it is also a way of legitimizing millions of inhabitants' place in French society. Noiriel's argument is a first in the sense that he questions the scientific and scholarly pursuit that operates in a vacuum, by bringing in social justice concerns to justify the importance of the study of immigration. He writes: "...expliquer ce que la France d'aujourd'hui doit à l'immigration, au-delà des enjeux de "pure" vérité, c'est donner à des millions d'habitants de ce pays la *possibilité* de situer leur histoire personnelle (ou celle de leur famille) dans la "grande" histoire de la Nation française, afin qu'elle y ait une place légitime" (11).

Noiriel begins *Le creuset français* by discussing why immigration is not considered a legitimate topic of research and hasn't been since the 1930s. In order to understand why that is, Noiriel makes a useful comparison to the USA. While the USA thinks of immigration as being an intrinsic part of the construction of the nation, the French think of it as an 'exterior' problem that has nothing to do with their past and how they think of themselves. Noiriel explains how France's origin myths had long been settled in the national conscious by the time immigration really began. The issue, then, is that immigrants are not considered a part of the past and

history of France. Noiriel is indeed particularly useful to my argument because he challenges France's obsession with the notion of (shared) origins.

His work on immigration provides a thorough history of immigrants' place in the construction of French identity, their involvement in the repopulating of France post WWI, and the reconstruction of France post WWII. His chapter "La reconstruction de la France" in *Le creuset français* addresses this issue in detail and carefully highlights the essential role immigrants played in France's industrial success. In a way also contrary to what has been written on the subject, Noiriel takes the time to lay out the many contributions immigrants have made to France's history, economically, intellectually and artistically speaking. One of his key interests is the role of representation and therefore of the media in the shaping of society's relationship to issues of immigration, immigrants, and Muslims. In *A quoi sert l'identité nationale?*, Noiriel analyzes the key role of the media in spreading stereotypes and constructing the figure of the *banlieues* youth, for example, as we know it today.

In *Le creuset*, however, Noiriel does not address colonial immigration. He does so 20 years later, when he publishes *Immigration, antisémitisme et racisme en France*. This work presents a detailed report on two decades of immigration research in order to contextualize more honestly and truthfully current debates about *immigration choisie*, *intégration*, and *discriminations*. In historicizing public discourses about immigration, Noiriel exposes how over a century of negative representations of immigrants have shaped today's racist and anti-Semitic discourses and policies. His angle of approach in this book is to look at immigration from the perspective of the stigmatization of the other: what is the role of public discourse in the creation of stereotypes and discriminations? He traces how the menace of the blue-collar

worker has become replaced with the menace of the foreigner, in the context of supposed immutable national identity. He shows how, throughout the 20th century, politicians redirect the people's discontent towards foreigners.

A key strength of the book is that it analyses how issues of poverty, unemployment, etc. are attributed to origin, nationality or religion, enforcing existing stereotypes and stigmatizations of foreigners. For Noiriel, the key to fighting stigmatizations, a term he prefers to 'discriminations' is to start with the public discourses that shape negative representations of young people in the *banlieues*: in education, in the media, in politics. What is most important to me in Noiriel's endeavor, however, is his insistence on considering that a variety of factors compose a person's identity. At the end of *Immigration*, he writes: "Il n'existe pas d'individus qui seraient seulement des "immigrés". La nationalité, le sexe, le milieu professionnel, le lieu d'implantation doivent toujours être pris en compte"(692-3). I would add to this list ethnicity, race and sexual orientation as well. Noiriel prefers to talk about stigmatization rather than racism, because according to him immigrants are discriminated against for a variety of reasons, not only for racial ones. While I agree with this point, I also think that there is a hierarchy of stigmas, so to speak, which are made more or less worse depending on one's skin color. For example, numerous studies¹³ have shown that faced with a CV of equal skill and competency,

¹³ See *De la question sociale à la question raciale?* Chapter 9 "Les discriminations racistes dans le monde du travail"; "Assignation et discrimination racistes : enquêtes dans le monde du travail en France." There is a much larger bank of studies coming from the Anglophone world, however. Keaton in *Muslim Girls and the Other France* writes: "people of color are supposedly discriminated against because they are "immigrants" or feared foreigners, not necessarily because they are African or Asian or "Black" (De Rudder, Poiret, and Vourc'h 2000). But the fact that a thing is not racially named does not mean it is not racialized" (8). Similarly, Lozès in "The Invention of Blacks in France" contends: "[Black populations] are most often identified through the reductive prism of "immigration" and "integration." It is skin color that turns a French person into a foreigner and asks him "to integrate" throughout his life. This is what led to the creation of the Ministry of Immigration, National Identity, Integration, and Co-development in 2007, an event accompanied by increasing restrictions on the granting of citizenship and the multiplication of administrative obstacles to the renewal of the French identity card" (108).

an employer will more than likely interview and hire the candidate with a French or European sounding name, than the candidate who visibly looks non-white, especially if the candidate looks and sounds 'Arab'.

Noiriel works to disentangle immigration from colonization, which he sees as a problematic amalgam because it confines the children of immigrants to a status of victims. For him, the best way to move forward and eradicate stigmatization of immigrants is to “casser les chaînes qui ont produit les stéréotypes sur l’immigré-agresseur et sur l’immigré-victime” (*Immigration*, 694). This stance is typical of white scholars who focus more on racism as an issue of prejudice than one of structure and institutions. Affect scholars such as Sara Ahmed suggest that recognizing past wrongs and injustices through apology and possibly reparations is an essential step in moving forward. A key weakness of Noiriel’s work, then, is that he does not see the situation of discrimination as a failure of the *modèle républicain*: “Ce n’est pas le “modèle républicain” qui a échoué [...] mais c’est le discours des élites qui a changé” (*Immigration*, 688). Noiriel does not question the system but rather the discourses that it produces. It is the system that produces these discourses that I believe we need to question. What are the historical circumstances from which *le modèle républicain* comes from? What ties connect Enlightenment theories of universalism (among others) to colonial invasions and to the state’s conception of French identity?

From Social to Racial/Racist in French scholarship

In *Immigration, antisémitisme et racisme en France*, Noiriel explains that what racism means now and what it used to mean are two different things. Racism in the past was a term used to refer to political platforms and discourses. Today, we think of racism as a form of aggression, a criminal act; in other words, it is vilified. In the conclusion to *Immigration*, Noiriel discusses what he calls the *fait-diversisation* of racism by the media (what I call societal prejudice and what others call *racisme ordinaire*), as opposed to the way society and its institutions are structured. For Noiriel, this *fait-diversisation* is a symptom of the trivialization of discourses on the topic. I agree with him that racist representations are spread, developed and normalized through discourse and media representation, but along with Eduardo Bonilla-Silva, I believe that this view of racism as prejudice is a white person's view of racism: "for most people of color, racism is systemic or institutionalized" (Bonilla-Silva, 8). I approach race not as a biological fact, of course, but as a construction that has a social reality for people of color and white people as well. In other words, I want to step away from abstract discussions of racism as 'evil,' and rather focus on the concrete, systemic ways through which it manifests itself.

In *La France raciste*, Wieviorka addresses racism directly. His book is the result of a sociological investigation focused on everyday racism in various cities and groups of people who are in conflict with each other: the police, skinheads, young immigrants, etc. While the book is rich with data, it limits itself mainly to describing instead of explaining. In spite of the fact that some chapters seem to address systemic racism, his analysis falls short of at least naming it as such. Instead, he focuses more on instances of racial prejudice within those institutions, but not the way those institutions have been designed to exclude in the first place.

He also talks a lot about the violence of the *banlieues*, without really explaining where it comes from: he does not historicize. In his chapter on racism and the police, he seems to suggest that the police used to be welcome in these communities, but there is no evidence of this. He also doesn't define the term *immigré* and seems to equate skin color with immigration.

In *L'espace du racisme*, his discussion on racism invites the reader to re-think racism as a form of action and to jettison the concept of race, which he sees as devoid of analytical power. Therefore, he is more interested in the forms that racism takes (discrimination, racial violence, segregation, etc.) and thinks of a racist state as another form of racist action. He talks about 'total racism' for cases where the state itself becomes organized on a racial basis – what Michael Omi and Howard Winant call a 'racial state' in *Racial Formation in the United States*. His main interest in this piece is creating the tools to examine the mechanisms of racism rather than examining what he calls the “sites and objects”(XV) of racism.

Overall, however, American and British scholars have been more interested in examining the ways in which their societies' core structures have been designed to maintain white supremacy. Many French scholars like Noiriel and Wieviorka argue that the French situation is rather different from the US situation, for example, in great part because France's society wasn't built on slavery. In a famously controversial essay titled “On the Cunning of Imperialist Reason,” Pierre Bourdieu and Loïc Wacquant bemoan the introduction of race by the USA as an analytical framework to understand European problems, claiming that race is alien to European contexts. Their argument is that race, as a category of social analysis, is particular to the US whereas class is the universally relevant category with which to analyze societies. Bourdieu and Wacquant are not the only scholars to dismiss race as irrelevant to the

understanding of European contexts. On the matter, Fatima El-Tayeb in *European Others* explains:

The continental European case represents a form of racialization that receives relatively little academic attention both because it diverges from models traditionally dominating the discourse around race and because its strategy of denial is particularly hard to challenge: rather than explicit mechanisms by which race is implemented or referenced in political, social, and economic interactions within and between communities, the ideology of “racelessness” is the process by which racial thinking and its effects are made invisible. Race, at times, seems to exist anywhere but in Europe, where racialized minorities have traditionally been placed outside of the national and by extension continental community (xvii).

Bourdieu, Wacquant et al. inadvertently promote the ideology of racelessness in part by arguing that American conceptual tools cannot be useful (and are even harmful) to think about the role of race in European social relations. This is what Stuart Hall calls the “internalist” (18) narrative of European identity, which is to say that Europe exists in a vacuum as a homogeneous entity devoid of influence from the outside. El-Tayeb shows how “mechanisms of racist exclusion in the United States and in the rest of the world are not as completely different as the two authors [Bourdieu and Wacquant] claim and that class is not enough to fully address these exclusions within Europe” (El-Tayeb, xix).

The notion that race is somewhat irrelevant to understanding social issues in Europe, however, often prevents scholars from acknowledging and examining racism as a structural issue. Racism is most often addressed as something that is ‘going through’ institutions at best,

but rather more addressed as societal prejudice. I want to take this scholarship further and consider how these institutions might have been designed to exclude in the first place. Indeed, several scholars have shown how French identity was constructed over time in direct relation to colonial slavery.

In his article “La République métissée: citizenship, colonialism, and the borders of French history,” Laurent Dubois contextualizes debates about French identity within French colonial history. He focuses on the ways the history of the French Caribbean have shaped how race and citizenship are imagined in Republican political culture. On the one hand, they produced a republican tradition of anti-racist egalitarianism. On the other hand, they also gave birth to a ‘republican racism’ through which new practices of exclusion are articulated. He traces a history of how the concept of French citizenship has become so contested today. In order to shed light on a movement like the *sans-papiers* movement, Dubois goes back to French colonization of the Caribbean and the conflicts over slavery that shook the French colonies at the end of the 18th century. He posits that selection and exclusion of who was fit to be a French citizen shaped the way contemporary France debates about and conceives of race, immigration and national identity. Framing issues of integration in colonial history, he writes: “The economic and social exclusion of these communities [*les banlieues*] confronts French society with the limits of ideals of integration that have been traditionally the cement of Republican social policy” (17).

Didier Fassin and Sarah Mazouz also discuss the idea that the French Republican institution is based upon Enlightenment universalism that is selective and exclusionary in “Qu'est-ce que devenir français? La naturalisation comme rite d'institution républicain.” In this

article, they interrogate the why of the naturalization rite of passage. They note that the rite is presented as a favor; something the Republic finds you worthy of receiving. Therefore, it is very selective and those who are granted citizenship are viewed as assimilated while others are simply not included/viewed as deserving. And yet, the naturalization process clearly tells them that they are still not the same as *français de souche*. While making them 'same' it is simultaneously making them 'other': you are now French, but let me remind you that you are not French like me.

The edited volume *De la question sociale à la question raciale?* by Didier Fassin and Eric Fassin addresses structural racism in the way they move from a *question raciste* to a *question raciale*. Their work can be thought of as a response to Bourdieu and Wacquant's in that it demonstrates that society cannot only be represented in terms of class. The book attempts to articulate *la question sociale* to *la question raciale* instead of opposing them. In the introduction to *De la question sociale*, they write that:

Le « racisme institutionnel », comme on le dit en anglais, est en fait une discrimination structurelle. Dès lors, il ne suffit pas (même s'il importe évidemment) de combattre le racisme bien réel de certains policiers pour y remédier. Les actions à conduire doivent pénétrer bien plus en profondeur dans le tissu social (Fassin et al, 7).

More often than not, however, French scholars tend to downplay or dispute the idea of a racial order and therefore of a white supremacist system. Fassin and Fassin's volume is quite remarkable in that it not only discusses structural racism but also directly involves white people, effectively removing racism from the sphere of theories and grounding it in actions. In other words, racism isn't simply an evil force in the world, it is something white people do and

white systems of power enable and enforce. In speaking of *blanchité*, their volume takes a step in this direction:

...on prend conscience aujourd’hui – comme on l’a toujours su dans les colonies, comme on ne l’a jamais oublié après la décolonisation, et comme on continue de l’énoncer sans ambages, par exemple, dans le monde antillais – qu’il y a des Blancs. [...] L’émergence de la “questions raciale” en France, c’est donc aussi l’apparition d’une “question blanche.” Cette problématisation a d’ailleurs des effets qu’il faudra bien prendre en compte: il ne s’agit pas seulement de constater une réalité empirique – les Blancs – mais aussi, et surtout, de penser un problème, tant scientifique que politique, qu’on peut désormais nommer “la blanchité” (Fassin et al., 8-9)

The question of ‘naming’ and ‘using the words’ to define so-called universalism as ‘whiteness’ is a key concern of my project.

In 2008, Pierre Tévanian, another key scholar of this project, also wrote one of the few French books that consider racism as a system instead of as isolated ‘evil’ occurrences. *La mécanique raciste*, actualized and republished in 2017, tackles the remarkable contradiction that everyone claims to be antiracist and yet discriminations still occur in massive proportions and without being punished. Contrary to so-called progressive discourses that relegate racism to simply being the manifestation of individual prejudice or of the “fear of the other,” that is natural and therefore understandable, Tévanian underscores its systemic dimension and the way in which it is at the core of French culture. In the book, he analyzes the logics, ethics and aesthetics of racism in order to expose it and deconstruct it as the toxic system that it is. Crucially, he calls out the hypocrisy of the ‘good’ antiracist republican’s virtuous antiracism,

constantly bringing the reader back to the essential question of equality. Indeed, one of his key arguments against the idea of racism as ‘fear of the other’ while at the same time exposing the Republic’s hypocrisy, is to demonstrate that the Republic’s core tenant of *égalité* is not at all incompatible with the affirmation of one’s difference, on the contrary:

[...] l’affirmation de sa différence et le combat pour l’égalité ne font qu’un. L’égalité et la différence ne sont pas deux valeurs antinomiques qu’il faudrait concilier ou tempérer l’une par l’autre, [...] D’abord, parce que la différence n’est pas en elle-même une valeur : elle est plutôt une simple et banale réalité, qu’il n’y a pas lieu de valoriser en tant que telle et en général – même s’il y a lieu en revanche de *revaloriser certaines différences* : celles qui ont été d’une valeur infamante ou infériorisante. Ensuite parce que la différence et l’égalité [...] sont au contraire *les deux faces d’un même mode d’existence* : l’émergence et le déploiement de la différence suppose l’égalité, qui elle-même ne se manifeste pas autrement que par l’affirmation et l’ostentation de sa ou ses différences (41-42).¹⁴

I am interested in engaging with and contributing to scholarship that actively works at dismantling a kind of scholarship and discourse anchored in neocolonial, universalist thinking that conceives of racism as an ethereal evil detached from society and institutions, and of white supremacy in terms of the standard or the default. In order to do so, I want to emphasize that when talking about race, I am also talking about whiteness: what it means to be perceived as white and what it means not to be perceived as white; that is, the social realities attached to racial constructions.

¹⁴ The italics are Tévanian’s.

Whiteness Studies in France

Whiteness studies as an official field of inquiry started developing in the USA and Great Britain in the 1980s. However, the concept and the analyses/constructions of white identities come from Black intellectual traditions¹⁵. This connection to Black epistemologies is often ignored, as noted in the analogical work of Peggy McIntosh “Male Privilege and White Privilege” published in 1988, in which she compares sexism to racism. Much as W.E.B. DuBois shows in *Darkwaters*¹⁶, scholars of color started defining, analyzing and understanding white identity decades (or more) before the field of critical white studies even started emerging. The debt that critical white studies owe to Black knowledge production is essential to acknowledge and build upon in order for my project not to reproduce the kind of white oppression it aims at dismantling.

Whiteness studies in France is a field of inquiry little explored by academia. However, two key works stand out in French scholarship on whiteness: *De quelle couleur sont les Blancs?*, a volume edited by Sylvie Laurent and Thierry Leclère, and *Dans le blanc des yeux: Diversité, racisme et médias* de Maxime Cervulle. In *De quelle couleur...*, Laurent and Leclère clearly position their research and their collection of essays within a radical discourse, one that confirms the work of Didier and Eric Fassin in *De la question sociale...* and the absolute relevance of discussing race along with class in France:

Cette relation dialectique entre la classe et la race, centrale aux Etats-Unis [...] est donc tout aussi pertinente dans le contexte français, comme l’avaient suggéré Didier et Eric

¹⁵ See in particular the works of Audre Lorde, bell hooks, and Frantz Fanon.

¹⁶ In *Darkwaters*, W.E.B. DuBois describes how well he sees through the white soul and its constructed identity. In other words, Black people have always known whites better than they know themselves. This idea that white people live in an illusion they constructed that makes them blind to their social realities is also developed by James Baldwin.

Fassin dans leur ouvrage précurseur *De la question sociale à la question raciale?* [Fassin et Fassin, 2008], dans lequel ils [...] y montraient que si le déploiement de la rhétorique raciale se fait bien souvent de façon euphémisée, elle n'en est pas moins réelle, y compris aux plus hauts échelons de l'Etat » (11).

Their introduction also takes unambiguous and non-neutral positions regarding what it means to be white: "Être "blanc" dans la France d'aujourd'hui, c'est appartenir au groupe majoritaire. C'est ne pas avoir à se définir. Ne pas avoir à répondre à la question: "De quelle origine êtes-vous?" C'est, enfin, le plus souvent, ne pas savoir qu'on possède des privilèges » (Laurent et al., 8). Right from the beginning, the writers unambiguously position their scholarship with the statement that white identity is a sign of inequality and privilege, thus approaching the Republic's ideals with a critical eye and refocusing the debate around the question of equality. The works of academics such as Laurent, Leclère, Tévanian, Fassin, etc. is essential because, if only rhetorically, it builds a bridge between the ivory tower of academic inquiry and the real lived experiences of the society they write about and therefore re-starts the kind of engaged scholarship that needs to find a public place. For example, one of the essays in *De quelle couleur...* is an interview with Magyd Cherfi, one of the founding members of French band *Zebda*. Also, throughout the volume, a variety of arguments and discussions echo the same basic tenant: "le destin social d'un jeune Français, même issu d'un milieu populaire, sera moins chaotique s'il est perçu comme "blanc", conforme à une conception restrictive de la citoyenneté, voire de la "francité", qui est par ailleurs entretenue par l'imaginaire hexagonal" (10). The relative absence of compromises to an imaginary academic objectivity is not only refreshing but also crucially needed to respond to white supremacist backlashes happening all

over the world. The articulations between race and class are the constant focus of the volume and one of its strengths.

The book is divided into four sections. In the first section, a discussion of academic and activist texts construct a nuanced vision of what white identity is, looks like, and could be. For Tévanian, the first article in the series, to be white is to experience privilege. For Sadri Khiari it is a social relation that is still in need of definition. The second section of the book is dedicated to the colonial question, which is often dismissed as being irrelevant to issues of identity in France since it occurred outside of the Hexagon. And yet, the historicization offered by this second section shows how deeply the French history of slavery and miscegenation constructed French whiteness. A key argument of this section is presented by Françoise Vergès, for whom cultural and social constructions of ‘white’ and ‘Black’ require a close look at colonial slavery. The third section questions the very nature of whiteness studies, exploring whiteness’ imaginary and also how it is represented. Clarissa Behar cautions against what could turn out to be a false de-familiarization, and be in fact, once again, a re-centering on white racial formation and hinder the possibility for whiteness studies to be a technology¹⁷ in the fight against racism. In this she echoes Sara Ahmed who contends that whiteness studies are not performative – ‘saying’ is not the same as ‘doing’¹⁸. Finally, the fourth section addresses the political uses and consequences of this imaginary. In this section, the extreme flexibility of whiteness and its populist uses is emphasized, in particular by Ariane Chebel d’Appolonia’s essay that discusses the notion of

¹⁷ I prefer the use of the term technology instead of ‘tool’ because technology refers to processes and principles, which is what systems are made of. Technology is therefore a term best suited to refer to the complexity and heterogeneity of systems.

¹⁸ In “Declarations of Whiteness: The Non-Performativity of Anti-Racism”, argues: “putting whiteness into speech, as an object to be spoken about, however critically, is not an anti-racist action, and nor does it necessarily commit a state, institution or person to a form of action that we could describe as anti-racist. [...] declaring one’s whiteness, even as part of a project of social critique, can reproduce white privilege in ways that are ‘unforeseen’.

'anti-white' racism. Others such as Laurent Dornel highlight the difference between racism and xenophobia when it comes to discussing *le mouvement ouvrier*, thereby bringing to the discussion the links between social, racial, and nationalist questions.

Maxime Cervulle's *Dans le blanc des yeux*, which comes out around the same time as Laurent and Leclère's edited volume, proposes to reverse the usual terms of the French debate around the question of diversity and instead to focus on the social construction of whiteness. In the first chapter, Cervulle makes clear that he embraces a systemic understanding of racism and offers a different perspective on racial social relations by describing the effects of racialization on the dominant group. In the second chapter, the author shows how the issue of whiteness " permet d'introduire une conception relationnelle systémique du pouvoir dans l'appréhension des rapports sociaux de race: il s'agit de contester l'idée selon laquelle les actrices et acteurs socialement perçus comme blancs échapperaient à l'emprise de la racialisation" (49). For Cervulle, whiteness is a social construct that describes a social experience characterized by the lived experience of dominance. In the final chapter, the author looks at discovering "dans quelle mesure les publics s'identifient ou se désidentifient des représentations raciales qu'on leur donne à voir, dans quelle mesure ils adhèrent ou résistent à ces images, bref dans quelle mesure ils "braconnent" ou non la blanchité" (131). In this chapter, the author attempts to grasp the socio-symbolic investments in fiction as they participate, to various degrees, in the reproduction of systemic racism. Throughout the book, it is evident that Cervulle is heavily influenced by British and US critical white studies. He concludes with this powerful line: "Car si le blanc n'est pas une couleur, il est bien le nom par lequel se dessinent les contours du racisme systémique"(165).

Islamophobia

It is impossible to talk about racism in France without talking about islamophobia. The term is often used to refer to the cultural racism (perceived) Muslims have to endure. In “Islamophobie, la fabrique d’un nouveau concept,” Houda Asal offers a thorough review of the research on islamophobia in the Anglophone and Francophone worlds, noting that the research is much more prolific in the former. While the very definition of the term is contested, it is used more and more by scholars, including those who use it in order to refute its existence such as Pierre-André Taguieff and Pascal Bruckner¹⁹. Asal explains that there are two components to take into account when examining islamophobia in France. First, it is the fact that Muslim populations in France come from colonial migration. Second, France’s principle of *laïcité* puts Muslim women at the center of religious debates and discriminations. Religion, then, must be a component of the race/gender/class analyses in order to understand islamophobia in France and the place of race in the construction of French identity. Part of my project will attempt to answer these questions: To what extent does religion and the rejection of Islam shape French identity? What is the role of Christianity in the country’s perception of its own identity?

In *Islamophobie, Comment les élites françaises fabriquent le “problème musulman,”* Abdellali Hajjat and Marwan Mohammed present to the public the first critical results of years of research on the phenomenon of islamophobia. In this research, they anchor islamophobic acts and discourses in the long history of colonial racism. Hajjat and Mohammed carefully

¹⁹ See his latest book *Un racisme imaginaire : islamophobie et culpabilité*, in which he states that: “L'accusation d'islamophobie n'est rien d'autre qu'une arme de destruction massive du débat intellectuel” (41).

examine the process of othering French Muslims suffer. One of their most striking remarks can be found at the beginning of the book, when they establish the grounds for their argument that islamophobia is what they call “un fait social total.” In other words, they start the book by making a non-exhaustive list of influential intellectuals (fiction writers, philosophers, and political thinkers) across the political spectrum who have taken islamophobic stances. Interestingly, such stances have been adopted by thinkers who have also written on and against racism, such as Taguieff, who expressed on France Inter in 1997 that “deux millions de musulmans en France, ce sont deux millions d’intégristes potentiels” (qtd by the PIR). If we consider that, to a certain extent, islamophobia is one of the forms taken by anti-Arab racism, such a comment coming from the writer of *La Force du préjugé* is particularly problematic.

As Hajjat and Mohammed deplore, little has been written on the subject of islamophobia. There is in fact a trend in philosophy epitomized by Pascal Bruckner arguing that islamophobia doesn’t exist. In *Un racisme imaginaire: islamophobie et culpabilité*, Bruckner’s central argument is that the term is a liberal ploy to shut down any and all criticism of Islam. While he doesn’t deny that Muslims are the targets of much hatred, he sees islamophobia as the invention of the political left in which the new figure of the victim, the Muslim, is instrumentalized. In rejecting the term altogether, however, Bruckner doesn’t offer an alternative. He also seems to ignore a plethora of violent discourses and actions perpetrated against the Muslim community (and those perceived to belong to it) precisely because of their religious affiliation. This disavowal is in many ways an insult to their ongoing suffering. The

denial of the racialization of Islam²⁰ that has taken place in the national psyche is not new by any means and has deep roots in the intellectual tradition of European thought (as proves the long elaboration of racist thought) and in the Republican institution itself. Seeking to discredit a term referring to the very real lived experience of millions “revient finalement à l’occulter socialement et politiquement” (Hajjat et al., 20).

Instead, France talks about *le problème musulman*, which unanimously rallies elites of all political and social circles. In order to understand how the construction of this problem around a national consensus exists today, Hajjat and Mohammed consider the ties between postcolonial immigration (also construed as a problem) and this *problème musulman*. They show very well the way this problem is constructed at the very end of the 1970s, by the combined actions of factory employers, the media, and the political elite. In opposition to traditional orientalist knowledge, Hajjat and Mohammed painstakingly historicize and de-essentialize the place of Islam in France in order to contextualize its demonization. What is, then, France’s role in the making of so-called Islamic terrorism?

Pierre Tévanian, a professor of philosophy and activist, wrote a number of essays on this *problème musulman* by reversing the terms of the question, and looking instead at the Republic’s understanding of *laïcité* and *égalité* as the real issue. By virtue of being a white, heterosexual man (which he acknowledges and discusses openly), Tévanian is in a privileged

²⁰ Fatima Khemilat, rising academic star and PhD candidate in the field, gave a presentation titled “Racialisation, religion et genre: quand l’intersectionnalité prend corps, elle vit en banlieue” at the international conference in Nanterre “Le religieux au prisme de l’éthnicité et de la racisation” in 2014. Khemilat focuses on the concatenation of identities in France in very specific spaces (*la banlieue* in particular) and the way the figures of young Arabs are constructed in order to obfuscate the inadequacies of France socio-political systems. She justly remarks that one of the byproducts and tools of this process is the establishment of a “respectable” or politically and socially acceptable islamophobia, which is referred to as the *problème musulman*.

position to publish much more frank and systemically critical pieces than Hajjat and Mohammed. In 2005, immediately following the first law against the Muslim veil, Tévanian publishes *Le voile médiatique. Un faux débat: "l'affaire du foulard islamique,"* which offers a particularly virulent critique of the exploitation of the Muslim veil by the media. The author shows that the repressive law voted by the parliament²¹ is the result of a debate started by politicians and dramatized by a very biased media. This mediatization encouraged the development of attitudes of fear and rejection by disproportionately giving the stage to those who were in favor of the law, and silencing those who were against it such as the veiled students themselves,²² engaged scholars, secular and feminist activists. For Tévanian, this has allowed the "production d'un consensus islamophobe, faisant de l'élève voilée le vecteur de tous les maux et de toutes les menaces" (12).

In the first chapter, the author exposes the way in which the media imposed and overrepresented the 'issue of the veil'. In the second chapter, Tévanian discusses the deep bias that permeated every media debate on the topic and lingers on the absence of the young women concerned by the law in this debate, as well as on the absence of voices arguing against the new law. In the third and last chapter, the author moves away from the pro or con debate and instead suggests a different opposition: for or against exclusion. The new alternative is a) rejecting the veil and therefore accepting exclusion, or b) rejecting exclusion and accepting the veil (85). Tévanian's exposition of the role of the media in constructing this 'Muslim problem'

²¹ The first of the two laws against the Muslim veils is called "Loi sur les signes religieux dans les écoles publiques françaises" of 2004. It prohibits students from wearing ostentatious religious signs at school.

²² Tévanian co-wrote a book titled *Les filles voilées parlent* with Ismahane Chouder and Malika Latrèche, in which veiled French women are subjects of the book instead of objects of study. This is a powerful response to the way public debate excluded them from the conversations that concerned them directly.

fostered my own thinking about the power of a (mostly) white media to shape race relations and society's understanding of what racism and antiracism look like.

Roughly ten years later, Tévanian publishes a new, more fully formed and informed reflection on the veil and its political and theoretical significances: *Dévoilements. Du hijab à la burqa: les dessous d'une obsession française*. The first chapter is composed of thirty 'paradoxes' of what Tévanian refers to as *un féminisme paradoxal*, that has led to the law of 2004 and to the one banning the niqab in 2010. His 30 paradoxes carefully undo a number of arguments that have considerably contributed to the development of the islamophobic machine that mainly stigmatizes women and that he therefore considers racist. Questioning what *laïcité* means and how it has become distorted through political instrumentalization, Tévanian shows that the hair of Muslim women as a political stake is much more than a diversion and rather the project of a racist society. He ends the book by describing the every day life of the women who wear the veil and the discrimination they suffer at all levels of their lives. The book asks a series of particularly important questions, some of which my project will consider as well: Can one be 'liberated' against one's will? What are the limitations of considering someone as alienated and in need of a savior? Towards the end of the book, Tévanian proves once again that racism is not the 'natural' response to a 'natural' fear of the other, and that the debate around the Muslim veil is really a debate about equality:

Si les fille et les femmes voilées n'ont pas été confrontées à une telle haine au cours des décennies précédentes, ce n'est pas parce que le racisme antiarabe et antimusulman n'existait pas [...] Les lois de prohibition et les campagnes de dénigrement n'étaient pas à l'ordre du jour pour la simple raison que, sauf exception, les femmes voilées

n'accédaient de toute façon pas à l'école et l'université, ni sur le marché de l'emploi (142-143).

In other words, it is only when Muslim women started claiming some of the Republic's equality for themselves, when they came out in the public space (school, university, etc.) that their veil became so unbearable (141).

Le foulard islamique en questions, a volume edited by Charlotte Nordmann, carefully picks apart the Republic's notion of equality. France is a country that declares itself of universalist culture, whose national identity is rooted in the concept of *laïcité*, and who prides itself on having invented equality. Several non-white scholars contributed to the volume and analyzed with nuance and care the varied meanings that the veil has for Muslim French women's identity, and the ways in which, as sociologist Françoise Gaspard remarks: "le foulard est parfois devenu pour ces filles le moyen, paradoxalement, de sortir dans la rue, de s'émanciper et parfois même de saper l'ordre patriarcal" (84). Dounia Bouzar also describes the complex strategies deployed by young Muslim women in France who "pass[ent] par l'islam pour devenir modernes" (57). In several texts, white feminism is put on trial for its inability to comprehend the double bind in which these young women are caught, but also because it offers a limited and essentialist understanding of femininity as a "féminité éternelle et meurtrie" as sociologist Nacira Guénif-Souilamas points out.

The issue of gender and race is powerfully explored in detail by Nacira Guénif-Souilamas and Eric Macé in *Les féministes et le garçon arabe*. Through the analysis of the movement *Ni Putes, Ni Soumises*, the question of social inequalities and racist discriminations, the authors explore what current feminism looks like in France and that they call *le féminisme républicain*.

Guénif-Souilamas and Macé explain that this feminism is constructed on two simplistic interpretations of *la fille voilée* and *le garçon arabe*. In this *féminisme républicain*, the young Muslim girl is oppressed and needs to be freed (even if it means excluding her from school), and the *garçon arabe* is sexist and violent and needs to be tamed. The authors show how such rhetoric fosters the myth that the Republic is by nature liberating, ignoring its past of resistance to feminine emancipation. This kind of feminism that gives acclaim to the liberation of the white woman while stigmatizing Muslim culture and the *banlieues* is a way to maintain a kind of “virtuous” racism (the authors’ words). Their book condemns the so-called progressive discourse of the Republic, and the hypocritical claims it makes about its own identity. Discussing the identity imposed to young Arab men from the *banlieues* is crucial to understanding the role the Republic has played in the making of terrorism, among other things.

In these three final sections, I discuss more in depth two key terms of my project: national identity and *communautarisme*. This contextualization is necessary to shed light on the particularities of the French context and on my call for a “creolization of theory”²³ and French identity.

Instrumentalizing National Identity

In *A quoi sert « l’identité nationale »?* historian Gérard Noiriel traces the origins of the term’s various uses in political discourse. Noiriel explains how the concept was invented²⁴ and

²³ I am borrowing the term from *The Creolization of Theory*, edited by François Lionnet.

²⁴ In my project I understand the concept of national identity in the same way Noiriel does. I conceive of national identity as an unfixed ideological construction susceptible to change. That said, I acknowledge and examine the

picked up by various political parties and voices in order to legitimize their power. Indeed, he remarks that the semantics of the term and what it represents change according to the various uses of the term to serve groups and their interests. Overall, Noiriél finds that the term *identité nationale* really enters French political discourse in the 1960s and 1970s:

Le terme « *national identity* » est utilisé pour décrire et encourager le processus d'« *americanization* » grâce auquel les immigrants sont invités à se fondre dans le « creuset américain ». Mais au cours des années 1960, avec la politisation des campus, une nouvelle génération d'universitaires refuse cette perspective de l'expression « *national identity* » à la fois pour dénoncer la culture nationale américaine dominante et exalter les identités dominées (*A quoi*, 53).

France begins to question the historiography imposed by the III Republic during the events of May 68 with the rise of anticolonial and antiracist activism led by the left and radical left: “La défense du « multiculturalisme » devient, dans le même temps, l'une des dimensions centrales du combat postcolonial dénonçant les pratiques « assimilationnistes » de l'Etat français (*A quoi*, 55). Since the 1980s, however, extreme right wing party Front National picked up the concept of national identity for xenophobic and racist purposes and to violently oppose immigration; what they call *la menace étrangère* coming both from the inside and outside. More recently, the term has been appropriated by the right and in particular by Nicolas Sarkozy in his Caen speech of 2007.

ways in which different political groups attempt to fix its meaning and representation, and I examine the consequences on this for marginalized populations.

Sarkozy's understanding of national identity borrows heavily from 19th century politician Maurice Barrès²⁵, in particular in his praise of the French soil and of a France that "combine le national et l'universel" (*A quoi*, 86). In short, Noiriel sarcastically sums up: "l'identité de la France, c'est donc le miracle du consensus, la fusion des contradictions dans un tout harmonieux" (86). From there derives an understanding that "le vrai français a l'« amour » et la « fierté » pour son pays chevilles au corps. Les ennemis des Français, ce sont ceux qui « haïssent » la France" (*A quoi*, 87). This appeal to feelings of love, which I will discuss more in depth in chapter three, is crucial to the story that those who question/reject the model of French identity defended by Sarkozy and the likes necessarily 'hate' France.

At the heart of such a definition of national identity and expression of patriotism are two important notions. First is the notion that French identity – its culture, language, history – is a static and already formed community. Second is the notion that expressing and publicly claiming one's differences (ethnic, racial, sexual, religious or other) is a threat to national identity. Therefore, deployed within this definition is the notion that equality requires sameness, or more specifically, that equality and sameness mean the same thing and that sameness guarantees and protects national unity. In "The Black Atlantic as a Counterculture of Modernity," Paul Gilroy eloquently addresses the notion that inhabiting several identities at once is perceived as political provocation and threat:

²⁵ Pascal Ory in "La nouvelle droite fin de siècle" discusses how Maurice Barrès became one of the main thinkers of ethnic nationalism and popularized the term "nationalism" in France. Barrès' core focus is adequately summed up in the expression "La terre et les morts", which is the title of one of his books. He develops this notion in three volumes: *Roman de l'énergie nationale : Les Déracinés* (1897), *L'Appel au soldat* (1900) et *Leurs Figures* (1902). All three volumes testify to Barrès's drift towards Republican nationalism and traditionalism via his attachment to the notion of origins, family, the army and the homeland. Given Sarkozy's obviously Barrès-inspired speech, it is also worth noting that Barrès was anti-Semitic (see his position on the Dreyfus affair in *Ce que j'ai vu à Rennes*).

where racist, nationalist, or ethnically absolutist discourses orchestrate political relationships so that these identities appear to be mutually exclusive, occupying the space between them or trying to demonstrate their continuity has been viewed as a provocative and even oppositional act of political insubordination (203).

Sarkozy's long tradition of ethnic nationalism functions within a rhetoric of colors in which 'white' is associated with the norm and national belonging and 'Black' represents difference from the norm and is perpetually associated with the outside: "These colors support a special rhetoric that has grown to be associated with a language of nationality and national belonging as well as the languages of race and ethnic identity" (Gilroy, 203).

Le communautarisme

The threat constituted by the expression of 'difference'²⁶ is expressed in France through the fear and rejection of multiculturalism. This French manifestation of what Gilroy calls 'cultural nationalism' is called *communautarisme* and can be roughly translated into 'differentialism'. It is impossible to talk about contemporary French national identity and its universalist doctrine without talking about *communautarisme*, its arch nemesis, also known as *repli communautaire*. This term is characterized by its pejorative connotation but also by its ambiguity in that it is indiscriminately opposed to republicanism, secularism, nationalism, universalism or individualism. To be even more specific, its pejorative connotation is so

²⁶ I am putting the term between quotation marks because it is used problematically by the proponents of the national identity discourse I described and I will question it in the rest of my project. What does difference mean in the French identity discourse? To what extent is it a euphemism to refer to non-white, non-Christian, non-cisgender, non-heteronormative, overall non-conforming populations? In what ways does it work to obfuscate the lived experiences of marginalized populations and preserve white innocence?

complete that no one ever claims it²⁷. In “Communautarisme : l’imaginaire nationaliste entre catégorisation ethnique et prescription identitaire” Fabrice Dhume-Sonzogni analyses what the term entails:

La sémantique ne laisse pas de doute : l’idée de « communautarisme » repose sur une lecture réactionnelle, qui dénonce inlassablement le « risque », la « dérive », la « menace ». [...] C’est l’antithèse du « Progrès » (« rétrograde », « passéiste », « repli »). C’est l’incarnation du Mal lui-même, dans sa version morale et religieuse, mais aussi médicale : « plaie », « cancer », « abcès », « gangrène ». [...] Face à « l’ordre républicain », les « communautaristes » « s’opposent », « réclament », « revendiquent », « profitent », « contestent », « provoquent », « perturbent ».

Dhume-Sonzogni remarks in the same article that the use of the term as key word on Google jumps from 91100 in May 2005 to over 1 million in May 2007. It seems that two public controversies in 2005 could have contributed to the spread of the use of/interest in the term: the Muslim veil controversy and that of the law²⁸ referring to the ‘positive impact’ of colonization.

Sociologist Sylvie Tissot in “Qui a peur du communautarisme?” on the blog *Les mots sont importants* justly remarks that the term is only used to designate minorities (of any kind)

²⁷ A number of French scholars have discussed this. Among others: Fabrice Dhume-Sonzogni in *Liberté, égalité, communauté : l’État français contre le communautarisme*; Laurent Lévy, *Le spectre du communautarisme*; Philippe Mangeot, « Communautarisme », in *Dictionnaire de l’homophobie*. See also Sylvie Tissot and Pierre Tevanian’s illuminating analysis of a 2004 report by the *Renseignements Généraux* on what France calls *les quartiers sensibles* (sensitive neighborhoods) also called *banlieues* in « Le repli communautaire, un concept policier » on their blog *Les mots sont importants*.

²⁸ I am referring to one of the four historical memory laws of February 2005 whose fourth article was highly contested, in particular the passage glorifying the impact of French colonization: “Les programmes scolaires reconnaissent en particulier le rôle positif de la présence française outre-mer, notamment en Afrique du Nord, et accordent à l’histoire et aux sacrifices des combattants de l’armée française issus de ces territoires la place éminente à laquelle ils ont droit.” This line was later removed from the text of the law.

and never to talk about white, bourgeois, cisgender, heterosexual men who overall structure and rule our political and socio-economic worlds:

que ce soit en 1999 pendant le débat autour du PACS, du mariage gay et de l'homoparentalité, ou ces dernières années à propos des immigrés, enfants d'immigrés, musulmans et non-blancs, c'est toujours au moment où des citoyen-ne-s discriminé-e-s et relégué-e-s (banlieusard-e-s, racisé-e-s, femmes, homosexuel-le-s, lycéennes et étudiantes voilées...) s'unissent pour revendiquer *les mêmes droits* et demandent à *rejoindre les autres* dans des territoires, des univers sociaux ou des modes de vie qui leur sont interdits (les centres-villes, les lieux de loisir, le travail qualifié, le mariage et la parentalité, l'école publique, le monde associatif et politique, les postes de pouvoir) qu'on les accuse de se particulariser, de se replier sur eux-mêmes et de diviser la société française en réclamant des « droits particuliers ».

In other words, when people claim their *droit à la différence*, the threat of *communautarisme* is used as an argument to shut down claims to equality. Pierre Tévanian in *Le voile médiatique* and in *La mécanique raciste* also denounces the hypocrisy of the use of the term, which he shows is actually France's way of institutionalizing inequality (*La mécanique*, 41-42). Earlier in the book, Tévanian describes the relation French universalism has to difference as one of obligation and prohibition. On the one hand, France practices "l'obligation de la différence" in which differences are imposed (man/woman, hetero/homo, Black/white) and assigned a value in a hierarchy of values. On the other hand, France practices what he calls "pseudo-universaliste non-droit à la différence," which is a justification of inequality of rights based on a person's conformity to majority norms. Those who conform to those norms can therefore

publicly express their identities, whereas those who do not need to learn to 'integrate' France (*La mécanique*, 29-30).

A number of French scholars have written against what they see as *communautarisme* and 'integration'²⁹ problems. Among others, Joseph Macé-Scaron in *La Tentation communautaire* worries aggressively about communities' claim to identities other than French, and fear that this claim will supersede their feeling of belonging to the nation. Robert Grossmann and François Miclo in *La République minoritaire: Contre le communautarisme* see French people's claim of belonging to what they refer to as 'tribes' as a denial of citizenship. François Devoucoux du Buysson in *Les Khmers roses: Essai sur l'idéologie homosexuelle* focuses on the gay community, which he portrays as hypersexual partygoers, and denounces their attack on French universalism. René Andrau and Antoine Sfeir, *Liberté, égalité, Islam: La République face au communautarisme* worry that Islam is the invisible threat menacing to destroy the Republican model. In his presentation of the book, Sfeir writes: "En quinze ans, l'affirmation de moins en moins sourde d'un repli communautaire a progressivement miné les principes fondateurs de la République." In *Contre le communautarisme* Julien Landfried points the finger at French elites and complacent media who have, according to him, given in to the blackmail of "entrepreneurs communautaires", whom he also refers to as "victimes."³⁰ The use of quotation marks here clearly underlines his perception of such people as opportunistic fakers, in line with a long tradition of de-legitimation of minorities' claims to equality. At the heart of each of these works is the idea that publicly claiming identities other than French is an

²⁹ I am using quotation marks here to emphasize that this is not my term, but a political euphemism to refer to what is actually more accurately described as forced assimilation.

³⁰ His quotation marks for both terms in "Communautarisme contre République : une menace en trois dimensions."

attack on France and refusal to integrate or what political figures also call *le vivre ensemble*. In my project, I will examine the role of white fear, love and hatred in shaping the representations and therefore the lives of marginalized others.

A Project Invested in the Work of Decolonizing

The exclusion of young men and women of North African descent from French society and French identity is often justified and legitimized by the so-called progressive discourse that their culture is incompatible with French culture, and that their different origins prevent them from fully belonging and integrating. I grew up with this story and did not hesitate to spread it. The issue with this notion, among others, is that most of the time these people are not immigrants but French citizens. Overall, when people are not white or they speak French in a way that isn't recognizably French or wear garments marking their belonging to a non-Christian religion, as we have just discussed, their belonging to the nation is questioned. Why is that? It's the stigma of those who have recent immigration background from North Africa that I am most interested in, although it is a question also faced by French Black people from French DOM-TOM such as La Martinique or La Guadeloupe as well as those whose ancestors come from sub-Saharan Africa.

Maya Smith in "Who is a Legitimate French Speaker" exposes the links between acceptance and language proficiency through an applied linguistic perspective. Smith debunks the idea that speaking French is sufficient to be accepted in French society, as is touted as the main requirement for gaining citizenship, for example, or simply to be considered French. Indeed, she shows the complex ramifications of the construction of national belonging as being

dependent on cultural legitimacy, which is directly tied to issues of race, nationality and language. In her interviews of French citizens of Senegalese origins, one in particular stands out for the purpose of my argument. Lucie, a teacher in Montpellier, discusses an incident with a parent who used a mistake she made as a pretext to denigrate her and voice their disapproval of Lucie being their child's teacher: "Lucie suggests that in the mindset of many people in French society, by virtue of being Black she cannot be French; and, therefore, she cannot be a native speaker of standard French" (Smith, 320).

This comment also reveals how the question of origins is systematically used as a tool to exclude French people of color who are forever stuck in the figure of the immigrant, the outsider. By conceiving of French identity and belonging as having shared origins, France effectively excludes those who were not born in France to parents of European descent. And yet, even that understanding of 'shared origins' is problematic, if we consider the fact that France colonized a number of North African and other countries, defining, changing, and inventing in the process and through contact with other populations what it means to be French. How the issue of origins manifests in the structure of France's education system, the emphasis on language, and the ways in which these are technologies of exclusion will be explored in this project as well.

The articles and pieces composing this project will contribute to more radical and engaged scholarly voices questioning the very systems of knowledge production and power structures that inform French national identity. Because of the relative scarcity of French scholarship on the topic of race, islamophobia, and whiteness, sources for this project will come from a multitude of horizons and privilege work by engaged white scholars and non-white

scholars and activists. In the spirit of El-Tayeb's work on Europeans of color, I believe that "the dominant internalist narrative of [France] cannot be deconstructed with methodologies internal to it alone" (xviii). Therefore, I will mobilize theoretical tools such as critical race theory and affect theory in order to make my arguments, but I will also seek the expertise of non-scholars who nonetheless practice public scholarship. That is, people who do (online) the work of the "organic intellectual" (Gramsci) by creating new formations, critiquing and seizing hegemony. I also want to distance my work from the concept of postcolonial studies because I tend to agree with the sentiment of the remark Nigerian writer Chimamanda Adichie made at the 2017 Paris edition of *Nuits des idées*: "Postcolonial theory? I don't know what it means. I think it is something that professors made up because they needed to get jobs." Adichie said this in the context of having been told by French journalists that France is not racist and asked if there are bookstores in Nigeria. While her comment is quite forceful, it points to the important fact that postcolonial theory tends to focus on the past, as if colonialism were a thing of the past. I also agree with scholars such as Bancel, who argue that the field is more nuanced than that, but I prefer the terms 'decolonial' and 'anticolonial,' if only because, as Adichie suggests, I see a white opportunist/savior connotation attached to the term postcolonial.

On the topic of scholarship by people of color, I want to fully acknowledge and engage with the fact that this is scholarship by a white woman. I will question what whiteness means in France today, its role in the kind of scholarship we produce, and question the foundations of the French Republic as being colorblind. This project will also engage with knowledges that have been traditionally dismissed or suppressed, therefore examining the archives of knowledge currently being created online by activist scholars such as Pierre Tévanian's blog *Les*

mots sont importants; Femmes publiques; les Bledardes; le Collectif des féministes pour l'égalité, which are reinventing feminism; and more recently MWASI Collectif Afroféministe and Labo Décolonial. These activist groups and think tanks actively engage with colonialism and how it is still today very much shaping the world we live in and everyone in it. They write and act to decolonize how we think of race, Islam, school, knowledge, etc. Their work, however poorly or rarely mediatized, is paramount to the questioning of the Republic as a system of white supremacy, and may be a bridge to bring back left-wing scholarly activism to the public sphere via what could be a powerful collaboration between scholar and public discourses.

A concept that can explain what this project aims at is 'creolization of theory'. In *The Creolization of Theory*, Shu-Mei Shih and Françoise Lionnet explain how this concept can describe the kinds of theoretical entanglements that have marked disciplinary formations in the academy:

As a concept creolization is simultaneously descriptive and analytical: it emerges from the experiential but **provides a theoretical framework that does justice to the lived realities of subaltern subjects**³¹, while explaining their experience in terms of an epistemology that remains connected to those realities. Creolization indexes flexibility, welcomes the test of reality, and **is a mode of theorizing that is integral to the living practices of being and knowing**. It is a mode shared by all cultures in contact. A foundational theoretical concept, it thus emerges from a productive engagement with the living dynamics of an uneven but interdependent world (2).

³¹ My emphases.

I understand from this that creolizing theory is a commitment to intellectual and factual honesty, one that considers how hegemonic forces and subaltern forces interact with each other and create our world. It is also a mode of reading history and academic worlds that gives a story which includes and considers the place and influence of subaltern subjects, which in the case of my project could be considered to be the non-academic knowledges that are being produced in France and that I mentioned above. It's a concept that allows for complexities and difference, moves away from the universalizing impulses of humanist (Enlightenment) knowledge, and actively promotes decolonizing knowledge. I also think that this concept can be useful to understand the interdisciplinarity of this project, and the ways in which its essays are tangled with each other while dealing with different questions. I see creolizing as a critical mode and way of thinking that can imagine a way of being French outside of discourses about national identity.

The Map of this Project

I approach the project from four different angles in four sections grappling with the question of who gets included in and excluded from what it means to be French³². In the first section, I am concerned with issues of knowledge production and destruction within the French education system. I try to answer the following questions: What kind of knowledge do French students learn? Who gets to produce knowledge? What knowledges get taught, and which ones do not? What are the consequences for French identity construction? In the second section, I discuss the racialization of religion in France and the concept of *laïcité*, which is France's word for its

³² All four chapters are in conversation but they have been designed to be able to stand more or less on their own, separate from each other, which is why there is some repetition at times.

brand of secularism. I look at the place Muslims occupy in French society and how *laïcité* is being used to exclude them from national belonging. In the third section, I am focused on issues of representation, recognition and state antiracism in France. I look at two French films, *Intouchables* and *Bande de filles*, and question the French colorblind antiracist institutions as well as the context in which they have been praised. In the last section, I look at the place of language in the construction of French identity. I discuss how it became such an essential aspect of French identity by looking at its colonial context, and I address what that context might mean for non-white, non-heteronormative contemporary French people: who is seen as a legitimate French speaker? How does the strict grip of the French state on linguistic norms affect marginalized others and their sense of belonging?

I find that to highlight the pervasiveness of white supremacy, it is important to examine its many faces. Therefore, I chose to examine the stories it tells about itself and about non-confirming others in four different areas; the education system, secularism and religion, media representation, and language. Contending with these various manifestations is a powerful way to expose the systems of power we live in and therefore reframe the conversation of what counts as violence and what discrimination is/does in France.

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2. Epistemic Racism in/of the French Education System

In Laurent Cantet's film adaptation of *Entre les murs*, a book between documentary and fiction, François Marin teaches French to multiethnic middle schoolers in a poor neighborhood of the Paris suburbs. In one scene, he attempts to teach his unimpressed students *imparfait du subjonctif*, a tense that they will only see in literary texts. The students begin challenging François, asking him why he teaches them a mode and tense that 'nobody uses in real life'. They point out that they will never speak that way with their parents and that even their grandparents didn't speak like that. François reluctantly agrees that it's not used very often, but he insists on two points: before they get to criticize its usefulness they need to learn how to use it, because it is important for them to know how to navigate between a variety of language registers.

François's answer is reasonable enough, but as this section will show, it falls short of what the students are asking. Indeed, the teacher misses the point of what they are implicitly telling him, which is that what he is teaching them is completely disconnected from their lived experience. In short, they call him out on his own positionality as a white, 'bourgeois' teacher. Instead of engaging this, François ultimately dismisses their requests by reminding them that their job is to learn the knowledge imparted to them, not question its production. This discrepancy, however, is not what drew the attention of critics, positive or otherwise. In fact, most negative critiques focused on the students' inability to follow school norms and rules, on the teacher's lack of authority, and on what they thought of as a pedagogical failure.

The minister of education at the time, Xavier Darcos, gives his opinion of the movie in an interview with *L'Express*: “Je suis frappé par le fait que la question de la transmission du savoir y semble souvent contrariée par celle de la difficile application de l'autorité. Dans cette classe, on n'est pas en situation d'apprendre.” Darcos' comment is inscribed in the French scholastic tradition of learning as knowledge transmission. As I will show, this premise, once historicized and challenged, invites a re-definition of what authority and learning mean/look like relationally. He is also very critical of the teacher François Marin, whom he sees as establishing “un rapport trop affectif avec les élèves” and tolerating “des remarques qui le mettent sur un pied d'égalité avec eux [...] Pour moi, c'est l'histoire d'un échec pédagogique.” Here, Darcos speaks to a particularly hierarchical and traditional understanding of the classroom as teacher-centric. The class revolves around the teacher because they possess the knowledge and expertise that students, who are construed as ignorant, are supposed to accept and respect without question.

Others echo Darcos' sentiment. Véronique Bouzou, who has been teaching French for years in so-called “difficult” neighborhoods, thinks that “le film ne va faire que conforter une immense majorité de personnes dans leur opinion, à savoir que les élèves de banlieue sont indisciplinés, irrespectueux envers leur professeur, violents entre eux et presque totalement incultes, à la limite de la débilité profonde” (SOS Education). It is clear that the notion that a strong hierarchy needs to exist between students and teacher in order for an atmosphere of learning to be established is prevalent in each of these critiques. Bouzou also surmises that, because of the students' questions and because the class is chaotic by traditional French standards, the students are portrayed as stupid and disrespectful. In other words, questioning

the education system – which is the first step of the French socio-economic ladder – is perceived as a threat and a sign of disrespect and even stupidity. Additionally, François' relative measure of understanding and compassion towards his students is seen as incompetence and weakness. More importantly for the purposes of my argument, the students' questioning of the very knowledge he is teaching them as not being universal, is seen as a threat to learning.

In this section of my project, I am interested in the ways the profound cultural, social and racial rifts of the French society manifest in the education system and their connection to French national identity. More specifically, I am concerned with the relationship between teaching and learning in France and France's republican ideologies. To begin, I must emphasize the importance and tremendous influence the French education system has always had on French society, in particular since it became institutionalized in the 19th century. In his preface to *Histoire générale de l'enseignement et de l'éducation en France (Tome 1)*, René Rémond highlights its importance:

Le modèle scolaire est devenu le modèle universel. L'enseignement a imprimé sa marque sur toute la vie sociale. Il impose ses moeurs et ses rythmes à la société tout entière. Quantité d'institutions se modèlent sur lui et calquent son organisation ou ses méthodes : depuis les auto-écoles jusqu'aux stages de formation professionnelle" (33).

Education is a central tenet of the construction of French national identity and by far the most important system conveying France's republican, universalist ideology. It is therefore impossible to discuss the construction of French national identity as a white identity without delving into education, the institution that is the cornerstone of this identity.

How does a story like *Entre les murs*, along with the paratext surrounding it in the form of reviews, interviews and comments come to unfold the way it did? What is the historical context of such a story? Can it be dismissed as simply a matter of teenagers disrespecting their teacher, as teenagers are wont to do? How does the French school system as ideological state apparatus (ISA)³³ enforce and protect a conception of French identity that is not universal but in fact, white, overwhelmingly cisgender male and heteronormative? What are the larger implications of the violence involved in the forceful inclusion of non-conforming individuals into the education system as a means of biopower³⁴?

The Invisibility of Whiteness in the Education System

In the introduction to his book *White*, Richard Dyer writes that “white people have had so very much more control over the definition of themselves and indeed of others than have those others” (Dyer, xiii). He also points out that white people never acknowledge that they are speaking as white people, which he contends is “part of the condition and power of whiteness: white people claim and achieve authority for what they say by not admitting, indeed not realizing, that for much of the time they speak only for whiteness” (Dyer, xiv). How was this power historically established as the norm within the French education system? How does this invisibility play out in the education system?

³³ I follow Althusser’s understanding of the term, which is that the ISA ensures the reproduction of the social and economic order in a capitalist society. However, while Althusser considers the scholastic system a non-violent apparatus, I argue that the violence has been internalized as normal and simply misrecognized.

³⁴ Following Foucault, I understand biopower as literally having power over bodies through the development of seemingly non-violent means, such as the protection and regulation of the social order via the school system. Biopower is a useful concept here since I am arguing that the school system is a machine for homogenizing and the goal of biopower is to present disunities as unities because heterogeneity is perceived as a threat.

Selective Universalism

The establishment of this norm was made possible by what Ramón Grosfoguel calls “epistemic racism.” I understand epistemic racism or epistemicide, a term I will use again later, as the discarding, devaluing, even extermination of knowledges deemed inferior by the western world. In “The Epistemic Decolonial Turn,” Grosfoguel expands and gives even more weight to the notion of hidden positionality by describing it as an epistemic strategy that allowed the creation of a myth of “truthful universal knowledge” (213). He writes: “By hiding the location of the subject of enunciation, European/Euro-American colonial expansion and domination was able to construct a hierarchy of superior and inferior knowledge and, thus, of superior and inferior people around the world” (“The Epistemic,” 214). What he calls the “coloniality of power” is what is at play after the decolonization. We thus live not in a postcolonial world, since 450 years of ideological, political and economic institutions do not disappear within a few decades, but rather in what he calls a “global coloniality,” and which doesn’t require colonial rule in order to exist.

How does this global coloniality manifest within the French education system? In “The Structure of Knowledge in Westernized Universities,” Grosfoguel explains that western knowledge, which thinks of itself as universal, is actually based upon the thoughts and views of thinkers from five countries (France, Italy, Germany, England and the USA): “[The] social theories based on the social-historical experience of men of 5 countries constitute the foundation of the Social Sciences and the Humanities in the Westernized universities today” (74). On the website of the French Department of Education, the lists of mandatory authors and works to be studied for the baccalaureate going back about 15 years do not contain a single

non-European writer or thinker, and no women writers. For the school year 2003-2004, students had to study Diderot, Voltaire, Breton, and Giono. Four years later, Shakespeare and Perrault joined the list. Two years ago, students had to study Flaubert, Eluard, and Baudelaire, among other names.³⁵ Additionally, in the pedagogical resources available for high school teachers on the website, 99% of the reading suggestions to carry out the literature programs are from white European male thinkers. These findings corroborate my experience as a French high school student, which is that we read the canon and the canon contained almost no women writers and no writers of color³⁶. It was understood that reading the canon would provide us with a universal understanding of the self and its place in the world. It was also understood that we were not to question what we read but embrace, admire, and respect it.

It was implied that what we didn't read was not on the syllabus because it was inferior: this is what Grosfoguel calls "epistemic inferiority." Grosfoguel demonstrates how the construction of this 'universality' was made possible by the establishment of the Cartesian belief of "I think therefore I am," upon which are built Western philosophy and ideologies. In his article, he connects what he calls the *ego extermino* (I exterminate) with the *ego conquiro* (I conquer) and *ego cogito* (I think): "The *ego extermino* is the socio-historical structural condition that makes possible the link of the *ego con- quiro* with the *ego cogito*" ("The Structure", 77). He argues that "the four genocides/epistemicides of the long 16th century are the socio-historical condition of possibility for the transformation of the 'I conquer, therefore I am' into the

³⁵ For a complete list of mandatory readings for the baccalaureate from 2002 to 2017 see Eduscol's archives at <http://eduscol.education.fr/cid57194/programmes-limitatifs-de-litterature-pour-le-baccalaureat.html>.

³⁶ It is important to note that even if any of these writers had had non-white origins and could pass as white, it didn't matter because we never discussed in any meaningful way the biographical context of their texts. Literary texts were studied as self-contained units, that is, in a historical vacuum. Questions of identity such as race, gender and sexuality other than national belonging were considered irrelevant to our understanding of the texts.

epistemic racism/sexism of the ‘I think, therefore I am’” (77). What is interesting in his argument is that he demonstrates the materiality of epistemicides by showing their immediate correlation to genocides. Indeed, the universal ideology is inherently violent in that it implies the historical erasure and destruction of people and their cultures, and it also profoundly affects non-conforming students’ place and sense of belonging to the nation.

One can trace the foundation of this epistemic inferiority to French colonial history. In “La République métissée: citizenship, colonialism, and the borders of French history,” Dubois contextualizes debates about French identity within French colonial history. He focuses on the ways the history of the French Caribbean have shaped how race and citizenship are imagined in republican political culture. On the one hand, they produced a republican tradition of anti-racist egalitarianism. On the other hand, they also gave birth to a ‘republican racism’ through which new practices of exclusion are articulated. In fact, Dubois and many others³⁷ posit that universalism itself was used to justify the violence of colonialism and then the selection and exclusion of who was fit to be a French citizen. In the late 1700s, when France was trying to figure out what to do regarding the citizenship status of former slaves, a large number of intellectuals and colony administrators such as Marquis de Condorcet, Daniel Lescallier, et Victor Hughes decided that former slaves were not ready to be granted political rights on the grounds that after a life of slavery they would not know how to properly use the freedom they had acquired. In fact, it was used as an argument to re-establish slavery in certain regions such as Guadeloupe in the early 1800s. These arguments are based on an understanding of former

³⁷ Among others: Pap Ndiaye in *La condition noire* re-contextualizes issues of race in France within slavery and colonialism. Dominic Thomas does the same with questions of immigration and national identity in “Immigration and national Identity in France,” as well as Fred Constant in “Black France” and the National Identity Debate.”

slaves as children who need to learn and be educated before they can be fully accepted into the nation's fold. This makes sense in light of the fact that France saw its colonial expansion primarily as a civilizing mission. Former slaves also had to prove themselves deserving of the citizenship status that was simply granted unconditionally to white people for the sole reason that they were born in France.

In *De quelle couleur sont les Blancs*, Sylvie Laurent and Thierry Leclère show how the dichotomies civilized/uncivilized, inferior/superior, etc. quickly became racialized. Since most people of color were not free or enjoyed limited and fragile freedom, skin color became (and is still) a sure sign of social and economic status (Laurent and Leclère, 82). Laurent and Leclère also contend that it is during colonization, in contact with people of color, that France construed itself as white and universal, which is why it is so important to go outside of the Hexagon to understand how dominant French knowledge production became white:

Pour que la couleur blanche construise une unite « spontanée » d'intêret entre des personnes dont les cultures, les idées et les objectifs pouvaient diverger, il fallait qu'une autre couleur agisse, ainsi que le faisait remarquer Baldwin, comme un référent solide, fixe, éternel. La couleur noire opérait comme l'axe autour duquel le monde blanc s'organisait. Elle occupait tout l'espace, faisant de la couleur blanche une couleur universelle, qu'il était inutile de signaler puisqu'elle était « naturelle », appartenant à l'ordre du monde (81).

This idea that white is the standard by which everything is measured is profoundly anchored in French minds. However, it has not been internalized as 'white,' but as 'universal'. This belief is the core strength of white supremacy in France. I contend that this belief accounts in large part

for the way questions about the legitimacy of the content taught by French teachers, who are overwhelmingly white, are perceived as knife attacks to the 'natural' fabric of French identity.

France still does not acknowledge the profound ways in which colonial practices shaped and impacted practices at home. Rather, it considers colonization unfortunate but belonging firmly to the past. Laurent and Leclère (and others such as Cervulle and Tévanian³⁸) contend that, on the contrary, colonial practices organizing society along color lines had tremendous influence on the racialization of French society:

[...] les dictionnaires de langue française ont fait des termes «Noir », «Nègre » et « esclave » des synonymes. Et la couleur « blanche » s'est insérée dans la société, mais comme une matière invisible. Dans l'Hexagone, des lois, des règles, des pratiques, des discours, ont pénétré les consciences et fini par poser des équivalences entre «Blanc» et« civilisé», «Blanc» et« citoyen », «Blanc» et « liberté » (82).

These dichotomies naturally found their way and were enforced in the French education system. It is no coincidence that while France was expanding its empire abroad, at home it was in the process of creating the school system as we know it today.

Jules Ferry, the father of modern school, was also a fundamental actor in colonial expansion and considered that “the superior races have a right because they have a duty. They have the duty to civilize the inferior races [...] in our time, I maintain that European nations acquit themselves with generosity, with grandeur, and with sincerity of this superior civilizing duty.” The concept of biological race has been thoroughly debunked but in 1884, during the age of racial anthropology, it was used to create (still current) laws and policies benefiting whites,

³⁸ See Maxime Cervulle's *Dans le blanc des yeux* (2013) and *La mécanique raciste* (2017) by Pierre Tévanian.

and to justify colonization. In light of this, it is no surprise that Jules Ferry's school reproduced these pseudo knowledges actively constructing people of color as inferior and whites as superior. While France was in the second wave of its colonial expansion in the 1800s, it was redefining the role of education at home and what it meant to be French. Abroad, France saw itself as a power to civilize and educate inferior races and cultures. At home, its role was to produce citizens worthy of the superiority of France via education.

In her article "Etre français en Nouvelle-France: Identité française et identité coloniale aux dix-septième et dix-huitième siècles," Saliha Belmessous also studies this historical construction of French identity from a colonial perspective, by analyzing the connection between colonial identity and national identity. In her article, she argues that colonial expansion led French authorities and elites to conceive of a French national identity that would in turn justify colonial expansion. Belmessous discusses how France's economic and social diversity and local identities at the beginning of its colonial expansion was problematic when it came to *franciser* the 'savages' of New France. Indeed, the French elites had to define what it meant to be French, first. And first and foremost, being French meant being a Christian and more specifically a Catholic³⁹ (Belmessous, 512). But in order for the colonized people of New France to be considered French, it was also decided that they needed to speak French even though at the time, linguistic diversity prevailed in France⁴⁰. Being French, the elites decided, also meant to be literate even though a large portion of the French were not. Slowly but surely a unified and homogeneous portrait of France crystallized, erasing 17th century France's

³⁹ Up until the revolution of 1789, the Jesuits played an immense role in education and they were also among the first to be sent to civilize the populations of New France. At the end of the 18th century, however, it was decided that school would be secular and their power diminished significantly.

⁴⁰ Education in cities was carried out in French by members of the clergy, but in the country, local languages, patois and Latin prevailed.

sociocultural diversity and laying the foundations of the myth of France's national identity's immanence that is still taught in school today.

In the 18th century, French elites changed with the decline and disappearance of the monarchy and the emergence of the French nation and Republic, but they continued to construct French identity as it portrays itself today: as the universal champion of human rights imbued with a civilizing mission. This notion that France was a superior culture that could enlighten inferior civilizations and races allowed for the following paradox: *la déclaration des droits de l'homme⁴¹ et du citoyen*. The text considered one of the foundations of French values today would declare all men equal in 1789 and emphasize fraternity (to be understood as solidarity) while at the exact same time France was condoning slavery, with the number of slaves in French colonies steadily increasing. The 'universal (hu)man' was a man, and he was white, exposing the hypocrisy of France's commitment to universal social justice.

At the end of the 19th century, one of the primary goals of Jules Ferry's laws was to spread these republican ideals and enforce the use of French across France. Instruction was given in French, and one of the core ideas transmitted by the new system was that the Republic was the only system capable of adapting to progress. French came to be seen as the language of rational, universal thought and thus a fundamental aspect of education. It also came to represent France itself. That meant French was used as the official language at the cost of hundreds of local dialects, and the influence of the clergy, which was seen as a backward institution - whose power had started to wane with the disappearance of the monarchy - reduced to a minimum. In contact with other cultures and civilizations it was invading and

⁴¹ In French, the use of *homme* is understood as representing humans in general. However, evidently the rights guaranteed by the declaration of 1789 only applied to white male French citizens.

enslaving, France was defining what it meant to be French, using mass public education as a primary vehicle for the spread of the 'universalist' republican ideology⁴².

Whose Objectivity?

In conjunction with the notion of universalism is the idea that the knowledge produced by French (and European) thinkers is objective. Still today, the notion that there is such a thing as an objective, neutral point of view (a God-like point of view, in Grosfoguel's words) permeates France's pedagogical philosophies. You can see it play out in *Entre les murs*, for example, when François doesn't address his own positionality, arguing that, indeed, *l'imparfait du subjonctif* is a mode that his students need to know regardless of their own life experiences and needs. This way of thinking, in turn, posits a student who is a blank page or rather, as I will show, a white, cisgender, heterosexual, middle class, native French speaking student.

The notion that knowledge is objective comes from the Enlightenment tradition that's entirely based on the conception of a rational, organized and intelligible world requiring from Man the production of rational and organized knowledge. This philosophy led to the establishment of natural and inalienable rights, which in turn led to the declaration of man's rights. This tradition is also rooted in the notion that this universal self is capable of creating rational, objective knowledge. This universal self, capable of creating objective, universal knowledge, however, does not address its positionality – it has none; it is universal. Therefore the effects of this positionality on the very knowledge it produces, as well as what it might mean for those whose positionality is radically different, is never addressed. The problem

⁴² For a detailed discussion of the role of French in France's national identity construction, see the fifth section of this project.

doesn't exist in this frame of reference, since a large number of populations are not included in the notion of a self. As Frantz Fanon shows in *Peau noire, masques blancs*, in the white understanding of the world, there are those who belong to the zone of being (white people) and those who do not (people of color), belonging to the zone of non-being. Within each zone people experience discrimination and privileges, but only those in the zone of being benefit from the generous, tolerant thinking and social justice endeavors of the political left. Not only are those cast in the zone of non-being excluded from knowledge production, they are disempowered of the very ability to make knowledge since they are not considered to have a self, a position to make knowledge from.

A number of thinkers today are challenging what they refer to as western epistemologies, which, by virtue of having been produced by western white men are automatically considered superior with regard to objectivity, since their positionality is assumed to be universal and rational. Boaventura de Sousa Santos, among others, argues against a western epistemology that he describes as being built on absences. In "The World Social Forum: Towards a Counter-Hegemonic Globalisation," he denounces what he calls "naturalization of difference," which is the occultation of hierarchies such as ethnic and racial differences. Second, he repudiates the occultation of what he calls "a monoculture of the dominant scale," which is the notion that there exists a dominant scale of things, universalism being at the top. The very production of epistemologies by non-white, non-western thinkers makes visible the white, male positionality of the epistemologies that have dominated and often actively stifled or destroyed knowledge production deemed inferior. French curricula today still emphasize the teaching of knowledge created by white men belonging to the Enlightenment tradition without

questioning their positionality or addressing the contradictions at the heart of the knowledge itself. More specifically, even as this knowledge purported to be universal, rational, and objective as well as to promote tolerance and natural human rights, women and people of color were excluded. Just as problematic, a number of these thinkers were openly racist but that aspect of their writings is generally not acknowledged and discussed in classrooms.

For example, students study the grandeur of *le siècle des lumières* and the advent of human rights extensively without ever learning that the 18th century also marked the emergence and development of racist ideologies that were used to justify the economic instrumentalization and exploitation of bodies of colors. Indeed, students do not learn that the advent of rational, objective, universal knowledge was also the dawn of so-called scientific theories ‘proving’ the superiority of the white race. Voltaire, notably referred to by Victor Hugo as *l’esprit français* and considered part of the French canon and therefore a vital part of French citizens’ education, wrote the following regarding black people:

Leurs yeux ronds, leur nez épaté, leurs lèvres toujours grosses, leurs oreilles différemment figurées, la laine de leur tête, la mesure même de leur intelligence, mettent entre eux et les autres espèces d'hommes des différences prodigieuses. Et ce qui démontre qu'ils ne doivent point cette différence à leur climat, c'est que des nègres et des négresses transportés dans les pays les plus froids y produisent toujours des animaux de leur espèce, et que les mulâtres ne sont qu'une race bâtarde d'un noir et d'une blanche, ou d'un blanc et d'une noire (Voltaire, 6-8).

In school, students read *Candide* but have more than likely never heard of these lines in which Voltaire reproduces the pseudo knowledge colonizers developed about the colonized. Using the

term “animaux” to refer to black people is a crude and cruel way of construing them as inferior and uncivilized, but Voltaire’s pseudo scientific description of black people is even more problematic because he was not just a random racist French intellectual. He was an influential intellectual whose knowledge production is still legitimized today. Indeed, he greatly influenced the field of historiography⁴³. I am not arguing here that Voltaire’s legitimacy is completely undeserved, but rather that the unquestioned, decontextualized study of the knowledge he produced has turned him into a symbol of French grandeur serving the Republic’s propagandist purposes. Voltaire, like many other authors studied in school, is a signified separated from its signifier by centuries of knowledge erasure and a concept of objectivity rooted in myth.

There is not only a clear absence of non-western knowledge imparted in class, it is also a knowledge that is curated to serve the purpose of creating a myth of France that in turn is supposed to foster national unity and pride in the nation. In that sense, choosing to ignore a large portion of a so-called canonical author’s work also reveals the political nature of knowledge. If anything, the practice is dishonest, unethical, and hypocritical. In choosing to ignore the fundamental racism of the *siècle des lumières*, school perpetuates the myth of an egalitarian and colorblind France. The teaching of history as memory cannot be objective because it serves as propaganda for the grandeur of the nation, and because its primary goal is to generate love, respect, and unquestioned allegiance to the nation.

⁴³ Voltaire wrote three major works: History of Charles XII (1731), The Age of Louis XIV (1751), and his Essay on the Customs and the Spirit of the Nations (1756).

Knowledge Transmission

You can also see this global coloniality at play in pedagogical content, which is built upon the idea that knowledge is accumulated and transmitted instead of created and transformed. In the preface to *Histoire générale de l'enseignement et de l'éducation en France (Tome 1)*, René Rémond writes that knowledge is something you acquire: "savoir acquis". He explains:

L'enseignement avait pour mission première de **transmettre** la somme des connaissances qui s'était lentement et de façon très progressive **amassée** au cours des âges : l'exercice de cette fonction reposait sur la conviction que les leçons du passé étaient la meilleure des réponses aux interrogations de l'avenir. Ce système de pensée a été profondément **ébranlé** par le progrès de la science qui **périme** les connaissances du passé : **l'obsolescence** rapide du savoir est un phénomène nouveau et qui ne peut pas ne pas avoir **d'incidences** sur l'enseignement qui a pour raison d'être de diffuser le savoir d'hier (HGE, 37)⁴⁴.

In this section, Rémond interprets the movements of knowledge production as disruptions, which makes sense considering the conception of teaching and learning that he puts forth. The rigidity of this understanding of knowledge explains the strict hierarchy that existed between teacher and student and that François Marin struggles with in the film. The teacher is the vehicle of transmission of knowledge, and the student, its recipient. It also explains why students challenging the content of their classes are perceived as a threat to knowledge instead of an attempt at participating in knowledge production.

⁴⁴ My emphases in bold throughout the section.

This understanding of knowledge is one that English language pedagogues Bruce Horner and Min-Zhan Lu would refer to as belonging to a “foundationalist” model in “Toward a Labor Economy of Literacy.” While they write within their discipline about English composition teaching and English literacy, their analysis of different literacy models in a pedagogical context is very useful for thinking about the way western knowledge is produced and transmitted. A foundationalist model of literacy is a model that treats knowledge as universal and fixed. Uncritical acceptance of this knowledge is precisely what is expected of students. Students’ ability to reproduce the knowledge is what is considered a success and an effective display of agency.

Going to school in France in the 1990s and early 2000s, I remember that in order to receive good grades I had to be able to (intelligently and in the right places) regurgitate what I had learned in class. Claire Kramsch in “Pierre Bourdieu: A biographical Memoir” writes of her own, very similar experience in the French education system:

teachers would repeatedly reject any personal opinion on the part of the students (“Miss X, your opinion is of no interest to us”) in the name of factual objectivity (“Just tell me what the text says”) [...] I was expected to use my knowledge of these writers, not to put the educational institution into question, but to reproduce the dominance of the class I had been trained to belong to. I had not been aware of belonging to any class, race, or ethnicity. I was French, and that was enough for me (34-35).

Indeed, I remember that knowledge was only about information. I realized later in high school that what is referred to as ‘critical thinking’ in the *socle commun de connaissances et de compétences* did not apply to the content of the classes. Exactly like Kramsch, I was expected to

put in conversation the various theories or ideas I was taught, but not to question them and certainly not to consider them in relation to my own life experience. The dialectic essay, which is France's essay form of predilection, is supposed to be utterly devoid of subjectivity – I was not allowed to use “I” in my essays. A professor once told me that my job was to write about “what can be said, what one can say” about the texts we read in class, not give my opinion, no matter how informed it was. The use of “can” here was meant to be understood as what could objectively be said about the text, regardless of anyone's racial, sexual or socio-economic positionality, my own or the author's. My worth as a budding intellectual was measured in terms of my ability to absorb a set of ideas about the world, notably that both the self and the text are self-contained units, and that ideas I was contending with were universal truths about the world. Knowledge was supposedly not a matter of perspective. And if it was understood that while knowledge was indeed produced, it was not thought of as constructed, fluid and changing.

In this praxis, the concept of ‘critical thinking’ is divested of its meaning and value and turned into a buzzword of the school as ideological state apparatus. The goal becomes to gain the skill of reproducing power relations through the complete devaluing of cultural history. This white French conception of ‘critical thinking’ actually strips labor of its historical and cultural meaning by making certain types of labor it finds unimportant or irrelevant, immaterial. The reproduction of social hegemony and the dematerialization of certain types of labor can be described as symbolic violence (Bourdieu). I will discuss this more in depth later.

A number of theorists in various fields have been questioning this understanding of knowledge as being exclusionary and disempowering. In particular, I will be addressing the

works of Paulo Freire and bell hooks. In *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Paulo Freire argues that the type of education that sees knowledge as fixed content does not allow for the creative kind of dialogue that actually creates knowledge. He describes this type of education as a kind of “banking,” in which students can only receive and catalogue information (70):

In the banking concept of education, knowledge is a gift bestowed by those who consider themselves knowledgeable upon those whom they consider to know nothing. Projecting an absolute ignorance onto others, a characteristic of the ideology of oppression, negates education and knowledge as processes of inquiry. The teacher presents himself to his students as their necessary opposite; by considering their ignorance absolute, he justifies his own existence. The students, alienated like the slave in the Hegelian dialectic, accept their ignorance as justifying the teachers existence—but, unlike the slave, they never discover that they educate the teacher (Freire, 70).

The type of pedagogy practiced by the banking system is disempowering on two major levels. First, it construes the student as stripped from any kind of literacies and treats them accordingly. Second, it places the teacher in a position of absolute power: the power of possessing knowledge. Students internalize this projection and therefore internalize the idea of their inferiority. Like Kramsch, I received negative comments on my essays ranging from “this is disappointing” to comments expressing the following sentiment “did you drink a glass of stupid today?” In such a situation, the relationship you may develop with your teacher is that of trying to please them and get their approval instead of learning. Because the teacher, consciously or not, has internalized their superiority through the superiority of the knowledge they embody,

they take everything you write/do/say personally and more often than not as a personal affront.

Freire conceives of a different pedagogy based on dialogue, what he calls “co-intentional.” In his understanding of pedagogy as a collaboration in which both teacher and students have agency and power, knowledge is something to be re-created, examined critically: “Teachers and students (leadership and people), co-intent on reality, are both Subjects, not only in the task of unveiling that reality, and thereby coming to know it critically, but in the task of re-creating that knowledge” (Freire, 67). In other words, epistemological curiosity about the elements of the dialogue between teacher and students is essential to learning and knowing (17). Authority becomes secondary in a situation of dialogue or rather it works in the background. Because it is co-constructed and negotiated between students and teachers, authority gains true legitimacy and can therefore fade in the background. Indeed, it is no longer about who knows and who doesn’t but rather about what knowledge is produced together.

In the transmission model, the student is a blank slate, or an empty jar if I stretch the recipient of knowledge metaphor. As a student it was understood that I had nothing to bring to the classroom – no useful literacies, understandings of the world, valuable lived experiences. There was my private life and my life in the classroom. Freire argues that “If students are not able to transform their lived experiences into knowledge and to use the already acquired knowledge as a process to unveil new knowledge, they will never be able to participate rigorously in a dialogue as a process of learning and knowing” (17). In *Entre les murs*, François’ students try to relate what they’re taught in class to their lives, but they see no connection. When they point it out to the teacher, he dismisses it when in fact it is a true moment of critical

thinking in which students attempt to create a bridge between their lived experiences and their classroom experience.

In the end, such an understanding of knowledge and how to impart it cannot foster actual learning. It is not really about learning but rather about indoctrinating, making sure a certain view of the world remains dominant. It is a kind of teaching that serves those in power instead of empowering students. However, even though my role as a student was limited to that of clever data entry, I still could relate to and see myself in some of the knowledge I was being taught if only because I am white and grew up in an upper middle class family, and because I didn't have difficulties performing the way I was expected to. What I was being taught more or less fit my lived experience. This foundationalist understanding of knowledge is indeed also that of white elites.

Lower class non-white students are even more alienated from the learning experience because they have historically been excluded from its production but also because they are told that they cannot question it. bell hooks in *Teaching to Transgress* speaks to this double standard when she tells us

I wanted to become a critical thinker. Yet that longing was often seen as a threat to authority. Individual white male students who were seen as "exceptional," were often allowed to chart their intellectual journeys, but the rest of us (and particularly those from marginal groups) were always expected to conform (5).

Indeed, it is both a racial and classed identity that contributes to this exclusion. Further, there is a violence at play against these students in these fixed, white elitist epistemologies, in that they have been produced within systems of power that have oppressed and marginalized people like

them. Pierre Bourdieu was one of the first to point out this violence, which he calls symbolic violence, in the French education system. According to Pierre Bourdieu in *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste*, symbolic violence is the unnoticed (partly unconscious) domination that every-day social habits maintain over the conscious subject. This concept is very interesting to me because it is used to refer to violence that is not recognized as such. It is a kind of unrecognized state sanctioned violence, the “symbolic violence through which the dominant groups endeavour to impose their own life-style” (511) or in our case, their knowledge and methods.

School, which is an institution invested with the right to “discipline and punish,” (Foucault, 1979) has a tremendously positive and revered position in French society. Because of that, French society gives little thought to the violence involved in these practices. Bourdieu explains that such “soft” violence is subject to “misrecognition” in everyday life thanks to a “scholastic culture which has the power to induce misrecognition of its arbitrariness” (328). Misrecognition allows symbolic violence to hide within dominant discourses and within other forms of violence as these are applied to non-white bodies. Treating students as blank slates, servers into which data is uploaded is violent enough as it is, but for marginalized students it is doubly violent because the blank slate is never really a blank slate: it is a white, middle class, French native speaker slate, which is being forcefully superimposed on their identity. Of course, the student is not an empty jar, and so their forceful inclusion in a system designed to keep them in their place is more than symbolically violent; it has psychological, emotional and material consequences.

bell hooks describes in *Teaching to Transgress* that her resistance to the banking model Freire describes was seen as a threat to authority. I have shown earlier the reactions of critics regarding the students' perceived rebellious attitude in *Entre les murs*. hooks describes this relation between marginalized students and teachers in the introduction to her book: "Nonconformity on our part was viewed with suspicion, as empty defiance aimed at masking inferiority or substandard work" (5). Indeed, one of the technologies of white supremacy is to enforce a process of delegitimizing non-white claims or challenges to established systems. As in other areas of oppression where nonconforming individuals are made responsible for their own marginalization, the script is flipped: non-conforming students question authority because they can't keep up intellectually, not because the authority may be illegitimate. Also, teachers who are challenged are asked to "acknowledge that [they] are addressing folks who are part of history. And some of them are coming from histories that might be threatening to the established ways of knowing if acknowledged" (hooks, 139). In the French education system, which is heavily invested in de-historicizing nonconforming French bodies, acknowledgment is incredibly threatening because the foundation of its identity is universalism, a concept that is a historical *par excellence*. The universalism at work through the school system has been instrumentalized by the state to maintain the status quo and therefore keep people in their place. I will discuss later the impact of this process on teachers and students.

Nationalism, Racism and the Violence of Epistemicides

La culture humaniste

In its presentation of the core program, known as the *socle commun*⁴⁵, in 2006, *l'éducation nationale* emphasized what it calls “la culture humaniste”:

La culture humaniste permet aux élèves d'acquérir tout à la fois le sens de la continuité et de la rupture, de l'identité et de l'altérité. En sachant d'où viennent la France et l'Europe et en sachant les situer dans le monde d'aujourd'hui, les élèves se projetteront plus lucidement dans l'avenir. La culture humaniste contribue à la formation du jugement, du goût et de la sensibilité. Elle repose principalement sur la littérature, l'histoire, la géographie, l'éducation civique, les arts plastiques, l'éducation musicale ou encore l'histoire des arts.

Before analyzing the disciplines identified in this quote, in particular literature and history, I would like to try to pinpoint what *la culture humaniste* means. Whose culture, judgment and taste is the education system passing on to students? In a series of remarks grappling with this very question in “La culture humaniste à l'école,” Salim Mokeddem concludes that, the vagueness of the concept's significance notwithstanding, it is an ideological project:

un projet, à proprement parler, idéologique, comme nous le pensons, qui viserait à instaurer une conception morale et civique des valeurs culturelles, pour les élèves et leurs enseignants, afin de déterminer une normalisation biopolitique des affects et des être-au- monde (le vivre-ensemble) dans un monde complexe où les assignations sont,

⁴⁵ On the website of the French ministry of education, *le socle commun* is described as such: “Les connaissances acquises par les élèves et les compétences qu'ils développent pendant la scolarité obligatoire constituent une culture scolaire commune. Le socle commun de connaissances, de compétences et de culture identifie ces éléments et les organise en domaines et objectifs” (éduscol).

de plus en plus, incertaines à reconnaître et à affirmer, pour les élites et les gouvernances centralisées (2).

He remarks that at its core this project is unequal in the sense that it ignores students' lived experiences and literacies as well as their socio-economic background in presenting taste, judgment, and sensitivity as transcending history and the locus of knowledge production.

Indeed, one will not be surprised to learn that in 2012, France was ranked as having the most unequal education system in the OECD by PISA⁴⁶, which determined that the correlation between socio-economic status and school performance was the most significant out of all the countries of the OECD. Far from being 'transcendental' in any way, the values and knowledges promoted under the umbrella of *culture humaniste* are those of a specific group whose historicity is made invisible by its claim to universality. MokkaDEM also points out, as I have at the beginning of this section, that *la culture humaniste* is one of the tools used by school to control and normalize French bodies. In the words of Foucault, *la culture humaniste* is a way of practicing inclusionary violence as a means of biopower.

This *culture humaniste* is one to be imparted through literature and history, not the sciences, as MokkaDEM remarks. What/whose history? What/whose literature? The obviously missing elements from the policy are former colonies. Their absence is striking if only because they are a fundamental part of French history and the construction of France as a nation. In addition, immigration from the Maghreb has brought to France a significant number of people who have now been French for generations, who are residents of France or who are still emigrating to France. This absence means that if such countries are mentioned in school, it will

⁴⁶ Programme International pour le Suivi des Acquis des élèves.

be peripheral and only as places France colonized in the past. Not only is this framing of history problematic in that it presents France's invasions only from a political and economic perspective at best, or as signs of the empire's strength at worse, and that it presents Africa as an inferior continent, but it also means that the historical, cultural, and linguistic heritage of a large portion of students who have origins in Africa will be silenced or distorted. The reason for that is that they are seen as disrupting a linear understanding of history, which serves the ideological construction of the nation—a nation that has always been there, untied and fixed. Indeed, in *A quoi sert « l'identité nationale »?* Noiriél denounces how history has been instrumentalized and distorted by politics to give the impression of a national permanence threatened by immigration. He gives the example of Sarkozy's political discourse which "inscri[t] les "valeurs républicaines dans l'éternité de l'histoire, en affirmant que, "depuis toujours," les Français les avaient défendues" (88). This is made possible by an understanding of identity that is fixed or that requires historical continuity, to use Noiriél's terms (88). The school is the ideological apparatus of the state in charge of reproducing identity and since identity is conceived in fixed terms, it makes sense that the pedagogical model to reproduce it is a transmission model.

In *Nationalism and History Education*, Rachel Hutchins analyzes French and US history textbooks in order to determine their roles in the spread and enforcement of nationalism. She concludes from her research that while French textbooks have slowly started to show more diversity in national history since the 1980s, these more diverse depictions of the nation serve "to emphasize the nation's egalitarian, open, and voluntaristic nature" (Hutchins, 78). The concept of diversity has been instrumentalized by all western societies with a white dominant

class. In the US, Jodi Melamed in *Represent and Destroy* maps out how the concept was incorporated into state ideology, designed and capitalized on to teach white US citizens tolerance (31, 32). She explains how nationalism has been absorbed in the field of racial formation (59). France, which does not think of itself in multicultural terms like the US do, uses the concept as a prop to advance and promote the Republic's egalitarian/colorblind agenda. In France, difference is not recognized so the ideological move is not "our culture is very racially inclusive," but rather, "racial formations don't matter here; we are above race." Both of these ideological moves are ways of policing race politics. In the case of France, it is a way of reaffirming that the only identity that matters is nationality and that/because it is already intrinsically egalitarian.

'White innocence' is also a concept that can be very useful to understand this instrumentalization and integration of diversity in the national discourse. France has a story about itself that it is an exceptional country with a civilizing mission. After all, over the centuries, France as a white identity built itself "attribuant à son (non-)Autre noir tout ce qu'il rejette en lui-même" so that "le Blanc s'attribue (exclusivement) « sa » pureté blanche" (Laurent and Leclère, 146). France claims for itself two types of innocence: the superiority of purity of intent and the superiority of tolerance and magnanimity. In preserving a historical image of France as egalitarian and open, history textbooks are preserving a story of France where structural racism doesn't exist.

In "White Ignorance," Charles Mills shows that claiming innocence also implies claiming ignorance: not knowing and not wanting to know. White epistemologies, then, are also epistemologies of ignorance (Mills). Mills explains that "the white delusion of racial superiority

insulates itself against refutation” (19). As I have shown, France accomplishes this in the school system by maintaining a very strong hierarchy between teachers, who are mostly white, and students. Hutchins also shows that white ignorance manifests in the way these textbooks have consistently attempted to eradicate ethnic conceptions of national belonging and to promote assimilation to dominant beliefs, to the myth of progress, equality, and colorblindness. In other words, these textbooks, whose contents are primarily determined by historians, actively contribute to the promotion of a white nationalist conception of national belonging.

A universalist vision of the self hides to anyone growing up in France, regardless of race, how these beliefs and myths are in fact white beliefs and white stories. ‘Ethnic’ is used only to describe people of color; white people never see themselves as ‘ethnic’ or white, for that matter. White, therefore, is the norm of national belonging. Students in *Entre les murs* who disrupt this norm are disturbing a racial order that is ‘invisible’ to white folk and to anyone who has internalized white supremacy. Indeed, as Shannon Sullivan and Nancy Tuana in *Race and Epistemologies of Ignorance* write:

White ignorance operates with a particular kind of social cognition that distorts reality. For example, the lens with which white people (and others suffering from white ignorance) perceive the world is shaped by white supremacy, causing them to mis-see whites as civilized superiors and non-whites as inferior “savages” (3).

In this context, the careful and calculated measure of “diversity” that has slowly starting appearing in French history textbooks since the 1980s in conjunction with the myth of progress and equality merely serves an assimilationist vision of national belonging and a way to maintain a vision of the white self as liberating oppressed ethnic minorities. Amongst many other

examples, Hutchins notes that decolonization is presented as a moral victory, a sign of moral progress and of France's benevolence (Hutchins, 67). This distortion of history is a form of what I think Robin DiAngelo would call "[white people]'s investment in racism" (260). Seemingly more forceful than Sullivan and Tuana, DiAngelo writes that white people have a stake in the way this distortion preserves the appearance of white innocence. She contends: "White ignorance is highly effective at protecting our investments in racism and thus, actively maintained in the society at large" (DiAngelo, 260).

Hutchins also remarks that while former colonies are represented more systematically in textbooks, they are still presented either as peripheral to the construction of France as a nation or in the context of *la francophonie*, which conveniently serves to advance the myth of French benevolence and the idea that we live in a postcolonial world, erasing the colonial violence at the roots of *la francophonie*. In other words, very few textbooks critically and honestly engage with France's history because the teaching of history primarily plays the civic role of unifying the nation and strengthening a sense of national belonging that is intricately tied to colorblindness and religion-blindness.

The teaching of French history is still done through a series of omission, of silencing certain kinds of knowledges not deemed beneficial to the preservation of national unity. A perfect example of this is the teaching of the Algerian War of Independence. First of all, it was only recognized by France as a historical event in 1999. In school, it was only taught as a case study of the decolonization process and as the major element that spurred the fall of the Fifth Republic. Students learned nothing of the complexity and the sheer violence of the war, of the torture perpetrated by the French, and of the aftermath, which left millions of French citizens

to be refugees in their own country. I also never learned that Algeria was considered a part of France and that its population was therefore French⁴⁷. French politics shrouded the event in a kind of fabricated amnesia that participates in a system presenting France as a magnanimous, homogeneous, human rights champion. In turn, it distorts knowledge of white historical figures such as Charles de Gaulle, one of the many figures to whom national feelings of love are attached. Nationally acclaimed as a hero of WWII and post war France, De Gaulle was also profoundly racist⁴⁸. This racist ideology motivated a number of crucial political decisions, notably the one that essentially revoked the French part in 'French-Algerian' citizens and enforced the geographical, social and economic segregation of North African immigrants and their descendants. However, this crucial context is not provided in school, often under the pretext of remaining objective/neutral and apolitical. When I was a student in one of France's elite *classe préparatoire*, our history professor regularly refused to answer more critically probing questions about what we learned because they were so-called political questions.

The literature curriculum also promotes this kind of silencing. Literature is approached from a chronological perspective, following the same organizing principle – *la culture humaniste*. A brief overview of the literature program in middle school can be found below:

⁴⁷ Some in Algeria were considered French citizens (Jews for instance became citizens in 1870, but most Muslims were simply subjects who weren't granted citizenship unless they abandoned their religious values, and very few did. It wasn't until the Fourth Republic that Muslims were granted citizenship more widely, even though they remained marginalized.

⁴⁸ In *C'était De Gaulle*, A. Peyrefitte cites De Gaulle as using violently racist language: "Les musulmans, vous êtes allés les voir ? Vous les avez regardés avec leurs turbans et leur djellabas, vous voyez bien que ce ne sont pas des Français ! Ceux qui prônent l'intégration ont une cervelle de colibri, même s'ils sont très intelligents. Essayez d'intégrer de l'huile et du vinaigre. Agitez la bouteille. Au bout d'un moment, ils se séparent de nouveau. Les Arabes sont des Arabes, les Français sont des Français. Vous croyez que le corps français peut absorber 10 millions de musulmans qui demain seront 20 millions, et après demain 40?"

Les professeurs choisissent librement des textes et œuvres dans le cadre fixé par les programmes. De la 6^e à la 3^e, les programmes de français suivent pour partie une progression chronologique en relation avec celle des programmes d'histoire : textes de l'Antiquité en 6^e, littérature du Moyen Âge et de la Renaissance en 5^e, le récit au XIX^e siècle en 4^e, œuvres du XX^e et du XXI^e siècles en 3^e.

While teachers enjoy significant freedom in their reading choices, the official program's emphasis on chronology means that the focus is essentially on France and Europe, ignoring African and Caribbean literature as well as works written by writers of North African descent. In high school, going back over a decade, the mandatory reading list for the *baccalauréat* does not include a single non-white, non-European author. When non-European, non-white, non-male writers make it on reading lists, such as Assia Djébar, it is because they have proven their commitment to the ideals of the Republic as well as complete mastery of the French language. It is true that Assia Djébar was the first author from the Maghreb to be elected at the Académie Française after receiving numerous literary prizes, in particular the Yourcenar Prize, testifying to her literary talents. But it is also important to note that Djébar wrote mainly fiction criticizing Algeria's poor treatment of women in particular. Given France's orientalist position regarding Islam and Muslim men, it is no surprise that Djébar's work is considered a safe, 'diverse' choice for school reading lists in France. I will discuss in my last section how France opportunistically claims francophone writers when it serves its interests and desires to appear open and diverse. Less convenient writers such as philosopher Frantz Fanon, for example, who wrote openly about race or Aimé Césaire, who argued in *Discours sur le colonialisme* against the idea that there was ever anything benevolent in the colonial project are not studied. These writers are

perceived as polemical/political while those who do not question the system are simply engaging in neutral knowledge production.

Movements such as *la négritude* are not mandatory subjects of study and are left to the discretion of the teacher. I had never heard of it until I went to university in the US. Concessions to francophone literature are made peripherally; there are bibliographies of African writers to be found on the website of the Education Nationale, usually when there is a specific occasion such as a poetry festival whose thematic is 'Africa'. In other words, *la francophonie* is France's diversity token, as I discuss in the last section. Ignoring for the most part the breadth and depth of literary works coming from former colonies (unless it is convenient to claim them), is another form of white ignorance that has concrete, material consequences for the people it ignores. Indeed, "White ignorance" Sullivan and Tuana write, "also impacts social and individual memory, erasing both the achievements of people of color and the atrocities of white people. A collective amnesia about the past is the result, which supports hostility toward the testimony and credibility of non-white people" (3).

The Violence of Making White

It is impossible to say whether or not teachers in France are in majority white today since France has made it illegal to compile racial statistics. I will thus make an educated guess based on what teachers have tended to look like socio-economically since the end of WWII; what France does know about its poor suburbs, which is that they are overwhelmingly populated with non-whites; what I have found in French scholarship about school; what my own experience looked like. In *L'hypocrisie scolaire*, François Dubet and Marie Duru-Bellat

contend that teachers form a rather homogeneous group (45) but they provide little to no evidence of this. Typically, middle school and high school teachers have tended to come from white middle-class families⁴⁹. These assumptions are in line with my own education since I have had only one teacher who was of North African descent and she worked very hard to hide it. Everyone else was white, including the teachers at the multiethnic middle school I attended in the city of Lille in the late 1990s. I cannot speak to how teachers individually interpret and teach the curricula and underlying ideology of the French state. Indubitably, there are teachers who challenge and question the system. Unfortunately, white supremacy is so pervasive that challenged teachers tend to adopt defensive postures and rarely admit that they are wrong or made a mistake, or simply acknowledge positively challenges to the foundations of their authority. I say this from experience as a student in France and as a teacher myself.

The pedagogy of universalist knowledge transmission is actually toxic to both white and non-white teachers, albeit in different ways and with different impacts. White teachers' positionality is relatively less challenged⁵⁰ than that of non-white teachers by virtue of the privileges and powers conferred by their skin color. However, in the atmosphere of resistance and unrest that France has been experiencing in schools over the past three decades, the universal positionality of the white teacher is more and more questioned by students. Holding on to this position and playing the role of gatekeeper can be not only difficult but also

⁴⁹ I cannot find statistics to back this up because France doesn't collect racial statistics. I am making this informed guess on the fact that for several decades after the Ferry laws being a teacher was considered a very honorable and important profession that 'honorable' people held: white people. Marcel Pagnol's novel *La gloire de mon père* (1957) epitomizes this idea. When non-white immigration began in earnest post Algerian war, immigrants were hired for manual labor and would not have been working for the government. Given the state of education in areas most populated with people of color, it is doubtful that they have the same opportunity to gain the degree required to teach as white people.

⁵⁰ Of course, gender, sexual orientation and age, among others, are also factors determining a teacher's perceived legitimacy and credibility.

untenable for these teachers. In *Entre les murs*, François does let his students speak and express their critiques but given his response, it is clear that the relationship is that of management rather than true listening and negotiating meaning together. In other words, it seems that François allows their outbursts up to a point in order to maintain a modicum of order in the class, not because he is actively engaging with what they argue. More optimistically, there is great potential here for reinventing what it means to be a white teacher in France and breaking out of the knot of contradictions that is at the core of the mission of making students French, or rather white. Unfortunately, teachers are also in a position to inflict great violence on non-conforming students. In a racist education system, non-conforming individuals' failures are explained away as moral, cultural or intellectual deficits. Earlier I gave an example of how teachers are put in a position to look for deficits in their students because the system cannot be at fault since it is offering universal freedom.

This ideological mission is incredibly confining to white teachers whose pedagogical horizon is narrowly contained inside a so-called neutral space designed for the transmission of love of the nation, but to non-white teachers, this space is also very violent. Whether they have internalized white supremacy or not, their positionality may be readily questioned because their very appearance belies their legitimacy. On the one hand, they have to teach (but also not teach) problematic material, as I've discussed above. On the other hand, they are constantly reminded that their legitimacy is dubious. In *Au secours, le prof est noir!* Serge Bilé and Mathieu Méranville write about the discrimination Caribbean and African teachers suffer inside the French scholastic institution precisely because everyone, from their white colleagues to the students and their parents, believes that knowledge is white. In "Who is a Legitimate French

Speaker?" Maya Smith relays the interview of Lucie, a teacher of Senegalese origins, who describes making a single grammatical mistake later corrected in conversation with a parent of one of her students. Her legitimacy as a teacher is from there completely called into question by the parent (320). In other words, just like former slaves had to prove they were morally and intellectually deserving of citizenship, non-white teachers have to work twice as hard to prove they belong at the front of the classroom, in France. Additionally, because their credibility is already in doubt, for non-white teachers questioning the system is often not an option at all.

The student body, on the contrary, is very heterogeneous from a sociocultural standpoint. Keaton explains in *Muslim Girls: The Other France* the underlying problem: "[the] expressed goal [of the national education system] is to reproduce and transmit a unitary, irreducible "common culture" to which all young people are expected to conform in the interest of the nation" (10). In conjunction with this goal is the belief that school as a socialization process makes one French (13). I contend that this socialization process is really a process of making one white. The perversity of this process is that it is never ending because non-whites can never be white enough to belong. When the school system constructs students as being gifted (or not), up to speed (or not), it measures them against an unacknowledged white standard. In that sense, the meritocratic system of the school is racialized system.

This homogenizing process is doubly violent to non-white students because, on the one hand, school is a necessary (if not the only) step towards economic success. In *L'école et les enfants de l'immigration*, Abdelmalek Sayad hints at the fact that the student-teacher relationship can be one of dependence (56) because the French school has a tremendous amount of power over children in general, but particularly over non-white children because

they do not benefit from the privileges of being white. The expression 'knowledge is power' has tremendous implications given the way the French scholastic system decides children's futures as early as 14 years old. Indeed, at the end of middle school a counsel of teachers will decide whether a student can continue towards a general high school or will be directed towards less valued, professionalizing branches of the education system that will limit the student's economic opportunities. On the other hand, it is very difficult for non-white students to appropriate this culture/knowledge imposed upon them in school, that is, to become white.

Keaton perfectly encapsulates this paradox:

On the one hand, the French school teaches them that they are French through its ideology of a "common culture" in a system whose gatekeepers are hostile to multiculturalism and change. On the other hand, young people are reared in segregated neighborhoods and schools that clearly belie those very teachings. The assertions by France's "suitable enemies" that they are French, and that the country they live in is their country, are a clear expression of symbolic power, to borrow a concept from Pierre Bourdieu (1990b), that is, practices aimed at preserving or transforming social reality by shaping its representations in ways that can perpetuate the status quo (13).

In other words, you cannot function in French society without going through the education system – whose expressed goal as Jules Ferry envisioned it was for people to learn to read and write in order to break their bonds – but the education system has been designed to keep you in your place, whether you are a teacher or a student. In *L'école et les enfants de l'immigration*, Sayad describes the concrete effects of this violence on marginalized students from internalization of self-hatred (57) to the inferiorization process they suffer at the hands of

teachers mired in white supremacy (57-60). He speaks of the difficulty for students to imagine a future (62). Sayad also remarks that the different socio-economic backgrounds of the children are known, such that the difficult material conditions of *banlieues* kids is clearly known by the institution, but that the real institutional changes needed to truly address how these conditions affect children have not been considered (64-66). Originally, the scholastic institution's main purposes were to offer education for/of the masses (guaranteeing what France calls *l'égalité des chances*), but also, and paradoxically, to create the ruling elite of the future. Doing both turns out to be impossible, and history has shown that the first stated goal is merely another name for inclusionary violence: forcing students to experience a profound dissonance between what school is supposed to do for them and what it actually does.

From a capitalist perspective, we can say that 'white' knowledge has been cemented as a social good and is therefore coveted capital. In this sense, school in France participates in the reproduction of the capitalist structure because school, like capitalism, is also a system of inequality (there must be 'bad' or lesser students in order for an elite to emerge) and universal freedom (knowledge will free you of your chains). France's meritocratic discourse of universality is a capitalist liberal discourse⁵¹ because it justifies inequality with racism. I am following here Ruth Wilson Gilmore's definition of racism as "a state-sanctioned and/or extra-legal production and exploitation of group-differentiated vulnerabilities to premature death" (28). The violence of the French school system is that it reproduces and exploits a system of inequality directly affecting vulnerable populations' survival, while at the same time promising freedom.

⁵¹ I understand liberalism as a theory positing freedom as human beings' ultimate purpose. It theorizes that humankind is struggling to free itself from "ignorance" or backwardness.

Epistemicides and their Implications: Political Considerations

Epistemicides in the Name of the National Ideal

In a talk she gave for the Muslim Think Tanks, a non-profit organization promoting spaces for the exchange of ideas about Muslims and Islam, Fatima Khémilat addresses the fact that when we think about epistemicides, we imagine a horde of people destroying national heritage or libraries. But the truth, she explains, is that the epistemicides that are the most common and pervasive are those committed silently, every day, everywhere. And the weapon for this invisible destruction, she argues, is your average history textbook. This systematic silencing or downright eradication of knowledges in the name of preserving a national ideal is a form of pervasive imperial violence that has profound consequences for non-conforming and perceived non-conforming individuals, as well as for those who perpetuate epistemicides.

Students of color and other non-conforming students are taught a history in which they are poorly represented if represented at all. In literature classes, if the works of people who look like them are studied, it is presented as peripheral. Through civic education but also history and literature they are asked to assimilate, love, obey values and stories and ideologies of a nation, which not only has not accepted them into its fold but also actively oppresses and excludes them from the possibility of ever truly belonging because they can never truly conform. They are asked to assimilate national ideals of freedom and culture, which exclude and ignore them in the name of preserving an abstract concept of the nation.

These epistemicides also contribute to the way the nation shapes what image it has of itself. In *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, Sara Ahmed analyses the symbol of the veil and its place in the French national imaginary. She writes that

the national ideal takes the shape of a particular kind of body, which is assumed in its 'freedom' to be unmarked. [...] other bodies, those that cannot be recognized in the abstraction of the unmarked, cannot accrue value, and become blockages in the economy; they cannot pass as French, or pass their way into the community. [...] Love for the nation is hence bound up with how bodies inhabit the nation in relation to an ideal (133).

I follow Ahmed by adding that this national ideal is not actually abstract. Concrete albeit invisible, it has a color (white), a sex (cismale), and a sexual orientation (heterosexual).

Epistemicides create boundaries and enforce hierarchies so that the bodies that disrupt the national ideal remain in the place they've been assigned by the system that rules over them.

The violence of imperial epistemicides is only one factor in the disenfranchisement and disempowerment of French people of color, but it is one that is seldom discussed. And when we talk of violence, it is to talk about the behavior of those marginalized others, not to qualify the systemic oppression they suffer from at a number of levels. You see this disempowerment represented in *Entre les murs*, in the appalling state of education in the French *banlieues*, and in the elitism of an education system rated as one of the most unequal systems in the developed world.

Indeed, rarely does the system question itself when the anger and frustration of the oppressed population culminates in crises such as the 2005 riots or the attack on Charlie Hebdo in January 2015. A few voices sometimes stand out, however, such as a collective of teachers of Seine-Saint-Denis who wrote an open letter indicting the education system:

Si les crimes perpétrés par ces assassins sont odieux, ce qui est terrible, c'est qu'ils parlent français, avec l'accent des jeunes de banlieue. Ces deux assassins sont comme nos élèves. [...] Nous, c'est-à-dire les fonctionnaires d'un Etat défailant, nous, les professeurs d'une école qui a laissé ces deux-là et tant d'autres sur le bord du chemin des valeurs républicaines [...] nous sommes responsables de cette situation.

While they acknowledge the role of the education system in failing and excluding the two young French men who perpetrated the attack, they also remark that *les valeurs républicaines* have failed them. And yet, when such tragedies happen, the government's first response is a reaction: these acts are perceived as threats to national unity, as attacks on French values, and so the first area of French life that will see policy change is the education system, purveyor and conveyor of the nation's values. The policy change, however, is never to address the issues such as those mentioned by these teachers, but rather it further marginalizes non-conforming students.

Let's take a look, for example, at how the government responded to the 2015 attacks on Charlie Hebdo by not only strengthening frontiers but also increasing civic teaching. The New York Times report that, after January 2015:

Officials in France announced new measures [...] aimed at reinforcing secular values at French schools, after the terrorist attacks in and around Paris exposed serious cultural rifts between children in heavily immigrant communities and others in classrooms throughout the country. Teachers are to receive new training, students would be exposed more deeply to civics and morals lessons, and classroom activities would include the singing of "La Marseillaise" (De la Beaume).

This political response assumes that these men must have attacked because they hate France and what it stands for, which is why the solution is to reinforce civic teaching whose purpose is to teach students to love the nation. Emphasizing civic teaching is also a way to further stigmatize non-white students generally perceived not to belong because it makes the terrorist attack an issue of 'immigration,' even though both men were French. Indeed, it reinforces color lines, that is, a racial understanding of national belonging. This then makes it socially acceptable to demand that the entire Muslim community apologize for the crimes of two men they probably don't even think of as belonging to their religious community. Non-conforming students, in this case (perceived) Muslim students, know that these civic education reinforcements are directed at them, and so does the rest of the school, teacher and students alike.

On Colonial Denial

In many ways, the education system functions as a place where political ideologies can be put in practice. It is a place where ideologies and systems of oppressions are more often than not confirmed and reproduced instead of questioned. For instance, in the early 2000s political figures were forced to engage in debate about *le devoir de mémoire*. Indeed, following Algeria's request in 2003 that France apologize for the atrocities committed by France in Algeria during the Algerian war, a very controversial law dubbed "*la loi sur la colonisation positive*" was passed at the beginning of 2005, essentially valorizing France's colonial presence in North Africa. 2005 is a year that Benjamin Stora in his article "Entre la France et l'Algérie, le traumatisme (post)colonial des années 2000" calls the year of "la guerre des mémoires."

Nicolas Sarkozy, then Minister of Internal Affairs and later as president, will uphold a policy of non-repentance towards colonial atrocities committed by France.

It is clear that recognition as a first step, in the form of an apology, would put in question everything that is (not) taught in French schools about colonization. Later, in his Dakar speech in 2007, as Sarkozy concedes that colonization was a mistake, he also declares that “le drame de l’Afrique” comes from the fact that “l’homme africain n’est pas assez entré dans l’Histoire. [...] Le problème de l’Afrique, c’est qu’elle vit trop le présent dans la nostalgie du paradis perdu de l’enfance.” The construction of Africans as children to be educated discredits and delegitimizes their stories, historical experiences, and demands for acknowledgement. It also puts in perspective the lacks and absences in the French curricula.

This vision of France as being a superior civilization is very clearly expressed in certain seemingly innocent word choices of the curricula that actually have fundamental ideological implications. For example, in the newly re-vamped middle school curricula, students in *quatrième* learn about:

Le XVIIIe siècle. **Expansions**, Lumières et révolutions

- Bourgeoisies marchandes, négoce internationaux, traites négrières et esclavage au XVIIIe siècle.
- L’Europe des Lumières : circulation des idées, despotisme éclairé et contestation de l’absolutisme.

Choosing to label French colonization “expansions” is hugely problematic because it completely neutralizes and even erases the violence of colonization. Similarly, the profound moral and human implications of slavery are obscured in the way the subject is classified as a matter of

economics, alongside *bourgeoisies marchandes* and *négoce internationaux*. In high school, a mere seven to eight hours is dedicated to colonization and decolonization during students' senior year. The price of admission into society is to exist without memory, to forget colonization as Mamadou Diouf explains in "The Lost Territories of the Republic" (36).

In fall 2017, a new education program was implemented in middle school. In March 2015, Najat Vallaud-Belkacem introduced a school reform aiming to address school's main failures by focusing on interdisciplinarity and increasing pedagogical autonomy.⁵² In particular, the reform is a response to a recurring criticism from the OCDE about how the teaching of French is too theoretical and excludes the most vulnerable students. The idea behind this new approach, according to Vallaud-Belkacem, is to allow students to: « comprendre le sens de leurs apprentissages en les croisant, en les contextualisant et en les utilisant pour réaliser des projets collectifs concrets ». She notes that « la raison pour laquelle tant de collégiens disent qu'ils s'ennuient, c'est la passivité dans laquelle les laisse le fonctionnement actuel du collège ». In other words, part of this reform is addressing the teacher-centric model that takes away student agency and the abstraction and arbitrariness of the teaching of *la culture humaniste* I discussed earlier.

The reform's shy attempts at addressing the exclusionary elitism of the French education system triggered a wave of criticism that is quite telling and speaks directly to the arguments made in this section. The bulk of the attacks concerned the following issues: the place of Greek and Latin classes, which would be incorporated into French; the fact that teaching the Enlightenment is now optional; the teaching of medieval Christianity and Islam. If

⁵² 20% of students' courses are now left to the school's discretion as opposed to being dictated by the Ministry of Education.

we listen to the detractors of the reform, the reform is attacking France's core identity. Former Minister of Education François Bayrou calls it an "entreprise de démolition" in an interview on France Inter. He talks about defending "ce que nous sommes profondément" and tells the government "ne touchez pas à ma France." More than 150 parliament representatives signed a petition accusing the reform of "couper la langue française de ses racines." Also, in making the teaching of the Enlightenment optional the policy is guilty of "renier les fondements de la Nation." In an interview with *Le Figaro*, right wing philosopher Alain Finkielkraut sees the reform as the embodiment of "la fureur anti-élitiste » and the glorification of a « hypermodernité numérique et niveleuse." Philosopher Michel Onfray considers that the teaching of the Enlightenment is being cast aside in favor of teaching Islam. He tweeted: "Avec les nouveaux programmes d'histoire : Islam obligatoire, Lumières facultatives. Michel Houellebecq⁵³ sourit dans son coin."

The fact that the new history program seems to give more airtime to issues of colonization triggered the reactionary statements of pundits inaccurately representing the reform. On BFMTV, former education minister Luc Ferry is quoted as saying that he regrets for example that European history is "présentée que sous l'angle de la traite et de la colonisation." For him, "on est dans une espèce d'idéologie post-11 janvier, on veut se faire pardonner mille choses, on est dans l'Europe de la repentance." In his interview with *Le Figaro*, Alain Finkielkraut, denounced a "présentation embellissante de la religion et de la civilisation musulmane." He also reproached the program with not being concerned with making students love France. Historian Pierre Nora deployed the following critique of a reform that he sees as

⁵³ Onfray is referring to Michel Houellebecq's 2015 novel *Soumission*, which depicts France in a political crisis that sees the rise of a Muslim Brotherhood that sweeps the power and implements Islamic law.

carrying “une forme de culpabilité nationale qui fait la part belle à l’Islam, aux traites négrières, à l’esclavage et qui tend à réinterpréter l’ensemble du développement de l’Occident et de la France à travers le prisme du colonialisme et de ses crimes.” It is particularly telling that the reform⁵⁴ created such a reaction given that its content does not warrant such analyses and is much less ambitious than the criticisms suggest.

Why is it that these small content changes elicited not only hysterical reactions warning of the end of French (Jean d’Ormesson) and the erasure of Occidental and European history teaching, but were also seen as negatively presenting France as forever apologizing for the evils of colonization? In her book *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, Sara Ahmed considers the way emotions circulate between bodies, private and public, and the way they are produced over time as a form of affective value. In her chapter on shame, she asks the question: “What does it mean to claim an identity through shame? How does national shame work to acknowledge past wrongdoings while absolving individuals of guilt?” (Ahmed, 101). I wonder what it means to claim an identity by refusing to repent. Ahmed analyzes how declarations of shame can bring a nation into existence as a felt community. She examines how saying sorry is perceived as a threat by nations: what does it commit us to? What does it do? Refusing to apologize for the past relies on cutting off the present from past. Teaching the construction of France as a nation through the honest lens of colonization would indeed be a way of highlighting the connections between past and present. By refusing to honestly contextualize French identity in terms of its

⁵⁴ Find the two decrees related to the reform at the following web addresses:

<https://www.legifrance.gouv.fr/affichTexte.do?cidTexte=JORFTEXT000030613326&dateTexte=&categorieLien=id>

and <https://www.legifrance.gouv.fr/affichTexte.do?cidTexte=JORFTEXT000030613339&dateTexte=&categorieLien=id>

hugely problematic colonial history, the French government is therefore suggesting that colonial practices are over when in fact, they are not. They have simply taken different forms.

De Sousa Santos' concept of cognitive injustice (*Epistemologies of the South*) is particularly helpful to frame the larger argument of this section, which is that the violence of epistemicides directly underlies all the other kinds of violence done to marginalized populations in France. What does it say about a state that it needs to destroy knowledges in order to maintain power? What does it say about an education system that it can no longer learn from the world? De Sousa Santos writes that

after five centuries of 'teaching' the world, the global North seems to have lost the capacity to learn from the experience of the world. In other words, it looks as if colonialism has disabled the global North from learning in noncolonial terms, that is, in terms that allow for the existence of histories other than the universal history of the West" (19).

I would argue that colonialism hasn't simply impaired the global North's learning and teaching abilities. In the case of France, it is eating them from the inside because colonialism is at the heart of the very structure of the education system in France, and it is a fundamental factor in the making of terrorism as France is experiencing it today.

Conclusion: On The Need for Decolonizing France's Education System

The four professors I quoted earlier testify to the stakes of reforming the French education system: the symbolic and material nature of its state sanctioned violence is directly responsible for the profound social, economic and intellectual disempowerment and despair

that France's non-conforming youth feels. The violence that has erupted in events such as the 1995 and 2005 youth riots, the terrorist attacks of 2015 in Paris and 2016 in Nice are striking examples of the failures of the system. While this violence has been heavily mediatized, the more insidious, invisible, steady scholastic violence of decades of undermining, devaluing, stigmatizing and forcibly homogenizing has yet to be acknowledged and reckoned with.

It is not my intention, however, to deprive these youths of agency. Stripping student of agency is still to a large extent the business of school, but students claim agency nonetheless and they do so with the help of teachers who are committed to their students rather than the system they work in. When the students in Sabrina Janvier's class in Corbeilles-Essonnes were asked if they felt French, only two students raised their hand. The school project "On m'appelle France" was born from this moment of honesty that was also a reckoning for Janvier. This project, led by students in their school's cinema workshop and encouraged by their teacher is a meaningful and powerful exercise of student agency. It is also an example of a white teacher seizing the opportunity to expand her pedagogical horizon and to question her positionality. The project allowed students to talk about how they felt about France, what it meant for them to be French, and what contributed to their feelings of exclusion and inclusion (Soullier).

However, these students and teachers are completely institutionalized in a system that needs to confront its colonial practices and work to dismantle them to prioritize student agency and student-centered knowledge production. Indeed, I agree with Diouf, for example, that "the stakes of writing history for a recognized and archived presence in the nation's past cannot be reduced to a mere mention in textbooks or to superficial vacuous pedagogy that passes for the teaching of the history of a given people" (46). His concept of a "co-authored colonial library"

(Diouf, 44), in this regard, is particularly useful to my point. Indeed, students do have existing literacies and marginalized populations have existing epistemologies and methods for doing the work of decolonizing. In France for example, there is the work of the scholars from the group *Les Indigènes de la République* (Houria Bouteldja, Sadri Khiari, Saïd Bouamama and Christine Delphy, among others). These scholars, by virtue of ‘using the words’ to talk about the racialization of Frenchness, are decolonizing political representation. Thanks to the Internet, school no longer has the monopoly of culture, which means that groups such as the Mwasi Collective, for example, have a platform to disseminate knowledge that is anticolonial. If you click on their “Ressources” tab, you will find a list of documents from analyses of intersectionality to texts by Audre Lord and videos explaining cultural appropriation. While I am not necessarily expecting middle schoolers to seek out these resources, they are there for their teachers. In other words, social media has allowed for the formation of a heterogeneous public scholarship filling the gaps and questioning the gaps of French education.

In these projects there is potential for meaningful collaboration to dismantle the fake neutrality of knowledge production and transmission. In the words of Lionnet and Shih in *The Creolization of Theory*, there is the potential for a process of re-politicizing (16, 25) to take place in schools. Even more importantly, Lionnet and Shih contend that epistemologies of the north are entangled with those of the south, to use Santos’ terms: “our politics of knowledge, disciplinary formations, and social inequalities are **mutually** constituted” (2). The power of French universalism and the reason why we need to do away with this concept is that it “assimilates within itself all forms of cultural diversity into a concept of Culture (or *culture générale*), hides geographic, racial, and other differences” (15). For example, it ignores the

impact of the Algerian War on intellectual life and thought production. Indeed, it is not that French culture is actually white but that it is whitewashed, difference erased and made to be forgotten. Historicizing, contextualizing, and understanding events from intersectional perspectives are tools that have been developed by scholars and pedagogues of color (some of whom I have discussed), for a long time.

Finally, I want to emphasize that this isn't just about issues of positionality. I am talking about people's lives. In *Decolonizing Methodologies*, Linda Tuhiwai Smith speaks to the costs and stakes of denying the historical formations of knowledge productions by provoking "some revolutionary thinking about the roles that knowledge, knowledge production, knowledge hierarchies and knowledge institutions play in decolonization and social transformation" (xii). In the introduction, she clearly states that the work of re-historicizing, which is also the work of decolonizing, is a matter of life and death: "the constant efforts by governments, states, societies and institutions to deny the historical formations of such conditions [the living conditions of Indigenous people in the US] have simultaneously denied our claims to humanity, to having a history, and to all sense of hope" (4). In other words, addressing epistemic racism in the French education system is not just about being fairer, it's about acknowledging and valuing the humanity of those white supremacy construes as non-conforming others.

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3. Islamophobia in *Laïcité*: The Racialization of Religion in France

In August 2016 on a beach in Nice, a woman was surrounded by four police officers who asked her to remove her tunic and veil (Morin). She was told that she needed to wear swimwear on the beach or would need to leave. She left. The pictures triggered international outrage: what was going on in France? How far was too far for France's radical brand of secularism to go? While this story may seem anecdotal, it is part of a movement of escalating islamophobia⁵⁵ in the enforcement of secularism in France. Even though the latest state policy regarding religious wear does not prohibit the burkini⁵⁶, private businesses like swimming pools for example can set their own regulations and, more often than not, prohibit it. Additionally, anti-burkini municipal by-laws multiplied in the summer of 2016 preventing women from wearing it on public beaches (Robert-Diard). Secularism is a prominent object of study and at the heart of many controversies in France. It has its own consulting committee, L'Observatoire de la Laïcité⁵⁷, created in 2007 for the purpose of assisting the state with regards to questions of secularism.

In order to understand the ramifications of French secularism as it is practiced today and discuss its relationship to islamophobia, we need to look at its historical context. French secularism, which I will refer to as *laïcité* in this chapter in order to signal the particularity of the

⁵⁵ I understand islamophobia as a form of cultural racism. It describes the discriminations Muslims and perceived Muslims suffer because of their real or perceived affiliation with Islam, a religion which has been conflated with terrorism and construed as a dangerous geopolitical force both inside and outside France.

⁵⁶ I am referring to the 2010 law prohibiting facial concealment in public spaces, also known as the anti-burqa law.

⁵⁷ Interestingly, there is also an Observatoire de l'Islamophobie identifying acts of discrimination against (perceived) Muslims. It is completely independent from the government.
iest un site totalement indépendant. Il n'est donc rattaché à aucune organisation politique ou religieuse."

French model, has been construed as a fundamental part of France's identity since the Revolution of 1789 and even more so when it was enshrined in law in 1905. In theory, the foundation of *laïcité* is the state's religious neutrality. One of the particularities of French secularism is that the state theorizes that in order to respect all religions, it cannot recognize any. This means that the state does not intervene in religious affairs, private or public, unless religion is being persecuted⁵⁸. The three principles of *laïcité* are: *liberté de conscience*⁵⁹, the freedom to practice a religion (or not) and the separation of church and state. With the end of the *Ancien Régime* in 1789 came the end of the clergy's privileges and political powers and the affirmation of the Republic's universal principles (*liberté de conscience* and equal rights). In the name of progress, science and equal rights, the Republic slowly but surely took away from the clergy their power in a number of spheres of influence such as education⁶⁰ and the official/legal regulation of mores like marriage. Scholars disagree on the origins of *laïcité*, but two major trends have emerged. Christian scholars have tended to see its origins in religion (Barreau, Madelin). On the contrary, philosophers like Peña Ruiz trace its origins to the Enlightenment era and the development of universalism, as well as to a need to emancipate the state from the political and social aspirations of the church.

In this chapter, I am not interested in entering the debate of the origins of *laïcité*. Instead, I am questioning whether the state has, in fact, truly emancipated from the influence of the Catholic Church and to what extent it has become the French state's religion. I am also interested in the problem of framing *laïcité* in universal terms. As I have shown in the previous

⁵⁸ See article one of the law: "l'État garantit l'exercice des cultes." The law in its entirety can be found on the site of the CNRS at the following address: <http://www2.cnrs.fr/sites/thema/fichier/loi1905textes.pdf>

⁵⁹ I cannot find a satisfactory translation of the term. It refers to the freedom of an individual to choose the values and principles that will guide their life.

⁶⁰ Public education has officially been secular since 1882.

chapter, universalism is in fact a white heterosexual cisgender male worldview, which produced orientalist knowledges construing Muslims as inferior⁶¹. The Pew Research Center in 2016 reported that 8.8% of the French population identifies as Muslim⁶². In light of these two points and the fact that *laïcité* is intricately tied to feelings of national belonging in France, I am concerned with the way the concept has been instrumentalized over the past three decades to further segregate and isolate French Muslims. Furthermore, I am wondering to what extent *laïcité* can still be used as a political and national theory/story for living together, given that it is built upon the idea of an irreducible hierarchical difference between French and Muslims.

A number of French scholars have studied *laïcité* and its place in the construction of French society. Two prominent scholars of *laïcité* are Jean Baubérot and Henri Peña Ruiz. Sociologist and historian Baubérot tends to write more generally about *laïcité* and to emphasize the neutrality of the state (*Laïcité (1905-2005), entre passion et raison*). He is also interested in the conflicts between religious and secular interpretations of the concept (*La Morale laïque contre l'ordre moral*). In *Dieu et Marianne ; philosophie de la laïcité*, Peña Ruiz insists that in the context of a culturally diverse society like France, *laïcité* is the only political and legal framework that can guarantee everyone's integration because it is based on universal principles emancipated from religious influence. Among others⁶³, sociologists Fabienne Brion and Caroline Fourest are concerned with the relationship between Islam and *laïcité*. In *Féminité, minorité, islamité: questions à propos du hijâb*, Brion reflects upon the French controversies known as *les affaires du foulard* and the position of Muslim women on questions regarding Muslim wear. In

⁶¹ See Edward Saïd's critique of orientalism as a western production of false knowledge on Arabo-Muslim cultures, fictionally depicting the Orient as psychologically weak and irrational (*Orientalism*, 1978).

⁶² It is worth noting that France in 2016 had the largest number of people identifying as Muslim in Europe, and that this number is predicted to double by 2050.

⁶³ See Jeanne-Hélène Kaltenbach (2002); Charlotte Nordmann (2002); Olivier Roy (2005); Natalie Kakpo (2007).

Tirs croisés : la laïcité à l'épreuve des intégrismes juif, chrétien et musulman, Fourest and co-author Fiammetta Venner denounce the threat of religious fundamentalism for secular societies by establishing points of convergence between the worldviews of Jewish, Christian and Muslim religions.

With this chapter, I am adding my voice to the relatively small chorus of French academics who critically engage with the dominant political and legal interpretations of *laïcité* and the consequences of these interpretations for Muslims and perceived Muslims. I will discuss in particular the work of activist scholars Pierre Tévanian, Nacira Guénif- Souillamas and Eric Macé⁶⁴. More specifically, I am concerned with analyzing the ways in which this concept is being used as an imperialist technology of white supremacist patriarchy to keep people of color in their place by legitimizing expressions of racism/islamophobia and by maintaining a certain image of French identity that denies social change. In other words, I am looking at how *laïcité* is a form of inclusionary violence as a means of biopower. What is the current definition of *laïcité* and how is it implemented from a legal standpoint? How has the concept been appropriated and instrumentalized politically with the help of the media? What is the role of *laïcité* in cementing white solidarity and constructing the 'Muslim terrorist'?

One Definition, Competing Interpretations

On the website of the French government, *laïcité* is defined in the following way:

La laïcité garantit aux croyants et aux non-croyants le même droit à **la liberté**

d'expression de leurs convictions. [...] La laïcité suppose la séparation de l'Etat et des

⁶⁴ See also Farhad Khosrokhavar (2003); Sadri Khiari (2011); Asal Houda (2014); Houria Bouteldja (2016); Nedjib Sidi Moussa (2017).

organisations religieuses. L'ordre politique est fondé sur la seule souveraineté du peuple des citoyens, et l'Etat —qui ne reconnaît et ne salarie aucun culte— ne régit pas le fonctionnement interne des organisations religieuses. De cette séparation se déduit **la neutralité de l'Etat**, des collectivités territoriales et des services publics, **non de ses usagers**. [...] La laïcité n'est pas une opinion parmi d'autres mais **la liberté d'en avoir une**⁶⁵. Elle n'est pas une conviction mais le principe qui les autorise toutes, sous réserve du respect de l'ordre public.

In this definition, the government expressly contends that, under *laïcité*, people are free to express their religious beliefs and that it is the state and its services that are neutral, not its users. In spite of this definition, the French government has passed two laws limiting the visibility of religion in the public sphere. In 2004, a law was passed to prohibit ostentatious religious signs in school⁶⁶. In 2010, a law was passed banning facial covering in public spaces⁶⁷. Both laws are widely perceived to be laws targeting Muslim veils are commonly referred to as the 'anti-veil laws'.

There are at least two ways to interpret what *laïcité* means in France. One essentially considers that religion is a private matter and that it must therefore be confined to the private sphere, lest one be proselytizing, which is illegal in France. This understanding of *laïcité* is relatively new (early 2000s) according to Baubérot, and Hajjat and Mohammed. The other interpretation focuses on the notion that secularism means respect and acceptance of the variety of religious beliefs and expression of these beliefs that exist in the social sphere. The

⁶⁵ My emphases in bold throughout the section.

⁶⁶ You can find the original text of the law as well as the version currently in use here: <https://www.legifrance.gouv.fr/affichTexte.do?cidTexte=JORFTEXT000000417977&categorieLien=id>.

⁶⁷ Read the full text and current version in use here: <https://www.legifrance.gouv.fr/affichTexte.do?cidTexte=JORFTEXT000022911670&categorieLien=id>.

first vision of *laïcité* is indubitably the dominant one, which has made possible the two laws mentioned above. It is certainly the one that received the most airtime (and still does) during debates on *laïcité* and what it means for France. The second one is advocated by a number of non-profit organizations⁶⁸ often absent from media debates, and a handful of intellectuals such as Etienne Balibar, Achille Mbembe, and Pierre Tévanian for example. In *Equaliberty*, Balibar discusses the paradoxes at the heart of *laïcité*, which supports certain freedoms but rejects others. In “The Republic and Its Beast,” Mbembe discusses how secularism has become a technology to police religion. I am particularly interested in Tévanian who is also an editor of a collection of interviews titled *Les filles voilées parlent*, one of the rare books offering a space for French Muslim women to speak for themselves.

While much has been written about the issues of gender, sexism, the place of Muslim women in the imperial project, and questions of national belonging⁶⁹, I want to focus on the ways these issues are ultimately expressions of the French brand of white patriarchal capitalism. I am concerned with analyzing the ways in which *laïcité* in France is an instrument of white nationalist patriarchy, and so I will be framing discussions of the Muslim ‘veil’ within questions of white supremacy, so as to reveal the structure of its existence in France. Tévanian is a key intellectual for this project because he is one of very few scholars in France to acknowledge and engage with his whiteness and his status as a white intellectual (man). I will also be historicizing *laïcité* and considering the way it was implemented in Algeria under French occupation, so as to analyze how it has become a technology of neocolonial practices.

⁶⁸ Among others, see the manifest of the collective Une école pour tou-te-s here: <http://lmsi.net/Communique-du-Collectif-Une-ecole>; the Collectif des féministes pour l'égalité; Participation et spiritualité musulmanes.

⁶⁹ See in particular *The Politics of the Veil* (2010) by Joan Wallach Scott and *European Others: Queering Ethnicity in Postnational Europe* (2011) by Fatima El-Tayeb.

The “Battle” for Secular France staged by the Media

In two militant volumes, Tévanian discusses in depth the ways in which Muslim women’s hair have become a major political stake in the past 20 years in France. In *Le voile médiatique*, he analyses the media’s occupation of the 2004 law prohibiting ostentatious religious signs in school – implicitly and often explicitly known as the anti-hijab law – and their exploitation of the Islamic veil, to show that the law was the result of a debate started by political figures instead of a social issue the people demanded be addressed. Tévanian takes apart the methods the media used to inject fear and rejection, and the ways they purposefully restricted and selected guests so that those in favor of the law had the most airtime. According to him, this media campaign gave way to an islamophobic consensus targeting young Muslim women and enabled the law to pass. While I think that Tévanian may be giving the media too much credit, I believe that mainstream media played and still plays a huge role in making socially acceptable the stigmatization of Muslim women and crudely enforcing stereotypes attached to the Muslim veils⁷⁰. The media sensationalized the law by presenting it as a stake in a kind of war for the survival of the French Republic and the values of secularism, Enlightenment, etc. that it stands for. Favoring extreme voices such as right wing intellectuals Alain Finkielkraut and Elisabeth Badinter, the media overall invited only a handful of ‘veiled’ women, most of them too old to have known exclusion from school and too busy defending themselves against accusation of being fundamentalists to be able to offer another perspective (*Le voile*, 38-39). Following the trend of public scholarship I described in my first chapter in

⁷⁰ Tévanian’s analysis and the weight he confers to mainstream media in shaping public’s perception of Muslims and perceived Muslims echoes historian Gérard Noiriel’s *A quoi sert l’identité nationale*, in which he discusses and condemns the ways in which mainstream media vilifies and demonizes young Arab men.

which social justice oriented scholars are relatively absent from the public scene, the media also did not invite social scholars researching Muslims and their religious practice (or absence thereof) (*Le voile*, 45-46). Secular feminists in favor of the law such as Elisabeth Badinter and Caroline Fourest were favored over equally secular feminists advocating that the school not exclude young women wearing a veil (*Le voile*, 48-49). Overall, the media created a spectacle in which French society became grossly divided between those in favor of a secular society and those who were not:

Il y aurait donc d'un côté une «France blanche», parlant d'une seule voix, et faisant front pour défendre «les valeurs de la République » et de «la modernité», de l'autre un péril incarné par des «Arabo-musulmans». Une représentation biaisée, faussée et simplifiée de la réalité politique, qui s'inscrit dans le paradigme du «choc des civilisations» (*Le voile*, 55).

In short, none of the organizations, spokespersons or scholars with more nuanced views, with a concern for the well-being of the young women who would be excluded from school or with a more progressive and less polarizing understanding of *laïcité* were given much if any airtime.

In 2012, Tévanian published another book following the passing of the second secular law, which prohibits facial covering in public spaces (also known as the anti-burqa law). In *Dévoilements*, Tévanian carefully lays out 30 contradictions and paradoxes of the stated motives behind the laws. Among others, he comments on the irony of restricting religious expression in a country that fights for freedom of speech, that is for people's right to insult and demonize Muslims. He also points at the way these laws, designed and implemented by white men, stigmatize and oppress women whom these same men portray as being stigmatized and

oppressed by the Muslim men in their family⁷¹. Tévanian also highlights the complicity of the school system, the intellectual world and the media in reinforcing and often normalizing islamophobia in France.

Joan Wallach Scott also points out the many hypocrisies and inconsistent rhetoric surrounding arguments for the laws. In *The Politics of the Veil*, she argues that the very particular historical discourse that allowed the laws to pass reinforced the idea that Muslim and French cultures are incompatible (aka cultural racism⁷²). In particular, she explores how the growing population of Muslims in France was reduced to a single difference (the veil), perceived as threatening to the nation, by way of flattening and erasing the diversity and complexities of French Muslims and labeling this difference the enemy of the Republic. Like Tévanian, she analyzes the discourse that constructed what she calls “a virtual community,” the Muslims, but also a mythical French Republic that doesn’t exist either.

⁷¹ In “Burqa: les non-dits du débat sur le port du voile,” Mediapart published a thorough examination of the debate accompanied by a series of important questions that were mostly left out of the national debate. It lists three types of arguments under which fall roughly every argument in favor of the laws: gender equality, secularism and public safety.

⁷² I understand *cultural racism* as a term that describes and explains new racial ideologies and practices that have emerged since World War II. The new forms of racism the term designates are complex and subtle, and operate in often-invisible ways. In France, cultural racism takes the form of colorblind racism and islamophobia, among others. In the US, Eduardo Bonilla-Silva discusses colorblind racism in *Racism Without Racists* (2003). In chapter two, “The Central Frames of Colorblind Racism,” he describes cultural racism as such: “[it] is a frame that relies on culturally based arguments such as “Mexicans do not put much emphasis on education” or “blacks have too many babies” to explain the standing of minorities in society” (76). In France, a culturally based argument about Muslims would be “Muslims are backwards; the women are submissive and the men oppress the women.” In Europe, Pakistani and British scholar Tariq Modood discusses cultural racism in Britain in *Multicultural Politics: racism, ethnicity and Muslims in Britain* (2005). Similarly to Bonilla-Silva, Modood construes cultural racism as a matter of language, religion, family structures, dress and cuisine.

Taking apart its faulty logic and reasoning, both scholars point at the preposterousness of this discourse. If this interpretation of *laïcité* is so ridiculous, the question that remains unanswered is why it was embraced by a majority of mainstream society. One aspect of this debate I would like to develop is the role of affect and emotions as an ideological apparatus to enforce and protect white nationalist patriarchy. In the end, the *laïcité* debates were not about secularism, but about islamophobia. For example, some variant of the phrase “if you don’t like it, you can leave” was used by many proponents of the laws. Given that much research has proven that pointing out the flaws and factual errors in a person’s argumentation does anything but change their mind⁷³, activist writers like Tévanian are effectively preaching to their choir. In order to understand the crux of the debate and interrogate a fundamental feature of the French brand of white nationalism, examining more in depth the affective dimension of the rhetoric of these debates is essential. Understanding the emotional manipulations and appeal underlying the arguments for this particular understanding of *laïcité* could possibly offer new ways of approaching issues of racism and islamophobia. What story about Islam and Muslims does white supremacy tell and how does it serve to maintain white hegemony?

⁷³ A number of studies in a variety of fields have come to this conclusion in studying belief perseverance. In 1975, Stanford researchers published a study titled “Perseverance of Social Theories: The Role of Information in the Persistence of Discredited Information.” They found that even after providing significant evidence proving them wrong, the students in the study refused to revise their beliefs. In political studies, David P. Redlask led a study titled “Hot Cognition or Cool Consideration? Testing the Effects of Motivated Reasoning on Political Decision Making” found that introducing people to negative information about a political candidate that they favor often causes them to increase their support for that candidate. In “When Corrections Fail: The Persistence of Political Misperceptions,” Brendan Nyhan and Jason Reigler examine misconceptions regarding politically charged topics. They found that giving people accurate information about these topics strengthened preexisting beliefs if the information provided contradicted these beliefs.

Love and Hate in/for the Republic

La France, on l'aime ou on la quitte

Time and time again, proponents of the anti-veil laws suggest or frankly say that to wear the veil is a sign of not adhering to France's notion of *vivre ensemble*, and that if one does not want to follow these rules (which, before the laws were enacted were implicit) one does not respect and love the Republic and therefore should leave it. In October 2003 on i-Télévision, then Minister of Education Xavier Darcos said the following about the students wearing the veil in school: "Quand on n'aime pas les lois de la République, on va ailleurs!" (cited by Tévanian in *Le voile*, 113). In a similar vein, Elisabeth Badinter suggests that if women in France want to wear the veil they can move to Afghanistan "Pourquoi ne pas gagner les terres saoudiennes ou afghanes où nul ne vous demandera de montrer votre visage, où vos filles seront voilées à leur tour, où votre époux pourra être polygame et vous répudier quand bon lui semble?" (cited in "Burqa: les non-dits du débat sur le voile").

These comments reveal a conflation of secularism with atheism since wearing a veil is perceived as a sign of non-respect of France's secularism. They also reveal strategic white ignorance in which Islam and the Muslim veils, by virtue of being essentialized, are conflated with backwardness and gender violence. I use the term 'strategic' because it is a chosen form of ignorance deployed in support of the Republic's ideology. After all, Badinter is a scholar. She can (and probably does) know about the heterogeneity in Muslim practices but chooses to ignore it. Finally, these comments reflect instrumentalization of *laïcité* as an internal imaginary border. In these discourses, the ideal of *laïcité* is appropriated and corrupted for the purpose of preserving an essentialist vision of France.

Tévanian remarks that the question that took center stage in polls and debates wasn't "Are you for or against the anti-veil law?" but rather "Are you for or against the veil?" This fallacious question at the center of the media coverage is a very Manichean one, which forced people to choose a camp: yes or no. This "yes" or "no" becomes the answer to a different question, in the end, since it is used to gauge your allegiance and love of the Republic. Do you love the Republic or not? If you wear the veil or don't object to it, it means you are positioning yourself against the Republic. I want to argue that in the end, the debates weren't about *laïcité* but rather about what it means to be French, and about whether or not you love and respect the nation.

Interestingly, during these debates Muslim women wearing the veil were not seen as proselytizing, which is one of the behaviors actively prohibited by French secular laws. Rather, they were cast as hating the nation, which is a strategy used by white nationalists in other contexts. In *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, Sara Ahmed explains that white supremacist organizations labeled as 'hate groups' often claim to be acting out of love and therefore rename themselves as organizations of love. She writes that "a crucial part of the renaming is the identification of hate as coming from elsewhere and as being directed towards the 'hate group'" (122). In France, this reversal of the script occurs with Muslim women as well. In the new story, it is not France that hates Muslims but rather Muslims who hate France. This is a strategy, Ahmed contends, in which love is used "as protection by identifying white subjects as already at risk from the presence of others" (123). The story that French ideals and French society are endangered by Muslim hate allows the reproduction of "the collective as ideal through producing a particular kind of object whose allegiance to the ideal makes it an ideal in

the first place” (123). In other words, those in favor of the anti-veil laws see themselves loving the nation. This love, in their eyes, makes them good, righteous people who are fighting for the right cause, for the preservation of an ideal of France to which they identify. In this story, you cannot wear the veil and love the nation. In this story, Muslim women are villains who refuse to identify with the ideal of the nation.

Muslim women are perceived to be refusing sameness, which, as Tévanian explains in *La mécanique raciste*⁷⁴ and Scott in *The Politics of the Veil*, is France’s interpretation of equality.

Scott remarks

In France many of those who supported a ban on headscarves insisted they were protecting **a nation conceived to be one and indivisible** from the corrosive effects of *communautarisme*. [...] in theory there is no possibility of a hyphenated ethnic/national identity – one belongs to a group or to the nation [...] equality is achieved, in French political theory, by making one's social, religious, ethnic, and other origins irrelevant in the public sphere; **it is as an abstract individual that one becomes a French citizen.**

Universalism – the oneness, the sameness of all individuals is taken to be the antithesis of [communautarisme] (11).

In a context where equality is understood as sameness, difference can only be perceived as a threat and a refusal to be a part of society. Muslim women wearing the veil are seen as signaling that they don’t want to be like white women, that is, to use French politics terminology, to integrate into the nation. In other words, they don’t love us.

⁷⁴ See chapter one “Egalité e(s)t différence” (23-42) for a broader discussion of equality in the French context.

In “Aimez-vous la France?” Sadri Khiari frankly explains that what the question really means is “Prouvez-nous que, malgré cette différence qui fait de vous des non-Français à vie, vous êtes bien français” (124). The difference he means is the fact that they are not white. The France of this question is a France with a mythical history, but not a real history, he argues, because the real history is those people who are asked to prove their love for France, that is prove that they are French: “*Nous sommes son histoire. L’histoire de l’esclavage, l’histoire de la colonisation, l’histoire de l’immigration néocoloniale, l’histoire que nous fabriquons au jour le jour maintenant que nous sommes là, d’ici et d’ailleurs*” (124). In the discrepancy between the unsubstantial, mythical France and the real, historical France is white privilege. Whites do not have to prove that they love France. It is their whiteness that is love of France, and it makes this gap unbridgeable.

Indeed, the problem is that removing the veil and appearing more like white French does not allow these women to become French women⁷⁵. Ahmed explains that the distance never goes away:

[...] *identification expands the space of the subject*: it is a form of love that tells the subject what it could become in the intensity of its direction towards another (love as ‘towardness’). Identification involves *making* likeness rather than being alike; the subject becomes ‘like’ the object or other only in the future (*The Cultural*, 126).

⁷⁵ In *De la question sociale à la question raciale* (Fassin and Fassin), Véronique de Rudder and François Vourc’h explore the concrete manifestations of this unbridgeable gap in the form of racial (racist, in their term of choice) discriminations at work. Jean-François Amadieu with *L’observatoire des discriminations* completed a study in 2005 that revealed that a woman with Arabic origins and a better CV than the five other candidates for the same position was three times less likely to receive a positive response to her application. The report surmises that her name was likely the issue. As a note, I am not equating women of Arabic descent with being Muslim, but mainstream society does racialize religion. Even though she was not wearing a veil on her CV photo, she was still discriminated against.

In other words, if Muslim women keep their veil they are defying their position of eternal 'becoming.' By that I mean that in the eyes of white France they refuse to stay in their place; a place where all they can do is forever aspire to be considered French. In refusing to remove their veils and therefore loving the nation, Muslim women are perceived as damaging the ideal image of the nation and as refusing to return the idealized image of the nation back to it (*The Cultural*, 127-133). On the flip side of this, the veil seems to prevent white French women from identifying with Muslim women since it is construed as signaling hatred of the loved object (the nation).

You can see this dynamic directly at play by considering that the battle against the veil took place first and foremost in school. Why there, specifically? In the second chapter I discussed the centrality of the French education system in creating the French citizen and disseminating the values of the Republic. School is the place where knowledge is transmitted and where students learn to love and extend the ideal of the French nation. Ahmed explains that reproducing this ideal, which is one of the mechanisms of white patriarchal heteronormative societies, is one of the ways to prove love to the nation. Preventing students from wearing a religious symbol that is perceived to be incompatible with the Republic's values is a strategy to keep young citizens away from unFrench behaviors.

A very particular brand of laïcité, then, is practiced as love of the nation. If you don't practice or understand laïcité the same way, it means you are against the nation. Ultimately, these policies are also about separating good French patriots from bad French patriots. In doing

so, white Christian-ish⁷⁶ France shows a very particular kind of solidarity that one can see displayed in other Western countries: the gathering of perceived sameness against a fabricated enemy, which necessitates the creation of an internal imaginary border (here, a corrupted understanding of *laïcité*). Wearing the veil is a sign of violence and provocation against the nation. It is love of this nation that makes them feel hate for Muslims.

The Muslim Veil as 'Sticky' Object

Today's understanding of *laïcité* in France is based upon the story that the west has created and continues to tell about Islam, which is that it is a backwards and dangerous religion⁷⁷. In "Le regard colonial Islam, genre et identités dans la fabrication de l'Algérie française, 1830-1962," Julia Clancy-Smith analyses how Muslim women's bodies in Algeria were objects of ideological struggles: "La femme arabe fonctionnait comme un symbole négatif, qui confirmait l'identité culturelle distincte et en conséquence l'autorité politique des colons européens, tout en déniait les droits politiques de l'Autre dont la culture était jugée inférieure." Indeed, Algerian women were encouraged by French military propaganda to

⁷⁶ Although France is secular, there is much evidence to suggest the continued importance of its Catholic roots. Kay Chadwick in *Catholicism, Politics, and Society in Twentieth-Century France* (2000) contends that Catholicism still functions as a complex component of French identity. In *La crise catholique. Religion, société, politique en France (1965-1978)*, Denis Pelletier discusses a specific period of time in France that redefined the place of Catholicism in society and more particularly in politics. Kevin Williams looks at the place of Catholicism in French education in "Faith and the French: Catholicism and Education in France." El-Tayeb in chapter three of *European Others* argues that France is haunted by Christianity, which shapes its attitude towards Muslim minorities (81-120).

⁷⁷ In "Orientalism Reconsidered," Edward Saïd criticizes the role of scholars in perpetuating orientalist knowledges of Islam. In particular, he denounces their refusal to acknowledge that antisemitism, which they readily decry, and islamophobia come from the same source. In chapter 10 of *Islamophobie*, Abdellali Hajjat and Marwan Mohammed trace a concise history of the construction of an anti-Muslim archive from the Middle Ages until now in order to contextualize current discourses on Islam and Muslims. Also, see Rodinson (1989) for a global perspective on Islam; Dakhalia and Bernard (2011, 2013) for a European perspective.

remove their veils. If they did, it was seen as a sign of allegiance to the Republic and to civility, and a sign of national resistance if they did not.

Importantly, the foundation for the 2004 and 2010 laws is a deliberate misreading of what the veil means, starting with the fact that the word 'veil' or 'headscarf' refers to any kind of veil, from the hijab to the burqa. Ahmed explains that black bodies are "misread as a form of rage, and only then as the ground of white fear" (63). In the case of the veil, it is purposefully misread as having only one meaning, the rejection of France, which then justifies white fear. The nuances of those garments and the various and complex ways and reasons why they are worn disappear in the homogenization of Muslims. This flattening of complexities turns Muslim individuals into a monolith, the monster to fear. Stereotypes are a fundamental means of spreading the kind of fear that allows white supremacy to maintain its power. The media served this power by capitalizing on fear to sensationalize the situation, thereby increasing ratings⁷⁸. The media's role in circulating stereotypes while disregarding more nuanced and humanizing voices is crucial in constructing the fear that is the root of this particular interpretation of *laïcité*: the fear of the loss of the beloved, idealized Republic.

Stereotypes have power because of the context in which they are spread. In order for this story about Muslims to have power, French history needs to be rewritten. The new narrative re-writes what *laïcité* means, ignores the still strong ties between France and Christianity, dismisses the systemic sexism and violence of French society as being the problem of individuals, and vehemently proclaims that French women are the equals of men. In this

⁷⁸ In "L'islamophobie: une myopie intellectuelle?" Laurent Muchielli discusses the role of journalists and intellectuals in the creation of what he calls "une panique médiatico-morale" that focuses on racializing and diabolizing religion instead of focusing on the socio-political conflicts at the heart of French society.

story, Muslims are endangering the national values of this imagined community and therefore, they are also legitimate objects of hate. In the headscarf controversies, both love and hate are at work: it is love of the nation (*The Cultural*, 43) that makes white France hate Muslims. It is the circulation of love, hate and fear that construct an enemy (Muslims) and an endangered party/victim (white, secular France).

The veil in this situation is a very important object that Ahmed would describe as “sticky.” Ahmed understands emotions as cultural practices instead of psychological states, that is, as a matter of contact between bodies. For example, society is not afraid of Muslims because they are objectively dangerous but because their bodies, through stories, have been constructed and fixed into objects of fear. She theorizes that “emotions can move through the movement or circulation of objects.” In turn, she explains that “such objects become sticky, or saturated with affect, as sites of personal and social tension” (11). This concept of stickiness may be very useful for understanding the symbolism of the veil and the violent reactions it triggers.

I contend that the veil is a sticky object to which fear and hate have been sticking and accruing affect over decades. A myriad of stereotypes/stories are attached to the veil: the misogynist Arab, the submissive woman, the terrorist, the sexually deviant Muslim, etc. In speeches, these words construct the nation as a subject in danger and stick to the Muslim veils, which become the symbol of two opposing narratives. On the one hand, these speeches rewrite French history in order to construct the ideal nation that is under attack. On the other hand, they reduce Islam to a backwards monolith while representing white France as the noble enlightened nation under attack, the white savior saving brown women from brown men, to

borrow from Spivak. The veil concentrates and represents these stories in such a way that one could almost wonder if without it France as a nation would be going through an existential crisis.

Indeed, I argue that the survival of the nation as it understands itself requires these stories in order to exist. In *European Others*, Fatima El-Tayeb explains how stories about being a Muslim that do not fit pre-existing narratives of what being Muslim means or what being French means are silenced, ignored or virulently attacked. Keeping a vision of Muslim women as lacking agency and power, as being in need of western intervention is needed for France to continue inhabiting its 'white savior' role whose job is to civilize those 'pre-modern Arabs'. Fear, as Ahmed explains, creates certain bodies like the dangerous or submissive Muslim and secures these bodies in those specific forms (*The Cultural*, 71). Fear constrains Muslim women wearing the veil in France, ironically quite a bit more than the actual veil that supposedly constrains them: it quite literally restrains their movements since they are not allowed in certain public configurations.

Laïcité as a Sticky Concept

Similarly, love and pride stick to the concept of *laïcité*. A historical constellation of political fights and policies are attached to it, which has turned it into a symbol of freedom. From its very beginning in 1789, *laïcité* has been construed as a fight against the influence of religion on the state, for the *liberté de conscience*. Education was seen as being wrestled from the backwards grip of the Catholic Church during the scholastic feud that culminated in the

separation of church and school in 1882⁷⁹. A century later it is the presence of Islam in France that is put in question and perceived as threatening *laïcité*⁸⁰.

It is important to understand that the concept has been easily instrumentalized and corrupted as a ‘freeing’ principle because that is what it is theoretically designed to guarantee. Separating the state from the church in 1905, in the era of positivism, was a way for France to give more prevalence and influence to science and reason. As such, *laïcité* in France was conceived as a way to encourage and favor progress. The idea is that allowing French citizens to choose what they believed in without being influenced by government authorities frees their minds from certain religious constraints that impede human (and therefore national) progress⁸¹.

The problem is that the so-called ‘freeing’ principles and benefits of *laïcité* were selectively applied and granted. Indeed, *laïcité* was implemented in a very limited fashion in Algeria, denying Algerians the political rights given to French in France. Raberh Achi in “La *laïcité* à l’épreuve de la situation coloniale” explains how the French colonial administration established strong ties with Algerian religious figures (see *Le Code de l’Indigénat*) and only maintained the illusion of equality that *laïcité* was supposed to bring, while, in form at least, respecting the principles of France’s civilizing mission. *Laïcité* is thus also a concept sticky with the story of France’s superiority and Arabo-Muslim inferiority. This is crucial in understanding the so-called shift in the French conception of *laïcité* Baubérot but also Tévanián theorize.

⁷⁹ See the Guizot law of 1833, the Falloux law of 1850 and the Ferry and Goblet laws of the 1880s.

⁸⁰ See the François Baroin report “Pour une nouvelle *laïcité*,” which marks for *laïcité* scholars such as Baubérot the turn of an anti-clerical secularism to an *anti-communautaire* secularism (*Histoire de la laïcité en France*).

⁸¹ Evidently, in replacing religious education with civic education the government merely swapped one ideology for another. In my view, this seriously discredits *laïcité*’s intellectual and spiritual ‘freeing’ purposes. In that sense, *laïcité* is a technology of white, liberal capitalist supremacy because it uses the illusion of freedom to advance economic growth.

Tévanian describes the last 20 years of policies against religious freedom as a shift from an egalitarian understanding of *laïcité* to a religious one, instrumentalized in the name of public safety (*Dévoilements*, 50). However, if you consider the superficial colonial implementation of *laïcité* along with the colonial obsession with unveiling Muslim women (a visible sign of religion), you understand better the paradox and even the contradictions of *laïcité*. On the one hand, Tévanian points out, the signifier *laïcité* has been sacralized in public debate through the sticker “*laïcité sacrée*” that was used at the occasion of the centennial of the 1905 law. This love for what *laïcité* represents (the civilizing mission, French superiority, French freedom, etc.) has been turned into a kind of worship, which automatically frames any challenging of the way it is practiced as an attack against it. On the other hand, the veil has historically been construed as the enemy of *laïcité*, which makes it stick to *laïcité*. In other words, you cannot think about one without thinking about the other; they are intricately connected to each other in public debates today because they have been so for centuries.

In *Dévoilements*, Tévanian analyzes Nicolas Sarkozy’s analogy comparing school to a mosque: “Quand on rentre dans une mosquée, on doit enlever ses chaussures. De même, quand une élève rentre dans une classe, elle doit enlever son foulard.” Tévanian explains:

C’est ce “de même” qui pose problème, car il revient à concevoir l’école sur le modèle du lieu de culte et la *laïcité* sur le mode de la religion. Cette manière de reproduire la logique religieuse – et de se placer par là même en concurrence avec les autres religions – s’oppose radicalement à la *laïcité* du début du XX^e siècle, qui fut au contraire l’invention d’une autre logique (51-52).

I agree with Tévanian that *laïcité* is the Republic's religion, or at the very least one of its foundational dogma. However, I argue that we need to consider the profound national and imperial dimension of the principle of *laïcité*. These feelings have been attached to it from the very beginning; in other words they are part of its conception and therefore explain how its interpretation is so easily slipping into a religious instead of a pragmatic mode. Balibar in *Equaliberty* writes that *laïcité* "is profoundly marked by the heritage of a certain ecclesiastical and administrative tradition, as well as by the imaginary of a certain imperial project" (223). From the beginning of the French Republic, the revolutionaries believed that separating the church and the state was paramount to the survival of the Republic, therefore, France's identity is tightly connected to *laïcité* as a religion-freeing and civilization-bringing principle. Furthermore, France's secular understanding of religion is intricately tied to Christianity, which construes religion in private and public terms. *Laïcité* is therefore also a French practice, deciding and defining what religion looks like. Indeed, *laïcité* in France is rooted in a Christian conception of religion and used against French Muslims, whose religious practices do not differentiate so easily between public and private. In short, Christianity can cohabit with *laïcité* and the Republic, but Islam cannot⁸². French love and fear for *laïcité* as a central tenet of French identity is being exploited in order to implement conservative, fear-based secular practices, which are reshaping French solidarity.

⁸² In *Identity, Insecurity and Image*, after discussing the French education system's 'collaboration' with the Catholic Church in the form of the private school system (still heavily Catholic), Ager wonders: "So is the state a secular organisation? Openly, yes. But there remains a creative tension between state and the Catholic Church, symbolised particularly in the tacit acceptance of a compromise in education" (122).

On Selective Integration and Boundary Making

The Willful Muslim Woman

Whiteness is afraid, yes, but it is not afraid of the other. It is afraid of the loss of the ideal, in our case, the idealized Republic. The main problem with which French mainstream society contends is the paradox of “the excluded insisting to speak from a position of insiders” (El-Tayeb, 34). Women wearing the veil are claiming Frenchness as a component of their identity, and they also claim being Muslim as a part of their identity. A powerful image encapsulating perfectly this idea is the image of young Muslim women protesting the 2004 law in France while wearing a veil and at the same time proudly holding the French flag in front of her face, as a veil itself.



Fig 1. AP press photograph during 2004 protests.

This image profoundly disrupts France’s story of what ‘French’ looks like. It is an image that tells a different story, one in which Muslim women insist that they are part of France, just as they are, and that they are already integrated. This is lived as an attack and a provocation because the west has spent quite an incredible amount of time and energy arguing the ‘a-temporal’ incompatibility of Islam and western values. In her chapter “Secular Submissions,” El-Tayeb

explains how this claim of incompatibility is not actually “framed as a conflict between a Christian majority and a Muslim minority, both of whom are European, but between European humanism, committed to the protection of rights, namely those of gender equality and sexual freedom, and a hostile, intolerant, foreign culture” (81-82). One can see how Muslim women walking around wearing a sign of belonging to a culture that the west has constructed as backwards would then be perceived as a threat to the Republic, or rather, to the idealized story of the Republic they’ve been telling.

When France talks about *intégration*, its favored mode of assimilating immigrants and perceived immigrants, it is actually talking about controlling non-whites and restraining their place within the nation; what I call selective inclusion. Non-whites are not outright ejected but rather kept in the place white France has assigned them thanks to such policies as the anti-veil laws. In light of this idea, I want to insist that white France is not afraid of Muslim women but, rather, of their empowerment. Indeed, one of the many ideas disseminated by the media and regurgitated by my own family is the idea that women wear the veil to provoke, to insult. In *Willful Subjects*, Ahmed tackles this notion that Muslim women who wear the veil in western countries like France are seen as willful. She explains that such societies see the veil as

a willful part, a part that refuses to take part in national culture, a stubborn attachment to an inassimilable difference. [...] The creation of a distinction between willing and willful parts is thus a crucial mechanism for reproducing the national body. [...]

Willfulness is useful as a technique for making those who are assumed as inassimilable [...] responsible for not being assimilated. [...] Anti-immigration discourse thus exercises the figure of the unwilling migrant, or more specifically the migrant who is

“unwilling to integrate.” To be unwilling to integrate is to be “too willing” to retain an allegiance to another body (*Willful*, 128).

Ahmed explains that “the figure of the willful migrant plays a crucial role in securing the borders of the national body: those migrants whose proximity is read as ill will, as not only compromising the health of that body but as aiming to compromise that health” (*Willful*, 129).

Two ideas are crucial here. First, the Muslim woman (whether she’s actually French or not does not matter for she is perceived as not being French) is a willful, backwards migrant refusing to integrate. She is forever an outsider, forever an immigrant, even if she and her parents were born in France, and this situation is her fault. This conflation of Muslim with immigrant from North Africa is one of the instances of racialization of religion in France. Second, it is not how removed she is from French society but rather how close she is that is bothersome. Her daring proximity, her claims to existence and agency, free mobility within and belonging to the nation is what justifies restraining her mobility and securing internal borders. *Laïcité* as I have described it, as well as the way its dominant interpretation have become rooted in white French minds, is a technology for enforcing this internal border.

La Femme “Libérée” in the Service of White Patriarchal Supremacy

Tévanian (*Dévoilements*) as well as others such as Nacira Guénif-Souillamas and Eric Macé in *Les féministes et le garçon arabe* have pointed out the sheer hypocrisy and contradictions underlying the anti-veil laws and every white feminist argument in their favor. Constructing an oppressed Muslim woman is essential to the establishment of a white French feminism whose lofty goal is to liberate her. In *Les féministes et le garçon arabe*, Guénif-

Souillamas and Macé examine what they call a “nouveau féminisme républicain, défenseur de l’intégration et de l’égalité au moyen de l’exclusion des plus subalternes” (10-11). This, for me, is an example of the ways in which white patriarchy appropriates and corrupts marginalized movements and concepts in order to maintain power.

Indeed, as I’ve explained, the laws against the veil rely on a very specific understanding of *laïcité*, one that serves a very particular vision of French identity. It also relies on enlisting feminist movements to its cause by offering conditional and limited inclusion in the system. One of the main arguments for the laws is rooted in white feminism: the notion that French women are liberated, that is, free to practice “la féminité du rouge à lèvres et des talons hauts,” (12) in the words of Guénif-Souillamas and Macé. Conservative white feminists like Badinter as well as many on the left joined the ranks of the fight against the Muslims veils. In particular, the women from *Ni Putes Ni Soumises*⁸³ became virulent supporters of the laws. Guénif-Souillamas and Macé describe the white patriarchal nation’s strategy of dividing and conquering cisgender women:

Les femmes arabes de NPNS incarnent idéalement les supplétifs zélés de la modernité et de ses valeurs. Comme pour tous les supplétifs, leurs parrains et marraines se sont bien gardés de leur préciser que cette distinction méritocratique, cette délégation de pouvoir républicanise, se paie au prix fort d'une assignation à la défense et illustration de la féminité, nature inaltérable et éternellement désirable. En échange de cette sous-traitance, est offerte à ces supplétifs une protection contre leurs agresseurs masculins

⁸³ *Ni putes ni soumises (NPNS)* is a publicly recognized, publicly funded feminist organization founded in 2002 by Fadela Amara. Of note, NPNS was originally created to protest against domestic violence and gang rapes in France’s poor, predominantly Muslim *banlieues*.

[...] Non seulement cet ordre des choses ne prétend pas dissoudre la hiérarchie entre les sexes, mais il instaure une hiérarchie entre femmes, celles qui savent et celles qui bientôt seront guidées pour sortir de la caverne (13-14).

This notion of knowledge is essential to the maintenance of white supremacy, as discussed in my chapter on education. It is not only that white women and the subalterns who have joined their ranks are fighting for the patriarchy in return for partial inclusion, it is that they claim access to an enlightened way of being a woman that is better because it is constructed as more modern, more free. Of course, as this quote suggests, the concept of freedom at play here is very limited since it is a freedom granted by white heteronormative patriarchy and for white heteronormative patriarchy, on conditions of allegiance to an understanding of the nation that also serves this very patriarchy⁸⁴.

I contend that these white feminists and others who have internalized white supremacy are in fact supporting their own subjugation and objectification within the French patriarchal system. Indeed, the imperative for Muslim women in Algeria to remove their veil during French occupation was also sexually motivated and sexually objectifying. One of the propaganda posters used for this purpose carried the following invitation:

⁸⁴ I follow Alison Jaggar's understanding of patriarchy as a system oppressing women by alienating them from their bodies (1983). I also follow Audre Lorde's understanding of patriarchy as an intersectional system of oppression connected to other systems of oppression such as capitalism and racism (1979). Additionally, I agree with bell hooks that patriarchy is an ideological system in which men claim dominance and superiority to women that can be believed and acted upon by either men or women (2004).

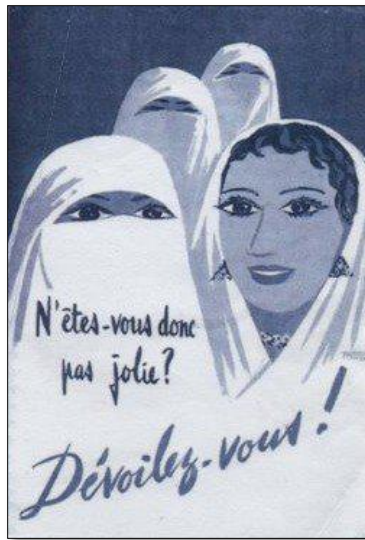


Fig. 2. Propaganda poster during the French occupation of Algeria.

The slogan is inscribed in a patriarchal view of women in which women exist for the pleasure of men, therefore suggesting that if they are hiding their bodies (from men) it means that they must be ugly. At the core of the unveiling of Muslim women, then and now, is a patriarchal act of power. It also puts in perspective the French (white) woman liberation movement, in which she is 'freed' from concealing garments but also 'free' to be the object of the male gaze. When choice of veiling or unveiling one's body is taken away and becomes an imperative, it is no longer freedom but a manifestation of the patriarchal system, which is ultimately oppressive to everyone but most harmful to women of color. Choosing to ally themselves with white men to support the anti-veil laws, these feminists are simply supporting their own oppression and enforcing their own act of power and violence on Muslim women.

Furthermore Scott discusses the "deeply erotic overtones" (55) of the imperial project. She explains how Muslim women were perceived as mysterious and fascinating, the objects of many colonial fantasies in which they were often depicted as prostitutes. More importantly, she writes about the sexual violence perpetrated on Muslim women:

The pleasures and dangers of imperial domination and sexual domination were conflated [...] and when marauding troops defeated native resisters, it is not hard to see why they often celebrated their victory by raping village women. Cartoons from the period illustrate this theme: native women are carried off by victorious French soldiers as "the spoils of victory" (55).

The unveiling of Muslim women was a colonial practice, an act of power that needs to be historicized in order to consider the violent implications for a group of white men to demand a woman of color take her clothes off on a beach in France, in 2016. It was never about freeing these women from the often-real confinement and oppression they suffered within their own culture. Rather, it was about satisfying sexual curiosity, instrumentalizing women's bodies to enforce colonial rule and assert French superiority.

The Limits of Diversity and State Antiracism

Laïcité as practiced by the French government today is masquerading in speeches and in educational material as a kind of state antiracism, tightly connected to the notion of progress in French minds. Indeed, as I've explained, the laws passed to prohibit certain configurations of the Muslim veils in public spaces have been promoted as fighting for gender equality and against the oppression of Muslim women. To be more specific, laws against the veil are presented as laws against a (Muslim) culture perceived as oppressive and backwards and therefore forcing the French state's understanding of equality on Muslim women. Since 2013, there is now a Charte de la Laïcité à l'École⁸⁵ to be displayed in every school, and with which

⁸⁵ The full text can be found here: <http://www.education.gouv.fr/cid73666/charte-de-la-laicite-a-l-ecole.html>.

parents and students tacitly comply upon entering the school grounds. The *charte* was strategically presented by a 'diverse' group of supporters comprised, notably, of then minister of women's rights, Najat Vallaud-Belkacem; Jean-Louis Bianco the president of the Observatoire de la *laïcité* and Lilian Thuram, president of Education contre le racisme. This *charte* is in addition to a number of pedagogical videos that can be found on government websites such as the Education Ministry website, for example, propagating the dominant understanding of *laïcité*. The overall argument is that the implementation of *laïcité* guarantees peaceful and egalitarian cohabitation, what France calls *le vivre-ensemble*.

But what exactly does equality mean in France? In *La mécanique raciste*, Tévanian explains that equality is conflated with sameness, while equality and difference are perceived as contradictory. In France, difference is a term connected to a myriad other ones such as *différentialisme* and *communautarisme* that have become sticky with all kinds of negative feelings like fear and hate. Indeed, on the one hand the idea is that "l'égalité exige qu'il n'y ait pas de différence entre les individus" (23-25), but on the other hand, when minoritized communities affirm their difference, they are perceived as threats because they seem to be prioritizing a kind of solidarity to a part of their identity that the nation does not recognize.

The issue, Tévanian explains, is that there are different types of equality but that none of them precludes one from thinking and believing differently from others: equality of rights, which merely states that all benefit from the right to be different without being treated differently in the eyes of the law; socio-economic equality, which supposedly guarantees the same access to resources to everyone without necessarily believing/thinking the same way and the same things. Unfortunately, because equality is practiced as sameness in France, and

because the standard for that sameness is white, European and Christian, difference is a term used only to refer to those who don't meet that standard. Tévanian writes that "en définitive, on ne dira même pas "le Noir est différent du Blanc" mais: "le Noir est différent" tout court" (39). This fundamental detail, which is not merely a word game, explains the way difference is understood as negative, dangerous and threatening.

From this, I contend that one of the fundamental issues underlying the *laïcité* debates is a refusal by white people to be named as such, to be one of the many differences that compose French society. In order not to be named, they have to maintain the story that we are not different; Muslim women are different, and they are bringing this difference into the public space instead of keeping it private. White people don't have to keep anything private, since what and who they are is not different but same; it is humanity incarnate. Tévanian describes this prohibition of difference as something that translates into

une inégalité des droits entre celui qui se conforme aux normes majoritaires, et qui jouit de ce fait du droit d'exprimer ostensiblement son identité, et celui ou celle qui s'en écarte, et qui pour ce sacrilège, se retrouve privé(e) du droit à l'expression, condamné(e) à la discrétion et aux efforts d'intégration (29-30).

In other words, you can be different, but not too much and not in public. You can practice your religion and express it as part of your identity, but not in public. Tévanian discusses this idea of being named in a 'colorblind' society, which, I argue, is one of the core reasons why Muslim women can only be seen as threats. He writes:

Les Noir(e)s ou les Arabes sont [...] nommé(e) et défini(e)s par leur différence – on les dit par exemple "issu(e)s de la diversité" – sans que l'autre terme de ladite différence ne

soit explicité: ce n'est pas le Blanc qui est différent du Noir mais le Noir qui est différent du Blanc! Lequel Blanc ne saurait être qualifié de blanc – ni d'”issu de la diversité” ce qu'il est pourtant lui aussi – **puisqu'il serait alors particularisé et de ce fait déchu de sa place d'étalon de l'humanité totale et accomplie.** (38)

By imposing their idea of equality and *laïcité* on Muslims, white French people not only maintain control and exercise power by limiting their movements – both physical and spiritual – they guarantee the survival of their identity, which is first and foremost a national identity. Overtime, this identity has been constructed at the only worthy identity, which makes any kind of deviation or difference a threat to its very existence.

The flip side of understanding equality in that way means that national discourse's use of terms such as diversity - which *laïcité* as a principle is supposed to protect at least at the religious level – is a very controlled, surface-like type of use. I insist on the term 'use' because ultimately diversity in white patriarchal discourse is but a technology of white supremacy. In France, the term is more often used in reference to *la parité* (France's term for gender equality) rather than ethnicity. France doesn't conceive of itself as a multicultural country like the US for example, so when talking about unifying society, it prefers terms such as *le vivre-ensemble*, which has become very popular since the early 2000's, rather than '*diversité*'⁸⁶. France's relationship to the term diversity is fraught since any kind of affirmative action is utterly

⁸⁶ However, the French tend to favor other terms depending on the idea they wish to convey. For example *issu de l'immigration* is used generally to talk about young people of color living in the banlieues.

inapplicable and perceived negatively because the constitution declares all people equal under the law.⁸⁷

This explains why diversity translates into *vivre-ensemble* in political speeches. The term, rather vague, can be best understood by looking at the ministry of culture's initiative, "Mission vivre-ensemble." Since 2004, a number of institutions such as museums across the country work together to: "aller à la rencontre des publics peu familiers des institutions culturelles et ainsi lutter contre les discriminations dans le domaine de la culture." The idea is to democratize access to culture, that is, to (mostly) white male French knowledge and art production as I've described it in my chapter on epistemic racism. In theory, and maybe in practice, it is a needed initiative, but what does it say about the meaning of *vivre-ensemble*? It is not insignificant that this initiative is called "Mission vivre ensemble." *Vivre-ensemble*, then, means being fluent in the language of power and being educated in loving France, its *patrimoine*, art, culture, etc. The idea is that if we give marginalized population access to this knowledge, if we enlighten them, we will all live together better. This way of thinking is an unfortunate legacy of France's colonial civilizing mission. It is also important to note that this mission comes from a government entity and that it was framed as a civic mission whose goal was to fight racism. In his letter to the president in 2006, then Minister of Culture Jean-François Hébert wrote:

Le Ministère de la culture et de la communication, par la richesse et la diversité de ses réseaux de diffusion et son action en faveur de la création, a un rôle particulier à jouer pour lutter contre ce phénomène et contribuer, au sein de notre société, à la volonté de

⁸⁷ It is worth noting that this dislike is apparent in the very term used to describe affirmative action in France: *discrimination positive*.

tous nos concitoyens, quelle que soit leur origine sociale, culturelle ou religieuse, de vivre ensemble dans le respect de la diversité et du partage.

No matter how commendable the initiative, for the most part it is in line with the civilizing and enlightening mission France has seen as its purpose on earth for centuries now. The fact that such an initiative also cohabitates with the 2010 law prohibiting facial covering in public belies its apparent benevolence.

In 2009-2010, the Assemblée Nationale conducted a *mission d'information* sur la pratique du port du voile intégral sur le territoire national⁸⁸. They auditioned more than 200 people from ministers to journalists to scholars and came to the conclusion that “il est nécessaire de convaincre, d'éduquer, de protéger, qu'il importe de conforter les agents publics, dans un seul but : faire disparaître cette pratique [the niqab and burqa] contraire à nos valeurs républicaines.” It is important to note that not a single woman wearing the niqab or the burqa⁸⁹ was invited to speak and give her opinion on potential legislation regarding their dress. It may have been difficult to achieve given that, depending on who you ask⁹⁰, less than 400 women in France actually wear a full body veil. In light of this, the law that came out of this report seems to be a symbolic gesture, albeit with material consequences in the form of a fine for the women involved. This is a declaration, enshrined in a law, that Muslim women are to be ostracized from society and through their bodies the whole of Islam, which is construed as disrupting French social harmony and homogeneity. The law reinforced the negative connotations/emotions

⁸⁸ The mission's report can be found here: http://www.assemblee-nationale.fr/13/dossiers/voile_integral.asp.

⁸⁹ These garments are conflated in the French public imagination, but they are different and have different meanings. The niqab leaves the eyes visible, whereas the burqa covers them behind a mesh.

⁹⁰ In July 2009, *Le Monde* published a report counting less than 400 women wearing a full body veil in France. In September 2009, *Le Figaro* published a report by the *Sous-direction de l'information générale* stating that the number would be closer to 2000 (Gabizon).

already attached to the veils – which were already exacerbated following the first law of 2004 – and further stigmatized Muslim women. The irony of this law is that its rejection of these women from the French *vivre-ensemble* is rooted in the argument that they are the ones refusing to participate in the *vivre-ensemble*⁹¹.

Indeed, the full body veil was attacked and construed by proponents of the law as being a garment actively signaling the wearer's refusal of this *vivre-ensemble*. This gives insight into another aspect of the *vivre-ensemble*, which is that it is not universal, as it purports to be, but rather a theory for legislating certain bodies. Muslim women bodies are to be corrected if they want to be included. This law is one of the ways French society produces national identities via the enforcing of internal boundaries. I contend that in this case, it is doing so by violating its own Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which declares that everyone has the right of freedom of movement within their state (article 13). *Vivre-ensemble* as a theory for living together is used as a weapon to deny national recognition (article 15) to Muslim women, that is, to recognize that they are French, and to create/encourage white solidarity.

White Solidarity and the Construction of the Muslim Terrorist

Predatory Identities

Vivre-ensemble in all our differences has limits, evidently, and the best way to enforce this idea is to construct a threat. Indeed, public safety was one of the core arguments

⁹¹ In "Port du hijab et défaut d'assimilation," Hajjat explains how the veil is construed as an obstacle to French citizenship: " il pose à la fois la question de la reproduction de l'*ethos* national, celle du contrôle du corps des femmes et celle de la loyauté. Au-delà du supposé « choc des civilisations » et de l'incompatibilité de l'« islam » avec la « république », l'enjeu principal est celui du maintien du mythe de l'homogénéité nationale, de la volonté étatique de contrôler les corps des femmes, et de la reconnaissance de l'autorité de l'État. C'est la convergence de ces trois modalités des relations de pouvoir qui font du port du *hijab* un cas problématique pour l'acquisition de la nationalité française" (453).

underlying the 2010 law prohibiting full body covering in public⁹². And it was passed despite the fact that a very small number of women in France wear a full body veil. Why is that? In *Fear of Small Numbers, An Essay on the Geography of Anger*, Arjun Appadurai writes that white patriarchal societies are ruled by the fear of small numbers. These kinds of societies, which are also almost always majorities, have most often constructed what he calls “predatory identities”:

I define as predatory those identities whose social construction and mobilization require the extinction of other proximate social categories, defined as threats to the very existence of some group, defined as a *we*. Predatory identities emerge, periodically, out of pairs of identities, sometimes sets that are larger than two and have long histories of close contact, mixture, and some degree of mutual stereotyping. [...] One of these pairs or sets of identities often turns predatory by mobilizing an understanding of itself as a threatened majority (74).

France’s national identity construction, which began several hundred years ago with the first colonial invasions, has continued to forge itself in reaction to the minorities that live in France and claim national belonging. The way *laïcité* has been instrumentalized to prey on Muslim citizens and residents is a clear example of how, among other things, French national identity has turned predatory. I would add to Appadurai’s analysis that predatory identities across the world are more often than not national identities; that is, identities whose very existence depends on erecting boundaries and defenses. Appadurai goes on to describe the predatory identity as one that

⁹² Among other arguments: women wearing a full body veil could be hiding weapons or be a terrorist pretending to be a woman.

successfully mobilize[s] [...] the *anxiety of incompleteness* (as minorities represent the inability of majorities to unite a nation as a single whole, fear and violence develop against the source of that incompleteness) [...] Incompleteness, in this sense, is not only about elective control or practical sovereignty but more importantly about purity and its relationship to identity (75).

In this section, I look at what and who threatens national identity, but I also examine how this threat is a direct result of identities becoming predatory in the first place.

Why are small numbers scary? According to Appadurai, “Small numbers introduce the intrusion of the private into the public sphere [...] They harbor the potential for secrecy and privacy, both anathema to the ideas of publicity and transparency that are vital to liberal ideas of rational communication and open deliberation” (81). The full body veil is a threat because it creates uncertainty in a neoliberal society. Is it a woman under this veil? Or a suicide bomber? Of course, the uncertainty emerges from the constellation of stories that have been told and the negative stereotypes that have been perpetuated over time, not necessarily from actual people in France disguising themselves as Muslim women and blowing up public places. Nonetheless, it was taken extremely seriously and warranted a law prohibiting such dress.

The (‘Islamic’) terrorist is the ultimate small number that predatory identities fear, Appadurai explains, because it is a corruption of the liberal idea of the individual; the terrorist is one and at the same time it represents the senseless mob. I argue that the Islamic terrorist is the construct and product of those predatory identities. As I have mentioned above, women wearing the hijab or the niqab were seen as victims but also as persecutors, in a twist that

portrayed them as potential attackers of the Republic. Tévanian writes about the early 2000s debates:

On a pu ainsi lire, en ‘une’ du *Nouvel Observateur* le 20 novembre 2003, le titre suivant: ‘Pourquoi une loi contre l’intégrisme.’ Au mépris [...] de toutes enquêtes sociologiques, plusieurs grands éditorialistes ont assimilé les collégiennes et lycéennes portant le foulard à des militantes ‘intégristes’, travaillant pour des groupes organisés engagés dans une guerre totale contre ‘la République’” (*Le voile*, 101)

This portrayal of the Muslim body as a *corps furieux* to use Tévanian’s terminology, is crucial to essentializing Muslims as a group that threatens national identity. *Laïcité* is a technology of systemic racism in which the Muslim body is monstrous and needs to be quarantined, but it is also a body that needs to be corrected (Puar and Rai, “Monster, Terrorist, Fag” 121⁹³). *Laïcité* is used to ‘correct’ those bodies as a kind of prevention or antidote (a counterterrorism) against the emergence of the monster aka terrorist, which is a physical threat to bodies within the nation.

On January 7 2015, two French men attacked Charlie Hebdo’s headquarters and killed 12 people in retaliation of Charlie Hebdo’s many satirical portraits of the prophet Mohammed.

⁹³ Through the lens of gender and sexuality, Jasbir Puar and Amit Rai in “Monster, Terrorist, Fag: The War on Terrorism and the Production of Docile Patriots” offer an incisive critique of the war on terrorism and the ways in which it explores and transforms old technologies (such as white supremacy and nationalism) for managing non-conforming bodies.



3. Charlie Hebdo #1011 11/2011



4. Charlie Hebdo #1012 11/2011



5. Charlie Hebdo #1163. 10/2014

Several attacks followed in Ile-de-France, up until the November 13 2015 coordinated terrorist attacks that killed at least 130 people in Paris. It seems that the nation's preemptive interdictions and attacks on Muslims did nothing to maintain its safety. Nonetheless, the government responded to the attacks by strengthening frontiers and increasing civic teaching, which, as I have argued in the previous chapter, directly targets Muslims and perceived Muslim children. The New York Times reported that, after January 2015:

Officials in France announced new measures [...] aimed at **reinforcing secular values** at French schools, after the terrorist attacks in and around Paris exposed serious cultural rifts between children in heavily immigrant communities and others in classrooms throughout the country. Teachers are to receive new training, students would be exposed more deeply to civics and morals lessons, and classroom activities would include the singing of 'La Marseillaise'" (De la Beaume).

In other words, France responded to the attacks by reaffirming the physical boundaries of the nation to prevent the outside from coming in, and by reinforcing the boundaries of French identity (what counts and doesn't count as French) at the domestic level.

The insider/outsider tension at the core of such measures is very apparent in Hollande's presidential address after the November attacks in Paris. To begin with, he declared: "Ma volonté est de mettre toute la puissance de l'Etat au service de **la protection** de nos concitoyens [...] nous ne sommes pas engagés dans une guerre de civilisation, parce que ces **assassins** n'en représentent aucune." He then talked about "**se protéger**, pour éviter que viennent sur notre territoire comme ce fut le cas vendredi des **combattants étrangers** pour mener des **actes terroristes**." But he also concedes: "[...] Nous le savons, et c'est cruel que de le dire, ce sont des Français qui ont tué vendredi d'autres Français. Il y a, vivant sur **notre sol**, des individus qui, de la **délinquance** passent à la **radicalisation** puis à la **criminalité terroriste**."

Hollande's speech faithfully picked up the same story of the monster/terrorist (them) and the endangered, innocent nation in need of protection (us). It is a story in which people of color (in this case, (perceived) Muslims) are always objects but never subjects of the media and political discourse. It is also a story that conflates juvenile delinquency with terrorism. On the one hand, this conflation undermines the role of these youths' socio-economic situations and lived experience (unemployment, poverty, racism and police brutality) in their acts of violence, and therefore it also undermines the legitimacy of the reasons for this violence. On the other hand, this conflation conveniently dehumanizes these young men so as to better feed the fear that will sanction further state violence. Declaring that the men who perpetrated the attack belong to no civilization and referring to foreign fighters while in the same breath admitting that these men are French, Hollande emphasized a kind of French unity and solidarity that excludes, following a territorial logic, parts of the country that are perceived as *islamisées* such as *les banlieues*.

On Corrupted Solidarity: "Je suis Charlie"

One of the powers of the white nationalist discourse is to frame criminal attacks by perceived or actual Muslims as attacks on the founding principles of the nation. Then president François Hollande's tweet after the Charlie Hebdo attacks perfectly illustrates this paradigm: "Aucun acte barbare ne saura jamais éteindre la **liberté de la presse**. Nous sommes un pays uni qui saura réagir et faire bloc." In a public address he declares: "La Nation a été mise à l'épreuve, elle a même été frappée au cœur, c'est-à-dire dans ses principes fondamentaux : **la liberté d'expression** et la **liberté de conscience**. Elle a été frappée dans ses institutions : la police a été visée en tant que telle." The attacks were indeed a response to a series of cartoons started in 2006, mocking Islam and the prophet Muhammad. With the framing of the event as an attack on three principles of *laïcité*, the president completely obfuscates the historical weaponization of these principles to violently include, exclude and stigmatize marginalized others. It precludes any kind of critique of the way Charlie Hebdo practices and uses its right to free speech.

Hiding state sanctioned violence and masquerading it as love of the nation perpetuates the dangerous Muslim backlash story—the story that Muslims cannot adapt to the country's values of free speech and gender equality. Any kind of protest coming from a member of the Muslim community can therefore only be perceived as disproportionate. Obviously, I am not suggesting that killing 12 people for drawing disrespectful and racist cartoons is a justified act of protest or retaliation. What I am suggesting is that these attacks and the way they are framed immediately obliterate the slow and steady violence of state sanctioned discrimination that's been oppressing Muslims in France for decades, as well as all the other ways in which Muslims

in France have been fighting peacefully for their rights⁹⁴. The solidarity the state creates is one that relies on erasing these stories that are a threat to current social forms and institutions.

No slogan better embodies this kind of corrupted solidarity than “Je suis Charlie”, the slogan and logo created by Joachim Roncin and under which supporters of freedom of speech and freedom of press rallied after the attacks of 2015. At first glance, the way the slogan was taken up is a prodigious international show of support to the victims of the attacks and to the press, which was perceived as being attacked as a whole. Millions of people across the globe rallied on public places in the name of this small satirical weekly magazine that, before the killings of its reporters, nobody outside of France knew about. It is important to note that the two men who perpetrated the attacks did not claim to target all free speech and the freedom of the press. They claimed retaliation against Charlie Hebdo specifically, for publishing and continuing to publish caricatures of the prophet Muhammad⁹⁵. The magazine’s official position for continuing to draw satirical cartoons of the Prophet was that it made fun of everyone – in particular powerful figures– every week.

While that may be true, this comment is emblematic of the way the western world (and the “je suis Charlie” meme) function. It assumes, in all of its glorious whiteness, that everyone being equal, making fun of the Pope is the same as making fun of the Prophet. Furthermore, it wrongly assumes that satirical representations of Islam will be received the same way and carry the same weight as satirical representations of Christian religions. In a society already saturated with sensationalist and stigmatizing stories about Muslims, such an assumption is dishonest and

⁹⁴ I am referring, for example, to the CCIF (Collectif contre l’islamophobie en France).

⁹⁵ Indeed, the magazine’s controversial drawings have been denounced for a solid decade by The Grand Mosque of Paris, the Muslim World League and the Union of French Islamic Organisations (UOIF) who sued the publication, stating that associating Muslims to terrorists was, indeed, racist. They lost the suit. The magazine’s headquarters in Paris was set on fire in 2011, among other incidents.

irresponsible. Saying “Je suis Charlie” was a simple way of affirming that, regardless of what Charlie Hebdo really did/does with the freedom of speech and press granted by its country, we were going to fight for their right to do it.

Saying “je suis Charlie” was a simple way of perpetuating the story of an imaginary Muslim community that wants to destroy the Republic and its secular principles. “Je suis Charlie” is a blanket logo that erases the specifics of the situation, glorifies an oft racist magazine⁹⁶, and condones comparing Muslims to terrorists. Evidently, not everyone is equal. Poking fun at and stereotyping a group that is already discriminated against is not the same as poking fun at those in power (white, Christians, heterosexual, etc.). Charlie Hebdo often practices the journalistic equivalent of joking about rape by making fun of the victims instead of the abusers.

Conclusion: *Laïcité*, France’s Brand of Islamophobia

“Je suis Charlie” is, in short, a great example of white people⁹⁷ solidarity and of the kind of ‘slacktivism’ such a superficial understanding of *laïcité* can conjure. I understand slacktivism as a superficial activism that takes the form of ‘feel-good’ measures limited to, generally, signing online petitions or changing one’s profile picture to show solidarity with a cause without needing to actually do anything about it. Slacktivism is a way for white people to look progressive without having to look too closely to their own privilege, and in the end it is a way to validate it. The way *laïcité* is defended through “Je suis Charlie” is in line with the way it is

⁹⁶ Christiane Taubira, France’s black minister of justice in 2013 was depicted as a monkey in Charlie Hebdo #1115 of 10/2013. The drawing, which also showed the logo of the Front National (a French extreme right wing party), was supposedly making fun of the Front National.

⁹⁷ I understand ‘white people’ in a broad sense as including people socially perceived as white but also people who have internalized white supremacy, whether they are perceived as white or not.

advertised by the state: as a *vivre-ensemble* in the respect of 'diversity'. This discourse conceals the history of oppression and violence as well as the labor of real activists⁹⁸ fighting for a just and ethical conception and practice of *laïcité*.

In a sense, *laïcité* is a prop, like "Je suis Charlie" to consolidate white solidarity within and of the French nation. *Laïcité* is therefore also an enforced practice, a forced kind of solidarity. As Dominique Moïsi, a French political scientist, puts it, "Laïcité has become the first religion of the Republic" (cited in the New York Times). After the Charlie Hebdo attacks, President François Hollande affirmed that *laïcité* was "non-negotiable," a "guarantee" against internal and external threats. France has also declared December 9 (the date of the 1905 law) a "Day of Laïcité" and introduced a new edict reinforcing the teaching of *laïcité* in public schools. This edict came about after many children refused to participate in a national minute of silence for the Charlie Hebdo victims, who they believe insulted the Prophet Muhammad. In this context, you cannot claim yourself French and refuse to say "Je suis Charlie."

Laïcité, practiced as what Achille Mbembe calls "radical equality" ("Figures of Multiplicity," 58) is a veil to conceal islamophobia. In fact, *laïcité* has had, in various shapes, its own apparatus for constructing and managing what the French call *le problème musulman*: the Haut Conseil d'Intégration (HCI) starting in 2003, the Stasi Commission, the Observatoire de la laïcité, the Charte de la laïcité, etc. In *Islamophobie*, Hajjat and Mohammed discuss the role of the HCI as a so-called 'neutral'⁹⁹ space for producing the Republic's ideology (144). The HCI was founded in 1989. Up until the early 2000s, it advised an implementation of *laïcité* that did not

⁹⁸ I am referring to scholars Tévanian, Macé, Guénif-Souillamas but also to Christine Delphy (2008); the writers on *Les mots sont importants*; Houria Bouteldja (2010, 2011) among others. I am also referring to anticolonial, antiracist organizations such as I have listed in my first section.

⁹⁹ It is considered neutral because it is a multi-partisan space, not because it is actually neutral.

prohibit the headscarf in schools. However, Hajjat and Mohammed explain that an ideological shift took place, which coincides with the Stasi Commission and Baroin's report "Pour une nouvelle laïcité" (144). The Stasi Commission produced a report pointing out what it considered failures to comply with the secular principles of the Republic such as wearing the headscarf in school or requests for women-only pool times. It also advised, in particular, the creation of the Charte de la laïcité and the prohibition of visible religious signs in school. After 2003, the HCI became an institution of containment of the 'Muslim problem'. While its (new) members at that point argued they were merely reacting to societal changes in reconfiguring their understanding of *laïcité*¹⁰⁰, I contend that this reconfiguration is institutionalizing the dominant islamophobic discourse of the media and politics and therefore institutionalizing the stigmatization and oppression of Muslims. The institutionalization of the discourse of islamophobia into codes, charts and policies – what Hajjat and Mohammed call a "champ de la laïcité" (147) – reinforces the power and self-righteousness of white France to defend and protect principles over people (of color), and emphasizes the conditional nature of French equality.

To conclude, it is important to mention that the institutionalization of islamophobia is also a capitalist project in the sense that it legitimizes the existence of an intellectual field, an expertise in the matter of the 'Muslim threat,' which is a lucrative business to those engaged in it. As I have discussed, the many negative constructions of the Muslim as object of scrutiny by

¹⁰⁰ In an article for *Le Monde*, member of the Stasi Commission Alain Touraine explains that "la France est devenue un pays communautariste. Il n'est pas juste de dire que j'ai changé d'avis, c'est profondément la France qui a changé: dans les lycées, on est juif ou on est arabe, on ne s'identifie plus par sa classe sociale ni même par les vêtements de marque les parents ont pu vous payer, mais par la religion."

the media are strategies for increasing ratings and sales¹⁰¹ and fodder for so-called intellectual neo-orientalist publications inventing the so-called *Islamisation* of France¹⁰². It also popularizes movies and books portraying Muslim women oppressed by Muslim men, such as *Brûlée vive* (2004), *Le prix du silence* (2007), *La révolte d'Aïcha* (2009), *Le voile de la douleur* (2013), and *Mon père m'a vendue* (2015) among others. I am not suggesting that the stories told by some of these writers are not worth reading. Some of them have been written as testimonies of their own lived experience. Rather, I am suggesting that their popularity contributes to the stigmatization of Muslims, whose lived experiences are directly affected by the ubiquity of these stories, often told without context and to people whose understanding of Islam is based on neo-orientalist knowledge, if it exists at all. France's capitalist system contributes to making islamophobia ordinary and normal.

¹⁰¹ Hajjat and Mohammed make a non-exhaustive list of sensationalist newspaper titles engaging in this stigmatizing discourse on pp. 118-119.

¹⁰² See for example Joachim Véliocas (2006); François de Lochner (2017).

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Appendix

Fig. 1. AP Press. "Muslim Woman Wearing French Flag as Veil." *Orient XXI*, 2004, Muslim woman wearing French flag as veil.

Fig. 2. French Army. "N'êtes-Vous Donc Pas Jolie? Dévoilez-Vous!" *Tumblr*, 18 Mar. 2013, sanstransition.tumblr.com/post/46023705055/n%C3%A4tes-vous-donc-pas-jolie-d%C3%A9voilez-vous.

Fig. 3. Charlie Hebdo. "Charia Hebdo." *Charlie Hebdo*, Nov. 2011, charliehebdo.fr.

Fig. 4. Charlie Hebdo. "L'amour plus Fort Que La Haine." *Charlie Hebdo*, Nov. 2011, charliehebdo.fr.

Fig. 5. Charlie Hebdo. "Si Mahomet Revenait." *Charlie Hebdo*, Oct. 2014, charliehebdo.fr.

4. White Stories about Black People On Representation and State Antiracism in France

“Amazones félines exotique un parti pris esthétique et politique corps souples athlétiques
luisants galbés jamais vu au cinéma film de banlieue”

This series of words listed in no particular order are used to describe the film *Bande de filles* (2014) in positive reviews of the movie in France. The cast of the film is entirely black, and mostly female. The movie was made by Céline Sciamma, a white woman director trained at France’s prestigious film school, la Fémis. Critics overwhelmingly praised the movie for making a movie never made before precisely because the entire cast is black, but in interviews Sciamma rejected the idea that her film was about what it’s like to be a young black French girl living in France’s marginalized *banlieues*. She said

Girlhood is not about what it’s like to be a black girl, it’s about what it’s like to be a girl...
I’m making this universal, and I decide that my character, who represents the youth of today for me, can be black... I would not say also it’s the typical banlieue, you know, we aren’t talking about religion in the film, **its not about race**¹⁰³, its not about struggling with racism (Blay).

Sciamma’s own commentary of her movie throughout interviews reveals a vision of belonging and being very much aligned with French republican universalism and colorblindness. In her words, one can hear her confuse (a desire for) a world in which representing a French woman as black is unremarkable, with the real world in which French women are, in fact, systematically represented as white. In this section I am going to discuss the problematic reality of putting colorblindness in practice in a profoundly racialized society, as Sciamma does in her movie.

¹⁰³ My emphases in bold throughout.

I have chosen this movie, as well as popular comedy *Intouchables* (2011) in order to question the way people of color are represented by white people in France, precisely because both films were critically acclaimed—*Bande de filles* for being innovative with an all-black casting, and *Intouchables* for being a heartwarming friendship across difference. Each of them has been promoted and received as transcending race. While as a white woman socialized in French society I have laughed heartily at every single bout of comedy in *Intouchables* and found Sciamma's movie beautiful and incredibly well filmed, I argue here that they both contribute to France's colorblind ideology and enforce its brand of white patriarchal supremacy, which oppresses marginalized communities in France. I understand and acknowledge that there are hierarchies of oppression, but I believe it is necessary to look at these films alongside the more violent oppression I discuss in my other sections. These seemingly innocuous films also contribute to the oppression of people of color. Therefore, their societal effects must be discussed in order to truly dismantle white patriarchal supremacy.

In this section, I am interested in the tensions between representation, recognition and state antiracism. What does the praise for these films say about the representation of people of color in French society? What does the fact that Sciamma's film is seen as innovative and antiracist in the ways it represents people of color say about their place in society? How much power do whites have over shaping people of color's place in society via their representation in the arts and the media? How lucrative is diversity and in what ways is it capitalized on in France? In broaching these questions, I am interested in the tension between diversity (as a

concept appropriated by neoliberalism) and communautarisme¹⁰⁴, which is seen as a threat to national unity in France.

It is 100% about Race

Intouchables (2011)

When *Intouchables* came out in 2011, no one in France (including the film directors Toledano and Nakache) talked about the racial dimension of the film. Whether they loved or hated the movie, critics focused on the socio-economic differences between Driss and Philippe and carefully avoided the fact that their differences are more than socio-economic and that the racial dimension of the film is absolutely meaningful. Those who loved the film praised how artfully it brought together these two men from opposite social classes. According to film critic Jacques Mandelbaum,

le film file une métaphore sociale généreuse, qui montre tout l'intérêt de l'association entre la Vieille France paralysée sur ses privilèges et la force vitale de la jeunesse issue de l'immigration. Là encore, une simple règle de calcul impose son évidence : la pérennité du corps social passera par l'exemple que lui fournissent Philippe et Driss, qui s'aident mutuellement à survivre dans le souverain mépris de l'égoïsme et de la connerie environnante.

For Mandelbaum, Driss and Philippe are on equal footing, “helping each other to survive.” One may see in *Intouchables* the epitome of the republican egalitarian dream only if one ignores the racial dimension of the film. As for those who hated the film, such as *Les Inrockuptibles* writer

¹⁰⁴ Please see the first section for a full definition and discussion of the term.

Jean-Marc Lalanne, the lack of nuance in portraying the friendship between these two men of drastically opposed socio-economic backgrounds is unforgivable. He writes:

L'homme riche qui avait perdu goût à la vie la voit enchantée par cet ange gardien facétieux [Driss], porteur de cette compréhension des vraies valeurs de la vie que les démagogues attribuent au peuple. [...] Et si les pratiques culturelles de la classe dominante sont raillées (l'opéra c'est chiant, la peinture contemporaine quel foutage de gueule), les signes matériels de richesse (grosse voiture, avion privé) sont considérés avec la plus grande bienveillance.

While noting that Sy is cast into the role of the nanny, which is a stereotypically black role I will discuss later, Lalanne is more bothered by the capitalist undertones of the movie, which makes fun of stilted, rich old France but casts a benevolent gaze upon material signs of wealth such as Philippe's fancy car.

Philippe's disability is the only social stigma, as it ignores the fact of Driss' blackness and how it affects his status in French society. In his review of the film, R.S. remarks that Philippe's disability is useful to humanize him but it is also made palatable by Driss' comedic presence. Interestingly, R.S. also notes that the health minister saw the movie as great publicity to raise awareness about issues of disability. André Videau in his review also remarks on the film's 'disability-positive' vibe, referring to the scene when Driss helps Philippe finding a way around his handicap in matters of sexual pleasure. In *Le Nouvel Obs*, Gérard Masson confirms the commercial virtues of the film in raising awareness regarding disability: "Ce film est un allié important pour le handisport. Il montre le handicap sans le stigmatiser, sous un angle positif et non misérabiliste ou fataliste." Delphine de Mallevo in *Le Figaro* writes that *Intouchables* would

be responsible for changing French people's perception of disabilities. Even though French society is quite behind when it comes to including differently abled bodies¹⁰⁵, these articles are only a sample of the articles that were written about *Intouchables'* forward thinking treatment of disability. Racial questions, however, were ignored or reduced to class issues.

It took an overseas audience to call into question the racial dimension of the film, which is on par with the fact that British and US scholars have always been at the forefront of looking at issues of race in France because most French scholars fail to question the colorblind republican model¹⁰⁶. From the get-go, *New York Times* writer A.O. Scott acknowledges this racial dimension in the title of his review: "Helping a White Man Relearn Joie de Vivre." The rest of the review doesn't hesitate to call the clichés as racially charged: "The caricatures are astonishingly brazen, as ancient comic archetypes — a pompous master and a clowning servant right out of Molière — are updated with vague social relevance, an overlay of Hollywood-style sentimentality and a conception of race that might kindly be called cartoonish." The review also calls out how problematic it is to tell a story of friendship across difference by ignoring the complexities, contradictions and problems around issues of race, especially if the characters are cast in stereotypical roles: "*The Intouchables* sets out to convert that anxiety into easy laughter and also, like *The Help* and *The Blind Side*, to replace antagonism and incomprehension with comfort and consensus."

¹⁰⁵ According to handicap.fr, 20% of the complaints France's entity dealing with discrimination (Le Défenseur des droits) received in 2014 were related to disability (Dal). In 2005, a law (la loi handicap) gave France 10 years to make all its public spaces accessible. In 2015, it is still quite difficult for a disabled person to go places, use public transportation, go to school and find a job (Vincent).

¹⁰⁶ I am thinking in particular of Keaton, Sharpley-Whiting and Stovall's *Black France / France Noire: The History and Politics of Blackness*, discussed in the first section.

Jay Weissberg's review in *Variety* is quite a bit more abrasive. The first lines read: "Though never known for their subtlety, French co-helmets/scripters Eric Toledano and Olivier Nakache have never delivered a film as offensive as "Untouchable," which flings about the kind of Uncle Tom racism one hopes has permanently exited American screens." Clearly, Weissberg did not find the movie funny nor did he consider that it promoted cultural diversity but rather saw Driss, Omar Sy's character, portrayed as "nothing but a performing monkey." And yet, in France it was seen as a multicultural movie, even if it was never talked about in racial terms. In *Le Courrier International*, Phil Hoad writes that the encounter between Driss and Philippe, François Cluzet's rich, paraplegic character, creates "des chocs culturels désopilants et la stimulante découverte d'un terrain d'entente entre les deux hommes." When confronted with the US critique of racism, the French dismissed it as a US critique of a French situation they can't possibly understand. Worse, they completely ignored the racial dimension altogether and focused on the TV style stereotypical dimension of the plot¹⁰⁷. This is problematic on several levels. Charlie Michael explains in "Interpreting *Intouchables*" that

in minimizing the importance of Driss's racial identity, such aesthetic preoccupations devalued the very qualities that made the film so appealing to France's minority communities, who have hailed the emergence of figures such as Sy, Jamel Debbouze and other popular screen actors of their generation for the social progress their success represents.

Indeed, it is not simply that the potentially racist dimension of the plot was largely ignored/dismissed. It is also that Sy, a young man from France's poor banlieues in an

¹⁰⁷ Omar Sy made a name for himself in France by acting in comedy sketches, in particular on the series *Service après-vente des émissions*. The series aired on French channel Canal+ between 2005 and 2012.

internationally acclaimed movie is a powerful – albeit problematically portrayed – figure that young people from the same poor banlieues can identify to. Racial dynamics are important both in the film between Driss and Philippe, but also with regards to the impact of its cast on the public. In fact, I argue that *Intouchables* had the success it did in great part because of the so-called cultural clash between Driss and Philippe. In other words, the movie was appealing because Driss is black and poor, Philippe white and rich.

Bande de filles (2015)

Sciamma's claim to universality is what enables her to say that her movie isn't about race. However, I contend that it is precisely this dimension that is the largest absence-presence of the movie in the sense that while race/racism is never acknowledged, it is everywhere in the film. Sciamma shows how her characters experience some of the very real discrimination that black people experience in France on a daily basis. Her *bande de filles* is profiled as a group of thieves by the salesperson at the clothing store where they shop. At school, Marieme's dreams of attending a *lycée général*¹⁰⁸ and improving her socio-economic situation get smashed on the walls of the republican school. Indeed, her grades are not good enough to be accepted in the high school of her choice. The reasons for the "bad" grades are to be found in her difficult

¹⁰⁸ In France, at the end of middle school, a committee of teachers decides the future of students based on their grades and whether they have passed the *brevet des écoles*, which is the exam students have to take and pass in order to be considered for high school. The kind of high school you will be able to join, however, depends heavily upon this committee. *Lycée général* is the most coveted because most socially valued option. There are also a flurry of professionalizing options such as *lycée professionnel* or *technique* and vocational programs, which are unfortunately much less valued. A large majority of students of color in France are funneled into these programs. See "La hiérarchisation des filières scolaires : de la relation dominant/dominé dans le jeu des identités et la reproduction sociale" by Hélène Chauchat and Céline Labonne for a discussion of the mechanisms of this devaluation.

private life: a mother who works very late, younger siblings and a home to take care of, a tyrannical older brother. In short, she lives the life of many marginalized youths of color in France's poor banlieues. French schools give a lot of homework, and Marieme simply doesn't have enough time to study. Yes, it is true that there are barely any white people in the movie. And yet, I contend that the systems that were designed for and by them are the invisible forces that shape everything that happens in the movie, including, quite literally, the force of Sciamma's white gaze.

Indeed, a key aspect of French antiracism and integration ideologies is the notion of merit, which is present in both movies. In *Bande de filles*, we see how problematic meritocracy really is, in particular in the scene I just described between Marieme and the school official. One may argue that Sciamma is criticizing the French education system, which she may well be, but how efficient is it? Even though this teacher's decision determines most of the rest of Marieme's story, very few scenes take place in the school. In fact, Sciamma keeps the focus on Marieme and not on the education system that is practicing a kind of intellectual weeding out that turns out to be racialized. In this sense, she participates in making Marieme completely responsible for what happens to her, even if she might not have set out to do that.

Sciamma's camera is almost exclusively focused on the young black women whose stories it documents. For example, in the scene when Marieme learns that she will not be able to attend a *seconde générale*, the teacher or counselor who tells her the news is absent from the screen. The authority figure, more than likely white¹⁰⁹, deciding the rest of Marieme's life or at least the rest of her life in the film, is never shown and quickly disappears. It is quite an apt

¹⁰⁹ See section two for a discussion on the whiteness of the teaching profession in France.

metaphor of the way in which the Republic refuses to talk about race, as if not acknowledging the profoundly racialized nature of the French nation would make the violence that its non-white citizens suffer disappear. The teacher or school official who tells Marieme that she will not be integrated in the system because she doesn't fit in it is just a disembodied voice, much like the disembodied racism well-meaning white leftists theoretically fight against. Sciamma refuses the somewhat activist label of *film de banlieues* because according to her, her characters just 'happen' to be black but are really universal. On the one hand, saying so doesn't make it so, even if it would indeed be just and fair. On the other hand, the universal (hu)man construct has been so exclusionary and problematic that it will require quite a bit more work on the part of Sciamma in order to truly disrupt it.

Sciamma's film has been accused of intellectual colonialism in some reviews. Vincent Malausa in *Le Nouvel Observateur* writes that "[l]a fracture entre ce cinéma d'auteur faussement militant et ce qu'il s' imagine encore comme un territoire inconnu (le terme banlieue lui-même y semble un gros mot) est tout simplement pathétique." Stéphane Delorme in *Les cahiers du cinéma* is accusatory: "[c]'est du pur académisme exportable aux étrangers qui aiment la Qualité française aux airs de liberté." However, one of the few scholarly articles written on the movie, "Il y a des règles: Gender, Surveillance, and Circulation in Céline Sciamma's *Bande de filles*," disagrees heavily with the critique that Sciamma practices intellectual colonialism in the film. Claire Mouflard, the (white) author, notes that the reviewers are the ones analyzing the characters according to colonial standards, while arguing that

Sciamma is *not* guilty of intellectual colonialism, but rather **performs an artistic anticolonial practice of feminism**, in unveiling the *signs* of surveillance as it is exercised

over the girls in the *banlieue*, as well as the viability of **the various performances (gender, mobility, capital)** assumed by her characters in order to evade that surveillance” (115).

It is problematic that Mouflard does not see race as one of the performances assumed by the characters, but it is not surprising. Her analysis of the film, while insightful, ignores its racial dimension. She argues that Sciamma’s ‘artistic’ take on the *banlieue* film is an act of disruption of the Other woman’s representation. She writes:

In *Bande de filles*, Sciamma effectively deconstructs the fixed and subjective “noire” identity associated in the French imaginary with “cité, sexe, couleur” (Regnier), in staging Marieme as a traditional lead character in a *Bildungsroman* striving toward her *émancipation* from the familial and institutional networks that control her” (Mouflard, 118).

As I will show later, this act of de-historicization is not a deconstruction of clichés and stereotypes but rather a way to enforce them by practicing French state colorblind antiracism.

I contend that, while the reviews are incredibly problematic in the way they exoticize black womanhood, they are for the most part in keeping with the way the actresses are portrayed in the film. The movie enforces stereotypes of blackness instead of disrupting them. The small doses of authenticity in the movie thus feel hollow. Indeed, the film only looks like a film that could be (but isn’t) one of a kind and show the ways in which white supremacy shapes every aspect of the black people’s lives she showcases in her film. Very simply, it could also set the movie outside of the banlieues. That in-and-of-itself would have been different.

Strangely enough, Sciamma doesn't want her film to be thought of as a kind of activist or antiracist movie. In other words, she is pretending to live in a postracial world where showcasing only black people in a French movie is not noteworthy at all. She doesn't want the fact that her characters are black to be a big deal. While the intention is noble, it is also ignorant, damaging, and it feeds right into the status quo. We do not live in a postracial world. As a white intellectual, choosing to portray only black people is a political decision and an act of racial power. White intellectuals like Sciamma have a role to play in the perpetuation of stereotypical representation of marginalized communities, and I will argue in this section that intellectuals who have been granted the most amount of power to shape minds, in particular white intellectuals, have a duty to educate themselves on issues of race in particular so that they can produce works that grapple honestly with the social realities of their time. *Bande de filles* is no such work.

In her review on *Madmoizelle*, Clémence Bodoc, who is white, is the only one to point out that praising *Bande de filles* for being a new outlook on the *banlieues*, something never done before, is outright racist in addition to being a faulty representation of the film. Bodoc agrees with positive critiques praising the beauty of the film, but she finds the reasons stated for finding the film innovative and beautiful utterly appalling. Responding to *Libération's* review that the movie is "a parti pris politique et esthétique", she writes: "*Bande de filles*, le dernier film de Céline Sciamma, est encensé par la critique, qui salue l'audace du sujet et du casting. En plus d'être fausse, cette analyse en dit long sur le racisme latent de notre société." Concerning the so-called new gaze on the *banlieues*, she notes that "tous ces gens qui n'ont de la banlieue que l'image que la fiction, les journaux télévisés et les magazines « d'investigation » veulent

bien montrer, seront confortés dans leurs représentations très stéréotypées.” She remarks that the black actresses are playing stereotypically black roles, and is outraged by the very use of the phrase “un parti pris esthétique,” which reduces black bodies to accessories, currently trendy in the white world: “Peut-on faire plus choquant comme commentaire ? Le Noir, nouvelle coqueluche de la saison automne-hiver ; après *Intouchables*, *Bande de filles* et *Samba* emboîtent le pas de cette nouvelle tendance ? Mais dites ! Ce sont des personnes, pas des accessoires esthétiques.” I agree with Bodoc. Casting a group of black women under pretense of universality is a way of aestheticizing black lives to serve white supremacy or support it while playing the role of the “good” white progressive. Whether she wants/means to or not, Sciamma is making a racial, political statement with *Bande de filles*.

Neocolonial Practices at Work in *Bande de filles* and *Intouchables*

Assimilation and De-historicization

What is Marieme’s character doing in this movie, other than live the stereotypically portrayed life of the *banlieues* as shown on the media? In “Constructing (Black) *Girlhood*,” black writer Ouma Amadou asks who Marieme is besides being black and French. She writes:

The viewer does not know Marieme’s origins. It is clear that she is black, and most likely of sub-Saharan African descent, but [...] There are no clues about her specific origins even through her behavior and choices. [...] Sciamma presents an assimilated Marieme who only sees herself as French. [...] **Marieme changes her hair radically three different times in the film, but there is no insight into who maintains her hair, which is odd given that [...] the ritual of taking care of such sophisticated hairstyles is integral to**

black female identity across the world. [...] Marieme's character feels particularly empty because Sciamma has compartmentalized what it is possible to see as an intersectional identity of being black and female. She has, instead, prioritized gender.

This points toward her adherence to a liberal French assimilationist tactic (Amadou, 8).

In other words, in order for Marieme to be a universal young woman who happens to be black, she has to have no cultural context. The imperative of cultural blankness or emptiness – which is never a blankness but rather a whiteness, as discussed in section two – is the epitome of white antiracism. In “Lost Territories de the Republic,” scholar Mamadou Diouf (who is black) writes that the price of integration is to exist without memory: “As the price of admission, they [non whites] are to exist without their memory and accept the very real prospect of not even being offered a place in the present and future of the French nation to which they belong” (Diouf, 36). In *Bande de filles*, Marieme has no context other than the context with which her kind of body is always associated: the *banlieues*. While it is not explicitly said, Marieme does not bring up her private life situation when the teacher tells her she cannot continue on to *lycée général* because she knows that it is pointless. What happens at home is considered separate from and irrelevant to school. Her lived experience is irrelevant both to the teacher but also to Sciamma, in a way, since she deems the racial and therefore socio-economic dimensions of this experience unimportant. Therefore, while Marieme does identify as French and nothing else – this is highlighted in the scene when she plays a video game of soccer and chooses the French team – it does nothing to include her into the republican school system.

In “The Black Atlantic as a Counterculture of Modernity,” Paul Gilroy remarks that inhabiting several identities at once is seen, politically, as a provocation (203). I think this is a

very important and relevant notion for thinking about national belonging of non-white French people. In her movie, Sciamma implies that she doesn't want race to play a role. As Amadou notices, Sciamma focuses on gender (it's the story of a girl, not a black girl). The thing is, Marieme has precisely the story Sciamma gives her because she is black. Ignoring the very biases that infuse her work, Sciamma simply tells the same story white people tell and hear about black people. In that sense, her piece fits very well within the nation's antiracist but also *anticommunautariste* discourse. As explained in section one, *communautarisme* is a term the French use to talk about those who argue that identities other than nationality are just as important. It is a term heavily pejoratively connoted and thrown around as an insult. This kind of PC racism has very material consequences for the ability of marginalized communities to represent themselves and advocate for the rights they only have in theory. A truly antiracist discourse cannot be anticommunautariste since it is a discourse that functions at the intersection of identities. It is also a discourse that questions whiteness and its place in antiracist discourse.

A different form of de-historicization takes place in *Intouchables*. Driss, the main black character, is portrayed as a problem youth who is lazy and failing in his familial and professional roles. Contrary to Marieme, Driss has a bit more of a story. He is a Senegalese immigrant who came to France when he was very young. He is French, like Marieme. Similar to *Bande de filles*, colonialism, neocolonialism and white supremacy are conveniently side stepped by putting the onus on Driss to assimilate. It is through his contact with Philippe that he learns how to truly assimilate, that is, to become white. In "Transnational Blackface, Neo-minstrelsy and the French

Eddie Murphy in *Intouchables*,” David Pettersen explains how Driss needs to learn how to be white in order to get a job. He notes:

Philippe teaches Driss how to pass as an educated white-acting citizen [...] Driss has even assimilated the values of the French republic, such as a respect for law and bureaucratic procedure. As Driss takes his leave of Philippe following the termination of his employment, another neighbour parks in front of Philippe’s courtyard. This time, he knocks on the hood and calmly interrupts another man talking on his cell phone. Driss explains with the patience of a teacher that he cannot park his car there because of the signs and asks him politely to move his vehicle (Pettersen, 65).

Driss has to learn the language of mainstream *bien-pensante* French society in order to secure a job. More to the point, he has learned to fit France’s understanding of civility. The underlying message is that if he wants racial discrimination not to be a problem for him anymore, he has to accept the French Republic’s rule of law. In other words, Driss’s problems are his own fault. In creating such a situation for their character, Nakache and Toledano reproduce a system of oppression in which France’s colonial history, neocolonial practices and white supremacy are invisible.

In the colonies, France saw as its mission to ‘civilize’ the ‘barbarian’ countries it invaded. The legacy of this understanding of France’s colonial civilizing mission is that immigrants or perceived immigrants of North African origin in France are treated as if they need civilizing, as if they were intrinsically uncivilized and their economic conditions and marginalization had nothing to do with their anger or violence. In the film, Philippe’s job is to civilize Driss and teach him white, civil French masculinity, as if such a thing exists other than as an ideal. To put it

bluntly, Driss has to be corrected of his base impulses but also of his laziness. From the very beginning of the film, Driss is constructed as a problem citizen whose purpose is to take advantage of France's social welfare and who will make it in French society if he just lets Philippe work his French civility magic on him and 'fix' him.

First of all, when he is first introduced, Driss has just gotten out of prison. He goes to Philippe's job interview with no hope or intention of being hired. He simply wants Philippe to sign his form stipulating that he is, indeed, looking for work in good faith. Driss is also shown at least twice with people portrayed as friends but also as "the wrong crowd." His progress towards becoming a civil French man is shown through scenes such as the one described by Pettersen in "Transnational Blackface," in which Driss goes from hitting a guy parked in front of Philippe's driveway to politely asking another to move his car. In short, Driss is learning to be a good citizen.

He is also constructed as uneducated and violent, a stark contrast with the character of Philippe who is portrayed as a reserved, witty, refined and knowledgeable French man who introduces unrefined Driss to good music (classical music) and good art (modern art). Naturally, the comedic dimension of the film comes from Driss' reactions to Philippe's cultural lessons, but the film does not stop there. By that I mean that Driss does learn the lessons: he learns to appreciate modern art, he even makes money making his own abstract painting and he uses this new knowledge to charm the employee at the unemployment office into giving him a job. In that way, where the film would simply be a stereotypical comedy portraying the clash of two radically different people, it actually becomes the story of a grown black man's coming-of-age: his becoming properly French and letting go of his bad habits.

I contend that in order to do that in a convincing way, Driss' character has to be relatively flat. I agree with reviewer Daphnee Denis that Driss is the main protagonist, but I disagree with her portrayal of Driss as much more developed than Philippe. He cannot be completely undeveloped as a character because of the strong friendship and chemistry he is supposed to have with Philippe and because he wouldn't be as lovable a character. However, what is most emphasized in Driss is not his depth but his lightness, his child-like approach to life. Denis points out that a lot more is known about Driss than Philippe, such as where he is from, that he is coming from prison and didn't tell his family, or that he is worried about his little brother. But in truth, none of that matters much. After all, it is never resolved. We don't actually know what comes out of Driss' intervention in his brother's life or whether he manages to get a good job, etc. Philippe's problems (as well as his entire staff's), however, are very clearly resolved one way or another thanks to Driss. Driss does have important economic and material problems, but they are not treated as such. Philippe has problems too, the most obvious one being that he is paralyzed from the neck down. However, he is incredibly wealthy, which, in some crucial ways, means that his staff can do his disability for him¹¹⁰. No one can do Driss' blackness – which is definitely a problem even if it's not acknowledged in the film – for him. Driss has to 'fix' this problem all on his own. Philippe's other issues are of an existential nature, so to speak (an entitled daughter, a fear of meeting a woman he cares about, boredom, etc.), as opposed to Driss' socio-economic ones. Those existential problems are ultimately

¹¹⁰ I am not suggesting that Philippe's disability is not an issue for him. I also don't intend to minimize this kind of disability. However, the movie is not about disability. If it were, Philippe would not be a very wealthy man with a 24/7 staff taking care of him. His disability is at the same time central and completely decentered in the story. On the one hand, the only reason why Philippe and Driss meet is because Philippe is disabled. On the other hand, Philippe's disability is very mitigated by the fact that he is wealthy which makes his situation at the same time more palatable (less difficult to deal with) to the audience and less of a problem within the story.

resolved by Driss. Driss is first and foremost a lighthearted, funny, distracting presence in Philippe's life. His main job, the way the story is told, is to make the older, wealthy, white, disabled man feel better/good while learning to be a proper Frenchman.

In that sense, he is the protagonist of the story: he will entertain both Philippe and the viewer. In fact, that is precisely why Philippe hires him in the first place; Driss will not be boring nor patronize him. Driss' lightheartedness and goofiness is a form of blankness in the sense that these qualities make him lovable both to Philippe and the audience, but they also make it easy to dismiss his interests as anything but silliness/immaturity that need to be shed in order to 'grow-up' and become an adult French man. Once Philippe's problems are resolved, it's time for Driss to start being serious. Driss' problems don't really get a resolution in the movie the way Philippe's do because they can be fixed only if Driss fixes his moral character. This he can do only if, by imitation, he does France the way Philippe does France.

On State Violence

White scholarly critiques of the movie often confirm and praise the notion that Sciamma erases the violence of the outer forces at play in Marieme's life. In "Le cinéma français face à la violence: du New French Extremism à une violence intériorisée," Karine Chevalier in particular writes that "Marieme peut être perçue comme une nouvelle Marianne française, représentative d'une France multiethnique offrant enfin une place cinématographique à ces jeunes filles appelées dans le langage jeune «bounty» (noire dehors et blanche dedans en

référence à la friandise à la noix de coco enrobée de chocolat du même nom)¹¹¹ (419). She also remarks that Sciamma hides from the spectator's view the police, issues of class and race as well as religious differences and clichés like rap and graffitis to focus on “des choses qu’il choisit de regarder précisément”:

Une violence de survie positive, contrôlée, intérieure au cœur de la banlieue. C’est par ces choix esthétiques que **le renversement de la violence** peut se faire, [...] **vidée de sa substance violente** s’éloigne du néo-réalisme qui tend à emprisonner les individus dans leur milieu social par des plans larges, préférant les plans rapprochés, intimistes, dans lesquels dominant des motifs répétés, tels que la main. Ces motifs nous invitent à **une analyse esthétique** privilégiant l’originalité thématique et visuelle de Sciamma plutôt **qu’une approche sociologique**. [...] Ce choix de mise en scène qui accentue la beauté des visages et des mains permet **un recul sur la violence** vécue comme un état de fait pour montrer la force de résistance qu’elle offre et le danger des dérives possibles (Chevalier, 419-420).

¹¹¹ The author of this article is clearly ignorant of the many negative connotations attached to the term “bounty,” which is actually used as an insult by Black folk to describe certain black women of Caribbean origins as not being very black or black enough. Note that since Sciamma has de-historicized Marieme and her friends, the very use of the term to describe them is puzzling. But more importantly, the fact that Chevalier uses it to describe the characters in the movie without taking the time to address these connotations and without seeing the need to justify her use of the term is appalling. Black blogger Mrs Roots writes that the term itself is at the intersection of several axes such as classism, racism and colorism. Importantly, she notes that “Le caractère racial de la culture occidentale comme étant une culture dite “blanche” est le résultat des différentes assimilations forcées que furent l’esclavage et la colonisation, soit le revers d’un racisme historique et systémique.” Quoting a commenter, she also writes: “En fait je pense que ce terme est aussi utilisé pour nier un aspect important du colonialisme : le fait que la “culture blanche” s’est implantée absolument partout et est devenue une norme qui n’est pas politisée de la même manière que les cultures absorbées par celle-ci.” In other words, the term ‘bounty’ is perfect because it allows one not to have to consider colonialism and white supremacy. The use of the term by Chevalier is in keeping with her article on violence in French banlieues films, and ironically very violent in itself. Scholar and film director Amandine Gay interviews black French and Belgian women in *Ouvrir la voix*, who confirm Mrs Roots description and analysis of the term ‘bounty’ (see *Ouvrir la voix* extra: “Niafou vs Bounty”).

For Chevalier, the minimization or outright erasure of violence is a kind of liberation offering Marieme an avenue of resistance. She can be a black Marianne because she is turned into an abstraction, a figure of resistance. This abstracting is what makes her worthy of white attention. She is transcending *communautariste* concerns. Through the reduction of Marieme to a symbol, the only people who are freed are the white spectators and the director. They are freed from having to think about the violence that Sciamma has hidden from their view: the state's violence such as the police's and the elitist school system's that marginalizes so many nonconforming students, and that are responsible for Marieme's situation. And crucially, they are freed from having to consider the violence of their own gaze.

What about Marieme? Marieme is stuck. Repeatedly, commenters noted that she chooses the French team when her brother lets her play a video game with her. While critics see this as proof that this (the film, the story) is France, that Marieme is part of French society, in light of the whole film and how it ends, I see this only as Marieme's belief. Marieme thinks of herself as French, but the French system and mainstream society reject her. Poor banlieues in France are what Diouf aptly calls "lost territories." They are outside of mainstream French society, and so it's not quite that Marieme is not offered a place in the French nation but rather that she is limited to a very specific place, the one where people like her belong. Indeed, the film ends with Marieme having nowhere to go.

If we ignore the racial dimension of the film, like Sciamma requests, then we can watch the movie as the coming-of-age of a young woman trying to figure out her place in the world by trying on various identities. The ending can be seen, then, as Marieme being on the brink of her life and ready to go out in the world, having resisted (without much success) the obstacles in

her way. But if we can't make abstraction of the fact that Marieme is a young black woman who spends the movie being limited by the white patriarchal system¹¹², what you see at the end is a young woman who has been rejected by the education system that's supposed to be supporting her, who is afraid of going home after leaving it, but who also refuses to continue a dangerous life working for the local drug lord. Yes, Marieme rejects the banlieue life, but Sciamma has not or maybe cannot imagine something else for her. Because she cannot do that, Marieme stays forever in the banlieues, as far as the spectator is concerned.

Maybe, the white viewer feels okay about that, not only because it is a familiar representation of French people of color, but also because Marieme is strong, she has proven herself to be a fighter. She has left the criminal life she was leading, and her hard work¹¹³ (whatever that is) will (it must, right?) get her out of the banlieues and into the mainstream society life she craves. The film ends in a way that absolutely does not indict the system that shapes Marieme's life and instead puts the onus on Marieme to make it in French society. If she doesn't end up fitting in, it's on her. I agree that Marieme is a resourceful, intelligent and strong young woman who is trying to find her way in the world. But the story is told in such a way as to suggest that it is because of these qualities that we should root for her to make it. Marieme shouldn't have to be any of these things in order to have access to those opportunities wealthier white French people just have without needing to deserve them.

¹¹² I will discuss more in detail later the figure of the sexist and violent man of color as it is represented in the movie.

¹¹³ The myth of labor, as understood from a white perspective (aka the-pull-yourself-by-your-boot-straps-and-you'll-make-it narrative), is present throughout the film. If Marieme can't go to the school she wants, it is because she doesn't work hard enough to get the grades she needs. And yet, Marieme's hard labor is displayed throughout the film (as is her mother's). She takes care of the house and her sisters, tries to do her homework, and tries to play sports. But like her mother's hard work, her labor is not valued by society. Carla Monroe's *Race and Colorism in Education* (2017) specifically discusses the devaluation of the labor of students of color.

As I discussed earlier, there is similarly no clear resolution for Driss in *Intouchables*. After he reunites Philippe with his lover, he fades away from the story and we don't know what happens to him. Again, maybe it's okay because he has fulfilled his function of fixing the white character and he has learned from him what he needed to know in order to join French society? The white viewer gets to feel good about the fake and toxic egalitarianism of the film, put forth by a so-called class (and race) transcendent friendship. The violence done to Driss' character, however, is quite obvious in the sense that he fits fairly well the description of the 'Magical Negro'. The Magical Negro¹¹⁴ is a long-standing trope of American fiction created by white people, in which a black man, usually with some kind of powers, comes to the aid of a white man. That character is a recycling, so to speak, of the 'noble savage' or 'happy slave' trope. Driss does not have literal magic powers, but he manages to completely transform the atmosphere of Philippe's life as well as his staff with his blunt, funny 'black' touch full of swagger (cue the birthday dance scene).

In "Hoodoo Economics," Heather Hicks explores this trope and the relation between magic and economics. She contends that "the magical "power" of black men in the films actually serves as an expression of their economic vulnerability" (29). This economic weakness is expressed "through the black men's reinscription as children" (29). I think that Hicks' discussion is very useful to understand how Driss functions as Philippe's 'magical negro'. The very fact that Driss fits this role in any way is violent in-and-of-itself, but it also puts in perspective his friendship with Philippe and its artificial dimension. Driss may become Philippe's friend, but he primarily depends on him economically. In fact, I argue that this friendship allows

¹¹⁴ See Farley (2000); Jones (2005); Zevallos (2012)

the concealment of Driss' economic situation as a systemic issue rather than an individual problem that civilizing Driss will resolve. For example, the scene where he gets a delivery job suggests that if people like Driss would just be charming and educated, employees would treat them more respectfully and trust them more.

As I explained earlier, Driss has much bigger problems than fixing Philippe's love life. Yet, this concern takes precedent in the film. Driss' economic situation is dealt with in such a way in the film that it remains, for the most part, hidden and unimportant to the plot. The first time it is addressed is when Driss wants Philippe to sign his welfare paper so he can get state financial help. This serves the purpose of showing the viewer that Driss is flawed in a fundamental way. No time is spent making his character more complex and suggesting that, maybe, he needs this money to survive and also to help his aunt and her children. Maybe a Black man just out of prison is going to have a very, very difficult time finding work, no matter how hard he tries, and Driss knows that. The second time his economic situation is addressed is at the unemployment office, where he ends up getting a delivery job. The scene serves the purpose of showing the viewer that Driss has learned his civility lessons from Philippe, he is all grown up now, and it pays since he gets a job. In the end, and this is very important, we don't actually know what happens to Driss who has just dropped this new delivery job he really needs in the middle of his shift in order to go save Philippe one last time. The scene is presented as a true friendship moment, and yet, in light of how Driss' economic situation is dealt with, it also serves to keep Driss in his place in relation to Philippe, whose needs end up always being more important than his. As far as the film is concerned, Driss remains economically vulnerable.

In “Is *The Intouchables* racist?” French journalist Daphnée Denis disagrees with the comparison of Driss to the Magical Negro figure:

the movie isn’t really about servitude. While American critics see a modern-day version of a black domestic and his white master, the French see a guy from the projects and a man who needs help to go to the bathroom. Both men have received their fair share of humiliation. Driss has little to no support in life—even his family gives up on him after he gets out of prison. And no one dares get close to Philippe because they’re scared he’ll break. They’re both pariahs, “untouchables.”

Despite the fact that her second sentence describes very well the modern economic situation that comes out of colonialism, choosing not to use the words and say that “the guy from the project” is black and the “man who needs help to go to the bathroom” is white allows her to put Driss and Philippe on equal footing and refuse to see the racially oppressive servant/master economic dynamic at play. But are Driss and Philippe really marginalized in the same way? Do they really suffer the same way from their respective stigma? The only way Denis can see equivalence between Driss’s situation and Philippe’s is by misrepresenting Philippe’s. Philippe’s staff does tiptoe around him and stereotypically treats him like a disabled person but they are not “afraid to touch him” as Denis claims. If they were, Philippe would literally die. Philippe may feel lonely and powerless, but he is neither alone nor completely powerless, in large part because of his financial means. Driss is alone and economically vulnerable. If this were acknowledged, the film would not suggest that Driss can fix his problems (perceived to be of his doing) all by himself. This is a crucial difference concealed by a falsely egalitarian perspective on the film.

Brown Patriarchy on Trial in Bande de filles

One of the moves of white supremacy is to replace racial discourse with gender and sexuality discourse, as Fatima El-Tayeb explains in *European Others* (83). France is a country that sees itself as free from the evils of patriarchy since it provided a semblance of equality to cisgender women. However, mainstream (mediatized) feminism has been reduced to a superficial celebration of stereotypical femininity. As Eric Macé and Nacira Guénif-Souillamas discuss in *Les féministes et le garçon arabe*, feminism has new enemies today, most prominently among them “le sexisme "d'en bas," c'est-à-dire les violences physiques et symboliques faites aux jeunes femmes et aux adolescentes d'origine maghrébine et destinées à les plier à un ordre patriarcal au service de la sexualité des adolescents de ces quartiers" (8). The other enemy of this new feminism, as I have shown in section three, is the veiled Muslim woman. A number of women such as philosopher Elizabeth Badinter and *Ni putes ni soumises* president Sihem Habchi¹¹⁵ argued very publicly in favor of the law preventing young women from wearing a veil in school (and therefore in favor of their exclusion if they chose to wear it) in the name of feminism and emancipation. Macé and Guénif-Souillamas qualify this new feminism of republican feminism, which defends integration and equality by excluding the most marginalized (10-11).

Marieme does not identify with any religion in the film, so I can safely say she is not Muslim, but she certainly fits the young woman of the banlieues needing to be freed from the

¹¹⁵ It is important to note that *Ni putes ni soumises* is a French feminist movement that has secured recognition of the press and government precisely by practicing a feminism promoting French national ideological values. It relies essentially on public funding to survive. The price of its recognition and survival was thus assimilation into the doctrine of the Republic and the spreading of its stories concerning women's place in society. A number of scholars and activists such as Etienne Balibar (*Equaliberty*), Sylvie Tissot (Imsi.net) and Houria Bouteldja (*Nous sommes les Indigènes de la République*) have heavily criticized the movement for supporting the right's Islamophobic instrumentalization of feminism.

yoke of low-life patriarchal oppression. This context is crucial to understand why, in *Bande de filles*, if state violence is deliberately concealed, patriarchal violence by men of color is on display. In “Il y a des règles,” Mouflard makes insightful comments about the way the traditional surveillance apparatus of the police in banlieue movies has been replaced in *Bande de filles* by the *jeunes de banlieue*. The problem is that she does not address the power differential at play in such a move. Replacing the masculine oppressive power of the state with that of the brown men the girls spend their time trying to evade is an act of racial power. It obfuscates the larger patriarchal and neocolonial system in which these men themselves function. It ignores a whole history of colonial violence that Guénif-Souillamas outlines in her section of *Les féministes et le garçon arabe* as she explains the social genesis of the figure of the garçon arabe (and, as she writes “leurs acolytes Noirs et petits Blancs des milieux populaires”).

In this chapter, Guénif-Souillamas re-historicizes the ways in which the violent virility of the film is on the side of white colonial patriarchy, “l’Occident chrétien hétérosexué” (69). She contextualizes the violence in *Bande de filles* as arising from the ‘civilizing’ of men of color by white heterosexual patriarchy in blue-collar environments, which has resulted in the kind of violent macho behaviors on display in the film. She writes:

Ravissant leurs contempteurs, [men of color] relaient ainsi docilement la représentation homophobe du monde qui a longtemps prévalu dans l'Occident alors qu'elle devient politiquement incorrecte [...] En surjouant: la partition hétérosexuelle, les jeunes Arabes des cités ne font que s'aliéner un peu plus à une culture dominante, se laissant ainsi dicter qui ils doivent haïr et détruire: en l'occurrence, eux. [...] Le confinement dans le virilisme conduit les jeunes des quartiers, tout entiers occupés à sauver un honneur qui

a depuis longtemps déserté son enveloppe féminine, à reporter leur brutalité sur plus dominées, plus vulnérable qu'eux: les filles des quartiers. (75-76)

Historicizing the violence of brown men on display in the film is absolutely crucial to offering an ethical critique of the film. Contrary to what Chevalier argues, there is plenty of violence in the movie, and importantly, this violence is racialized. Stereotypically, Marieme's brother represents the violent, culturally backwards older brother who controls his sisters as if he didn't know that he lives in a so-called 'civilized' society in which women have been liberated from the yoke of patriarchal oppression. In the story, Marieme encounters all the stereotypical *banlieue* problems that saturate French media. She is controlled by her brother, she has to be careful of the gangs of men in her cité, the threat of rape is lurking everywhere, and when she joins one of the gangs she hides her gender to protect herself from sexual aggression. The representation of men of color that emerges from this is nothing new; men of color are uncivilized, lazy, criminals, at best sexist, at worst violent. So much for *le renversement* of the media clichés, for the transgression, that Chevalier and other reviewers see at play in the movie.

Indeed, in his review of the movie titled "Au-delà des clichés", Olivier Barlet (also a white critic) writes that "L'intérêt de *Bande de filles* est justement qu'il évite les clichés, ou plutôt qu'il les retravaille pour les dépasser." Commenting on the all-black cast, he sees it as a political choice: "il y a là encore un choix politique de représentation de cette part invisible de la diversité." The problem with this comment is that black marginalized communities are not invisible at all. On the contrary, I argue that their hypervisibility in the media is a form of violence that the film does not disrupt but merely enforces. A number of scholars have

discussed this negative hypervisibility of men of color in the banlieues¹¹⁶. Most notably for the purpose of this essay, I will discuss Guénif-Souillamas and Macé *Les féministes et le garçon arabe*, which explores in depth the ramifications of ignoring the intersectional dimension of identities and their representation and social relations.

Economic Violence and Hypervisibility in Intouchables

In *Les féministes*, Guénif-Souillamas writes

les garçons arabes - et leurs acolytes, Noirs et "petits Blancs" des milieux populaires - semblent être voués à un machisme atemporel, interdits de séjour dans ces lieux de la réconciliation entre les sexes que l'on prétend apaisés, rejetés aux confins de ce processus inédit de transformation sociale des identités sexuées, empêchés d'y participer mais tenus de le servir en tenant le rôle du contre-exemple, de l'inadapté (63).

In *Intouchables*, Driss has to be civilized. In the movie, this civilizing process and the (exaggerated) gap between Driss and Philippe's environments primarily serve a comedic function. Driss is funny because he is represented in the movie as the figure of the "inadapté" trying to become the "adapté." I have discussed how, learning the language of the Republic, Driss can flirt with and charm the employee at the interim agency into giving him a job by displaying his new artistic knowledge. This scene and the two scenes when Driss deals with the car parked in front of Philippe's driveway are funny scenes, just like all the other scenes functioning on the same mode because Driss's *banlieues* 'shows' in an exaggerated way; by

¹¹⁶ See among others, Macé (2006); Noiriél (2007); Diouf (2012).

being disproportionately violent, and then by mimicking the white model he's been given. In other words, Driss needs to rely on white masculinity in order to succeed economically.

In the film, Philippe perfectly and stereotypically embodies this white, gentlemanly, romantic masculinity. Never coarse or crude, he dictates old school love letters and poems to his assistant for the woman he loves in which he discusses literary or musical works they both enjoy. He takes Driss to the opera, the pinnacle of refinement, and plays him the best of classical music, trying to inculcate Driss with 'good' taste. While I agree with a number of critics who see this in part as a parody of stilted aristocracy, in the end Philippe's 'culture' has more weight than Driss'. While Driss entertains him, ultimately Philippe does not adopt in any way Driss' music and sexual mores, which are portrayed as fun but not a way of life worth considering because they are corrupting, too. Driss, however, does develop a taste for art that he then uses to speak the language of white civility. Philippe's way of being a cisgender heterosexual man is presented as the better, more serious and (falsely) less violent way of being a man.

On the flip side of this, Driss' black man heterosexual masculinity is hyper visible throughout the film. He is portrayed as a very sexual being and completely unashamed of it. Throughout the film, he unapologetically hits on Philippe's assistant (who turns out to have a girlfriend). Driss hires prostitutes for himself and for Philippe. He also plays matchmaker between two of Philippe's employees, as well as between Philippe and the woman he loves. In short, Driss' character is a legacy of the colonial construct of the fascinating (to whites) but corrupting (to white innocence and purity) figure of the black colonized body. Another of Driss' function as hyper sexualized masculine figure is to restore Philippe's white, wounded

confidence in his sexual abilities and appeal. While the film does a great job of offering a different and less stigmatizing perspective of the sexuality of disabled bodies, which are most often portrayed as asexual, it does so at the cost of fetishizing Driss.

Paradoxically, in the role of caretaker – which is most often considered a feminine profession – Driss thus takes on a kind of feminized position in relation to Philippe while also restoring his romantic and sexual confidence. Therefore, at the same time as he is portrayed as hyper masculine, Driss is also paradoxically feminized and therefore kept vulnerable. This is a perfect example of the way white patriarchy both uses and undermines black heterosexual masculinity. Doing so is a way of keeping men of color in their place, in a perpetual state of need of white patriarchy in order to function both socially and economically. For example, Philippe is responsible for giving Driss a financial ‘taste’ of the world he lives in. After declaring in a modern art gallery that anyone can buy some paint and throw it on a canvas, Driss decides to try his hand at abstract painting. Philippe tricks a wealthy friend into believing that Driss is a rising artist and that he should buy his work now while it’s still affordable. Doing so, he sells Driss’ first and only painting for about 10,000 euros. He gives the money to Driss in cash, while on his private jet. It is a satire of the absurdity of Philippe’s world, but it does so at the expense of tokenizing Driss who will not become a great painter and join the ranks of Philippe’s wealthy friends. In *Racial Capitalism*, Jodi Melamed (following Cedric Robinson, Ruth Gilmore, Chandan Reddy and others) describes capitalism as also needing these inequalities and racism in order to function:

Capital can only be capital when it is accumulating, and it can only accumulate by producing and moving through relations of severe inequality among human groups [...]

These antinomies of accumulation require loss, disposability, and the unequal differentiation of human value, and racism enshrines the inequalities that capitalism requires (77).

What this means is that the character of Philippe needs the character of Driss in order to exist as a wealthy Frenchman. Similarly, the film cannot really take Driss out of his socio-economic and racial prison. It needs Driss exactly where he is, reproducing the hierarchies of France's capitalist society in order to make a profit. Indeed, the profits from the film were enormous. In other words, telling stories like *Intouchables*, which reproduce France's colorblind ideology, is very profitable and thus participates in the self-feeding loop of racial capital.

Driss is also hypervisible as a black person in the way he is often filmed as if being 'in black face'. In "Ce que le succès d'*Intouchables* nous apprend sur la situation des acteurs noirs en France," Régis Dubois remarks that Omar Sy in the role of Driss fulfills all of the three main stereotypical roles that Black actors are invariably playing in French cinema: the thug, the nanny and the funny guy. These traits are made even more prevalent by the fact that the physicality of his performance and his costume is often exaggerated and reminiscent of black face. For example, in "Transnational Black Face" Pettersen remarks that

Sy alternates between banlieue tough guy swagger and comic trickster moments designed to make white people laugh. When he plays the tough guy, he hunches his shoulders forward, walks by lumbering exaggeratedly in a slightly bent-leg stance, and keeps his face taut and his lips pursed" (60).

It is precisely this performance and the way it contrasted with Philippe's that made consensus in the French press and allowed many critiques to write a version of *Le Monde's* review by

Mandelbaum: “the film offers a generous social metaphor that shows the benefits of contact between France’s ‘old’ generation, one paralyzed by privilege, and the vitality of a young generation made up of so many immigrants.”

The kind of visibility this take (*Intouchables*) on cultural diversity presents is really problematic and complex. On the one hand, the film relies heavily on the stereotypes of the banlieues and the negative hypervisibility of men of color in the media. One of the messages of the movie seems to be: if you can act white, we will respect and include you (to a point). *Intouchables*, like *Bande de filles*, conveniently hides systemic violence by ignoring the history that has created people like Driss and Philippe. On the other hand, many found that the movie was a sign of progress and youths from the banlieues have hailed the emergence of actors like Sy gaining fame and exposure. These youths often loved Sy’s hypervisibility, and I cannot deny that Sy is an excellent and charismatic actor deserving of his fame¹¹⁷. At the same time, unfortunately, the film feeds into and fits well in France’s colorblind ideology of belonging. It clearly and purposefully casts a black man in a very stereotypically black role while at the same time making clear – and not completely unfounded – claims to authenticity.

People of Color in French Media

In *Bande de filles*, Sciamma claims to want to give a space to young women who don’t often have one. But the truth is that they are not invisible at all, in the way the queer and trans communities are in France and whom she chose to represent in other films such as *Tomboy*.

¹¹⁷ Considering that the film is inspired by a true story and that the character Sy plays is actually of Moroccan origins, Sy’s choice instead of an actor of Moroccan origins is not insignificant. Black people suffer different types of discrimination in France than Arabo-Muslims, who are not well liked and much more controversial, as I discussed in section three. Therefore, choosing Sy was in part a deliberate move to increase profits.

These 'gangs' of girls have been the subject of many a media story, and Sciamma's *bande de filles* does not tell a different story. She stages racket scenes and fight scenes, and does everything but deconstruct the clichés attached to these women. The question of what kind of visibility is created and given to people of color, as opposed to how often they are made visible, is just as if not more important.

In the 1990s, a pressure group called Collectif Egalité formed to fight discrimination against black people (and later all people of color) on French television. A report¹¹⁸ was conducted which revealed (no surprise) that they were disproportionately represented as problems and threats, or as performers. People of color have little to no control over these representations since there are very few people of color working in the TV production industry in France¹¹⁹. Led by writer Calixthe Beyala, this movement was going strong in the late 1990s and early 2000s but has not garnered much media attention since. Pressured by the Collectif Egalité, the Conseil Supérieur de l'Audiovisuel (CSA) performed an analysis of French TV programs to quantify people of color's presence in French TV. Joseph McGonagle justly notes in "Ethnicity and visibility in contemporary French television" that this focus on numbers completely obscured the real issue, which is rather how people of color are represented in the media (285). Indeed, "to analyse the situation only in terms of numbers does very little to challenge any stereotypes or prejudices" (285). Naturally, the CSA refused the quotas solution demanded by Beyala, based on the fact that the Republic constitutionally does not recognize difference, ethnic or otherwise. In other words, imposing quotas to increase representations of

¹¹⁸ Alec G. Hargreaves and Antonio Perotti analyzed the report in 'The Representation on French Television of Immigrants and Ethnic Minorities of Third World Origin.'

¹¹⁹ Joseph McGonagle in "Ethnicity and visibility in contemporary French television" discusses this in detail.

people of color on TV was seen as a form of *communautarisme*, which was unacceptable. But as a woman in Amandine Gay's documentary *Ouvrir la voix* has justly said: "un film avec que des Noirs c'est du communautarisme, alors qu'un film avec que des Blancs, ben c'est un film."¹²⁰ Although I am not sure focusing on numbers alone is going to improve people of color's representation in the media, this is a very powerful quote because it makes visible how problematic and racist the CSA's response to Beyala was. With this in mind, it is no surprise that 20 years later, white directors successfully direct movies like *Intouchables*, *Bande de filles*, and *Samba* (also by Nakache and Toledano) in which people of color are getting main roles in stories told by white people, and in many ways, for white people.

What I argue, then, is not so much that people of color in the past and even today are invisible, but rather that they are visible in a very specific and limited way¹²¹. Whites control the way they are represented: in the media, which is still overwhelmingly white both in production and hosting, in films. Whites also control in antiracist politics, as I will explain in the next section. White media and intellectuals have always had a tremendous amount of power in shaping society's views of people of color. I cannot talk about representation without talking about power, and naming that power as white. Directors like Sciamma need to make ethically responsible movies if they choose to make movies about people of color. And in truth, they should really just step aside and let people of color tell their own stories.

¹²⁰ As a side note, I believe that the reason why *Bande de filles* was not considered *communautariste* is precisely because it was made by a white intellectual, and that is not threatening to France's sense of self.

¹²¹ In "L'impossible lutte contre les discriminations télévisées," Eric Macé carries out a research project in which he analyses the media presence of people of color on French TV over a day. He remarks that "avec moins de 3% de la totalité de la population du corpus, les Arabes sont littéralement expulsés du monde télévisuel français" (181).

In her documentary *Ouvrir la voix*, which opened in France in October 2017¹²², Amandine Gay interviews francophone Black women about their experience being Black in mostly white societies. In an interview with Mediapart, she explains that the project came out of her experience as a black actress:

Ça [the documentary] part d'un constat qui venait de mon travail de comédienne. A l'époque, j'étais comédienne et j'étais très, très fatiguée du type de rôle qu'on me proposait, c'est-à-dire soit la migration tragique soit la banlieue délinquante, qui sont un peu les deux pôles auxquels on est invité à passer des castings quand on est une femme noire en France.

She continues on to describe the difficulty she had in creating and suggesting different roles for black women (such as *sommelier*, for instance), because she was constantly told that 'it doesn't exist in France'. Appalled by those comments, she decided to make *Ouvrir la voix*. The comment 'it doesn't exist in France' is a particularly important to understand the way blackness is construed in France. On the one hand, it is a white act of power to make black bodies invisible in certain ways and hyper visible in others (cue Gay's stereotypical role offers). On the other hand, the reason why such representations of blackness as the *sommelier* don't exist in France is not because they don't exist at all but rather because they are only able/allowed to exist as exceptions and therefore not worthy of being told as a story. They are prevented from existing as so-called "normal" occurrences by those very white people who homogenize and flatten what blackness looks like and does.

¹²² I was not able to get a copy of the documentary to watch it in its entirety, and only had access to interviews of Gay, excerpts and extras from her documentary on YouTube.

Among other things, the women in Gay's documentary talk about the pain of rarely seeing themselves represented and represented positively in the media in general. They also describe how they internalized an idea of who they are and who they should be that is a projection of the white gaze. They talk about how difficult it is to extricate themselves from this representation¹²³ and the internalization of their own supposedly inadequacy/ugliness/stupidity, etc. What is most important to me for the purpose of this section is that Gay's documentary represents Black francophone women from their perspective, on their own terms, in all of their nuances and differences. Her work is a way of re-thinking French universalism through the experience of Black French women by representing their plurality and heterogeneity.

In the following section, I discuss France's brand of state antiracism and the way it is designed to give good conscience to white people while continuing to enforce a deeply unequal and exploitative system. I will also examine the place of diversity within such a system, and how it is exploited both for profits and intellectual capital.

Ideological Considerations

Universal Antiracism – On State Antiracism in France

Inspired by Jodi Melamed's analysis of US state antiracisms in *Represent and Destroy: Rationalizing Violence in the New State Capitalism*, I am concerned with the functions of works like *Bande de filles* and *Intouchables*. Whether they intend to or not, they are cultural products that participate in current conversations (or lack thereof) about race in France. They are

¹²³ The extra "Elle avait pas de profession" is particularly interesting in this regard.

products of France's organizing discourse about race and belonging. Should art deconstruct clichés? If you want to make ethical, mindful art, yes, especially if you are a white person making art about and with people of color.

Looking at the history of antiracism in France, it is clear that so-called antiracist movements like the Ligue des Droits de l'Homme (LDH) and the Mouvement contre le racisme et pour l'amitié entre les peuples (MRAP) are recognized movements because they were founded on the grounds of the Republic's colorblind ideology. In "A Logic of Camps: French Antiracism as Competing Nationalism," Riaz Tejani explains that the LDH and MRAP were respectively founded after the Dreyfus affair in 1898 and during the Vichy regime in France to protect children from Nazi deportation. Tejani's concept of "competing nationalism" to refer to French state antiracism is particularly useful to understand in what context a movie like *Bande de filles* can emerge. Competing nationalism "is the assertion of nationhood premised upon one incumbent or challenger concept of national identity against plausible competing others" (Tejani, 110).

In short, antiracist organizations recognized by the state have a profound connection to national identity and Republican ideology. In fact, if they want to have any form of credibility in the media, they need to maintain this connection, given that they are subsidized by the state. For example, SOS Racisme and Ni Putes Ni Soumises both uphold and take positions for republican values of secularism (NPNS took a public position in favor of the laws against the veil) and against *communautarisme* (SOS Racisme is against affirmative action). Since the early 1990s, the Arabo-Muslim presence questions this understanding of belonging and nationhood based on origin. Therefore, much more controversial and unsubsidized are, for example,

organizations like Collectif Contre l'islamophobie en France (CCIF), which are often accused of promoting *repli identitaire* (aka *communautarisme*).

Tejani describes the whiteness of the organizations he visits (114, 122) but most importantly, he remarks that the idea of fighting islamophobia, for instance, is perceived by these two antiracist groups as a kind of *communautarisme*, which in their view goes against the fight against racism. This is because antiracism is practiced in the service of a particular understanding of nationhood; that of white republican supremacy. This model, Tejani explains was

more than a process for political inclusion and cultural assimilation for migrants, it had been the centerpiece for an erstwhile dominant national identity harvested directly from the values of the French Revolution and recast successively through subsequent national political traumas. [...] many activists viewed and practiced antiracism as the grassroots manifestation of national greatness premised on the careful dissolution of difference" (123).

In *La mécanique raciste*, Tévanian corroborates Tejani's finding when he describes the way he was asked to leave antiracist meetings with MRAP and NPNS when he called out their whiteness (98). A very important aspect of French antiracism is the notion of disavowal, which can explain why Tévanian's remark about the whiteness of the assemblies triggered such a violent reactions:

J'ai été surpris par exemple de la violence des réactions lorsque j'ai fait remarquer que certains plateaux télévisés consacrés au supposé problème de l'immigration étaient composés à 100% de Blanc(he)s, ou quand j'ai décrit l'assistance d'un meeting des Ni

putes ni soumises comme une assemblée blanche. Cela s'est reproduit au MRAP [...] où l'on m'a plusieurs fois accusé de racisme ou de dérive ethniciste..." (*La mécanique*, 97-98).

The foundation of the Republic's understanding of race is that it doesn't exist. More honestly, I would say that it doesn't exist as far as whites are concerned because people of color are racialized every day, in every way. These white audiences were refusing to be racialized the way they racialize people of color. They refused to be named, in other words, the way they name/confine/construct people of color.

White Disavowal

In "Du déni à la dénégation," Didier Fassin explains that "la dénégation préserve la représentation de la réalité et sa signification, mais elle en écarte les éléments les plus désagréables. Dans ce mécanisme, il s'agit de reconnaître une réalité qu'on préférerait refouler et d'empêcher qu'elle ne parvienne à la conscience" (144). He goes on to quote the Haut Conseil à l'Intégration's 1992 report on wage inequality, which warns its readers not to read difference as discrimination (145). Tévanian was dismissed from these antiracist meetings because he was asking the audience to recognize the reality of their privileged position, their whiteness. If they did that, they would have to admit that the discriminations they purport to fight are racial. Indeed, as Fassin remarks "les "discriminations raciales" tendent à se fondre dans l'ensemble des discriminations, qu'elles soient liées au sexe, à l'orientation sexuelle, à l'existence d'un handicap, [...] Dans ces conditions, les discriminations raciales perdent [...] **leur inscription historique et leur signification spécifique**" (148). One key aspect of French

antiracism is that it de-historicizes discriminations. Sciamma, Nakache and Toledano all practice disavowal in their films in the way they frame their stories as apolitical and as “not about race”.

Didier Fassin explains that up until recently (around 1998), racial discriminations in France were not named as such (141). Fassin remarks that in the 1990s, the expression ‘racial discrimination’ was rarely used in the media, whereas ‘racism’ was often used in reference to extreme right wing ideology (142). This is important in that it shows that racism was (and is still) construed as a kind of abstract evil that is the prerogative of political parties like Le Front National (FN). It maintains the fiction that racism is an issue of individual, moral deficiency as opposed to being a system in which everyone lives and from which white and conforming folk benefit and marginalized folk do not. It also maintains the figure of white antiracist work as the work of ‘good’ people while constructing the figure of the marginalized as in need of rescue. French state antiracism functions according to the drama triangle model¹²⁴ in which you have a victim, a rescuer and a persecutor. The difference is that the ‘victim’ in this case is forced into this configuration and disempowered by the ‘rescuer’ who can therefore continue to exert power over the ‘victim’ who is then indebted to the ‘rescuer’. Neoliberal white supremacy in France often polices racial interaction via this model.

Fassin also notes that today, racial discriminations are overexposed in France but the language to name them and talk about them has changed. For example: “la formule ‘lutte contre les discriminations’ tend à être remplacée de manière systématique dans le discours officiel par l’expression ‘promotion de l’égalité des chances’” (147). Fassin describes this political rhetorical move, which begets a law called “la loi pour l’égalité des chances” in 2006, as

¹²⁴ I am referring to the Karpman drama triangle (1968), a model of social interaction theorizing a type of destructive human relation.

a way to promote the positivity and optimism of these politics while moving away from the problem that they are supposed to fight. This also allows for the minimizing of the violence of discriminations in the form of disavowal. More importantly, what Fassin describes is precisely the way neoliberal hegemony functions by incorporating oppositional critiques of the state into the neoliberal discourse¹²⁵.

Not only are these antiracist organizations mostly white, they are the only ones with state recognition and therefore political power to shape antiracist politics and to disseminate French antiracist ideology. The issue of the context in which antiracist thought and antiracist organizations emerge and function is at the heart of the question of representation. If Sciamma's film is a product of the Republic's colorblind discourse, then one of the functions of her film is to enforce state ideology. In *Represent and Destroy*, Melamed explains how the first phase of American state antiracism (1940's – 60's) – which she calls racial liberalism – instrumentalized race novels for information retrieval, with the goal of educating white readers to not be racist, to be the leaders of the decolonizing world. She writes: "Literary studies has been a foremost cultural technology for producing, transmitting, and implanting official antiracist knowledges" (15). Whether they mean to or not, I argue that Sciamma's and Toledano's and Nakache's movies practice white French official antiracist ideology in one form or another—*Intouchables* by making the portrait of a fake egalitarianism in the friendship

¹²⁵ This is the way Grace Hong and women scholars of color such as Audre Lorde understand difference in our neoliberal societies. For a definition of the term more specific to hegemony, see Omi & Winant. In their article "Racial Formation in the United States" Omi & Winant write that "far from ruling principally through exclusion and coercion (though again, these are hardly absent) hegemony operates by including its subjects, incorporating its opposition" (68). While Omi & Winant focus on US society, their understanding of hegemony can be applied to the way the French system aims at absorbing its complex and diverse people into a system that preserves the appearances of homogeneity. Jodi Melamed in *Represent & Destroy* historicizes the ways in which neoliberal hegemony has coopted and incorporated such critiques into its system in the USA.

between Philippe and Driss, and *Bande de filles* by pretending that choosing an all-black cast is not a political statement and by practicing white feminism.

Racial liberalism is a very useful concept to understand the context of these films and their function in France's national identity discourse, because liberal anti-racisms [...] institutionally validate some forms of difference and make others illegible [...] controlling what counts as a race matter, an antiracist goal, or a truism about racial difference, official antiracisms have structured legitimate knowledges in the domains of law, public policy, economy, and culture" (*Represent*, 11).

The request that we see Marieme as any French girl, that we think of *Bande de filles* not as a banlieue movie but as a "fresque intime" (Sciamma) is a request for socio-political context and racial difference to be deemed irrelevant: the fact of Marieme's blackness but also of Sciamma's whiteness and therefore white privilege.

The only difference that is being accepted and discussed as relevant is gender, both in the director's own words and in the scholarly analyses. The reason for this is that gender is the only identity marker/difference that has been addressed in France and not been discarded as a form of communautarisme via the question of *la parité*, whose objective is the equality of the sexes at work and in politics. Unfortunately, dealing with questions of sexism without acknowledging race, such as Sciamma's film does, simply enforces state ideology and perpetuates the misrepresentation of people of color against which movements like Afro-Feminism and works like Amandine Gay's *Ouvrir la voix* struggle.

Dominant voices like Sciamma's and the directors of *Intouchables* have the power to direct the audience's gaze towards very specific types of differences but also to show us how to

look at these differences. In *La mécanique raciste*, Pierre Tévanian explains that French antiracism is characterized, among other things, by the notion that racism needs to be corrected because difference is a way for (white) people to be enriched: “On engagera certes [...] un travail pédagogique auprès des racistes, afin de les aider à surmonter leurs appréhensions et à percevoir les différences comme un ‘enrichissement’” (117). This, he explains, is because French antiracism is based upon the notion that racism is fear of the other/of difference. This is a conception I discuss in section three. Understanding racism as fear of the other turns antiracist media into the tool to teach racists that Melamed describes as being part of racial liberalism.

Furthermore, it re-casts racists as merely human and suffering from basic human weakness. It effectively diminishes and often outright denies the violence of being racialized, and it puts the onus on racialized others not to be too different, too demanding, too radical and not to scare innocent white people. In a movie like *Samba*, which is arguably more nuanced than *Intouchables* with regard to race relations, the audience is presented with a bourgeois white woman recovering from a burnout (Charlotte Gainsbourg) and a black undocumented immigrant from Senegal who fall in love with each other. While it would be unfair to view the movie only through this lens, it is clear that one of its purposes is to humanize the migrant, who is definitely a racialized figure feared by white French people, and to show the audience that ‘there is nothing to fear’¹²⁶.

¹²⁶ Similarly, Driss is a thug but not much so that he is not completely alienating to white audiences.

White Innocence, White Fragility & Antiwhite Racism

The disavowal I've been discussing takes many forms, but a salient example for my purpose is France's officially unrepentant position regarding colonization. Sara Ahmed's theorizing of public expressions of national shame is very useful here. In "Shame Before Others," Ahmed is concerned with what it means to construct an identity through shame. Ahmed analyzes how declarations of shame can bring a nation into existence as a felt community. She analyses how saying sorry is perceived as a threat by nations: what does it commit us to? What does it do? She wonders how allowing ourselves "to feel bad" also allows the nation to feel better, to build "a narrative of recovery" (112), which in turns allows for the present nation to be idealized in a declaration of patriotic love and pride (113). But love for whom? Pride for whom? This 'declaration of shame' strategy has been a strategy of white supremacist nations such as Australia, which she analyses in her essay.

I want to ask the question of what it means to claim an identity by refusing to be ashamed, to repent; that is 'to feel bad'. It is not a coincidence that so many reviews of *Intouchables* have talked about how it made people 'feel good'. Andrew O'Hehir talks about the movie as "a feel-good fable." Agnès Poirier talks about the film as a "hymne à la fraternité" responding to France's need for "cohésion sociale." Sandrine Blanchard's review in *Le Monde* is titled "Bons sentiments". She writes: "*Intouchables* est un film qui donne du plaisir, reconforte et suscite un rire salvateur." It is quite telling of white France's need to be validated and feel comforted in their 'goodness' even to be saved ("un rire salvateur"). But saved from what? Racial guilt? And who is saved by this laughter? At whose expense is white France laughing? The fact that a story reinforcing black and white hierarchies is thought of as redeeming is part of a

mechanism of defense of white supremacy. Shelby Steele in “White Guilt” theorizes that the “white need for redemption has contributed to this tragic situation [the widening gap between Blacks and Whites in the US] by shaping our policies regarding blacks in ways that may deliver the look of innocence to society and its institutions but that do very little actually to uplift blacks” (498). France’s white guilt manifests completely differently than white US guilt because France still for the most part does not recognize that racism is institutionalized, and it also refuses to deal with its colonial past in an honest way. White guilt in France looks more like defensiveness, in a way. That said, the fact that *Intouchables* made people feel good is precisely because it portrays a friendship across racial difference. The existence of this very feeling ‘good’ derives from the unacknowledged situation of profound racial inequalities in France. In that sense, a sense of redemption is at play in the reception of the film. At the same time, as Steele argues, it does nothing to actually empower people of color in France.

Refusing to apologize for the past relies on cutting off the present from the past, which is the strategy France has been implementing until now¹²⁷. I discuss more in detail France’s position in section two, in my sub-section “Colonial Denial”. As I have shown, Sarkozy’s Dakar speech is the perfect example of a non-apology; one that ends up elevating the French nation and putting down African nations. Denial is a defense strategy. It is also a manifestation of what Robin DiAngelo calls “white fragility” or a refusal to feel bad, in my terms. She writes that “white fragility may be conceptualized as a response or “condition” produced and reproduced by the continuous social and material advantages of whiteness” (248). The paradox, she

¹²⁷ Different presidents have had different positions on the matter, some insisting on the un-repentance such as Sarkozy. Others, like current president Emmanuel Macron, have used ambivalent approaches. On the one hand, Macron clearly stated that colonization was a crime against humanity (Anne) – a statement poorly received by the French – but on the other hand, he stated that African nations have “civilizational” problems (20minutes), on the same mode as Sarkozy’s. I discuss Macron’s position more in detail in section five.

contends, is that “at the same time as it is ubiquitous, white superiority is also unnamed and denied by most whites [and] white moral objection to racism increases white resistance to acknowledging complicity with it” (248). One of the defense strategies of white supremacy when confronted with its racism is to appropriate the language of oppression to talk about themselves as victims; hence why anti-white racism now seems to be a thing. In France, this strategy is quite prevalent.

There is now an organization called OLRA (Organisation de Lutte contre le Racisme Anti-blanc), which fights instances of what it calls ‘anti-white racism’. I put the term in quotation marks because the only way such an organization and statement can exist is because France understands racism as the plague of egalitarian societies, not as a technology of unequal societies. Because French society is not equal, appropriating the term ‘racism’ to describe prejudiced behaviors against white people, the dominant group, is a blatant act of power. But the truth is that the label ‘antiwhite racist’ has been used to dismiss scholars such as Houria Bouteldja for simply pointing out white privilege to white people (378); that is, for telling white people that they are white:

Pour le PIR, la race existe, les races sociales existent. La preuve, c'est qu'elles luttent. En France, les Indigènes ont pris l'arme de la race pour combattre une rhétorique redoutable : l'universalisme. Un universalisme blanc qui masque et nie les hiérarchies structurelles qui constituent la République française (*Nous sommes...*, 378).

Bouteldja points out two key traits of French antiracism: it is steeped in white universalism and it ignores France’s structural inequalities. Why is it so hard for white people to be called white? Because if they are, it means they have to re-think their idea of universalism and equality. It

also means that maybe they are not 'good' people. In short, accepting to be named is accepting to question their entire frame of reference and national identity.

Furthermore, the Republic measures its level of enlightenment (regarding diversity) and inclusivity by how well it tolerates difference. Of course, as Tévanian justly remarks in *La mécanique raciste*, tolerance is a racist virtue at the same time as it can be a stage of overcoming racism (129-131). The problem is that tolerance is the counterpart of white egalitarianism and is often the final stage of overcoming racism, as far as progressive white French people are concerned. It is a concept whose sole purpose is to make white people feel good about themselves. It doesn't represent any kind of real antiracist praxis, but rather an injunction to be magnanimous in allowing the existence of what we find unpleasant. It preserves the hierarchies of power in which we (white people) remain at the top and in control of the racial narratives. In other words, France's discourse of tolerance is a technology of white supremacy that hides racist discourse and protects existing racist structures of exclusion. It is also a technology for preserving white innocence. In *White Innocence*, Gloria Wekker writes about the white Dutch message to racialized others in the Netherlands: "The implicit and infernal message, the double bind we get presented with all the time is: "If you want to be equal to us, then don't talk about difference; but if you are different from us, then you are not equal" (Prins 2002)" (15-16). French racialized others are facing the exact same message. I discuss in section five the way they take apart this message and push back by creating their own language to give voice to their lived experience.

The Diversity Business

I want to begin this section with a recapitulation of the ways in which the discourse of diversity/difference has been coopted by neoliberalism¹²⁸ in France. It is such a discourse that allows a movie like *Bande de filles* – which arguably accessorizes blackness – to be thought of as progressive and for a movie like *Intouchables* to be portrayed as a celebration of friendship across difference. In the past 20 years, public intellectuality has steadily restricted racial meanings in the service of the Republic's policing of race politics. In France, it has done so in several distinct ways. First of all, races don't exist and so racism is a matter of individual prejudice, not a systemic issue involving dominant and marginalized populations. Second, the Republic is diverse, but diversity is a private matter, and difference¹²⁹ is not recognized as socially/politically/legally relevant. Third, antiracism is the expression of white tolerance aka white goodness. There is thus a tension between diversity and tolerance, which looks good on white people/the Republic, and difference/*communautarisme*, which is threatening because it is the claim by the 'diverse' populations that they are more than just a token of the Republic's 'diversity' agenda. Last but not least, difference in general is framed as a (integration) problem¹³⁰ and a crisis of national security¹³¹. Because racism is a matter of individual prejudice and difference a threat to national unity, public racial knowledge as a whole is mostly confined to sensational media stories and individual testimonies, but can also be found in sensational

¹²⁸ I understand neoliberalism as an ideology whose practice entails, among other things, the commodification of individuals to maximize capitalist profits while claiming to promote the flourishing of all individuals regardless of race, sex, gender or sexual orientation. In that sense, I am following Grace Hong's definition of neoliberalism in *Death Beyond Disavowal*: neoliberalism is "an epistemological structure of disavowal, a means of claiming that racial and gendered violences are things of the past" (7).

¹²⁹ It's important to repeat that diversity in France means non-white and non-Christian. Therefore, saying that difference is a private matter only applies to non-whites and non-Christians.

¹³⁰ See *Islamophobie*, Hajjat and Mohammed 2013.

¹³¹ See *A quoi sert "l'identité nationale"?*, Noiriél 2007.

‘scholarly’ works by the likes of Pascal Bruckner or Oriana Fallaci that feed into the national threat stories.

I frame my argument in a neoliberal (and therefore capitalist) context because there is money in the business of policing racial politics and in reinforcing white solidarity and supremacy. By extension, there is money in the business of telling stories of fake egalitarianism and ‘tolerance’ like *Intouchables* as well as in the production of stories of ‘dangerous’ (perceived) Muslims, as I discuss in section three. Indeed, Islamophobia and the general negative othering of racial bodies pay well in high TV ratings but also in electoral votes. At the height of the veil controversy in the early 2000s, the media favored strongly opinionated figures with inflammatory islamophobic rhetoric, which were sure to boost television ratings.

It turns out that *Intouchables* made an incredible profit. The movie’s rate of return was 602% (Libération). Indeed, the film gathered 19 million viewers with a budget of ten million euros (allociné). Internationally, *Intouchables* attracted 31.9 million viewers and was nominated for a plethora of awards¹³². Mainstream societies agreed with the critics that, indeed, the film made them feel good. As an independent film, *Bande de filles* did really well and was in the top 20 of the most profitable French movies of 2014, with a rate of return of 112% (BFM Business). But the success of Sciamma’s film lies more in the intellectual prestige it gained. It received a number of Césars nominations and received the special jury prize at the Lumières awards, an institution rewarding specifically French films. It also did well internationally, receiving among others the special jury prize at the Philadelphia Film Festival. Sciamma profits from the intellectual legitimacy and (perceived) expertise the success of her film gave her. It constructs

¹³² A list of the nominations and awards can be found here:
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Olivier_Nakache_%26_%C3%89ric_Toledano.

and strengthens her position as a progressive, social justice oriented artist. As for Nakache and Toledano, the success of *Intouchables* gives them the reputation of making a certain kind of movies that people want to see, increasing the chance of their future economic success. The fact that their next movie was *Samba*, which also featured Omar Sy¹³³, is proof that diversity and its related themes are definitely worth capitalizing on.

Conclusion: Re-imagining White Public Scholarship in France: Recognition & Disruption of White Solidarity

I discuss in section one the changes in the role of the intellectual in France in recent years, as well as the kinds of intellectuals who occupy the front of the public stage. Historian Gérard Noiriel in *A quoi sert "l'identité nationale"?* describes the changes in the place of public intellectuals in France, who were in majority leftist up until the 1980s, and the new role they have come to play in the reactivation of the discourse on national identity. Most of the public intellectuals in France today are right wing conservatives who are strong advocates for the Republic's national story about integration, meritocracy, racism and antiracism, and 'the Muslim problem'. Noiriel explains that there has been a divorce between public intellectuality and scientific expertise. Public intellectuals are perceived as carrying out the agenda of politicians, which is not an unfounded criticism when one considers intellectuals like Alain Finkielkraut and Elizabeth Badinter, but which prevents any public intellectual from being recognized both publicly and by their academic field. He writes:

¹³³ It is difficult when writing about such a topic not to write as if the people I am writing about are completely stripped of agency. I would like to take a moment to acknowledge that they are not. Omar Sy has done very well for himself, becoming an international star and casting in Hollywood blockbusters such as *Jurassic World*, for example. While I think his success can be questioned and analyzed through a racial lens, per the capitalist standards of our society, Sy is a definite success story.

Ceux qui choisissent de s'investir dans la science sont marginalisés, même quand ils continuent à intervenir dans le débat public, pour la simple et bonne raison que leur manière de poser les problèmes ne correspond pas aux attentes des médias. À l'inverse, les intellectuels de gouvernement acquièrent une notoriété médiatique en commentant les questions d'actualité, mais de ce fait ils se coupent du monde savant (76).

Today, intellectuals who prevail in the public sphere are those who hold various discourses that, among other things, work closely with the media to frame media reporting and representation of people of color that confirm and enforce stereotypes. These intellectuals have a lot of power to represent, silence, and influence. Effectively, they do the work of representing and destroying (Melamed).

Elizabeth Badinter is a pertinent example of this, seen through her role in the veil controversy. She immediately took position in favor of the laws restricting the freedom of Muslim women in schools and public spaces. She can be heard practicing a version of "La France, on l'aime ou on la quitte" in the form of white republican feminism (see section three, "La femme 'libérée'"). In the span of a few sentences, Badinter manages a) to misrepresent Islam by collapsing the various kinds of veils Muslim women wear and their significations, b) to destroy them by reducing them to the type of the submissive woman, and c) to rhetorically expel them from France. While this kind of story about what it means to be a Muslim woman is to be expected from a right wing conservative like Badinter, it is not the prerogative of the right. In fact, arguably just as dangerous and more insidious is the antiracist discourse of so-called liberal leftists like MRAP and NPNS who perpetuate an understanding of race as hate of

the other, and antiracism as a function of enriching white people and the nation, teaching them tolerance, thanks to the incorporation of diversity into its midst.

White intellectuals who are doing academically sound work that actively questions state ideology and media representation still have a privileged position conferred to them by their whiteness as a social reality. In their role of knowledge producers, intellectuals are responsible for the construction of difference as a problem that is picked up and reinforced by the media through the telling of the same story. It is essential that they use it to do public scholarship that is informed by those politics to support and display the work of activists and scholars of color who have already been doing the work of questioning, critiquing, and imagining new ways of being French for decades. The work of scholars like Guénif-Souillamas and Macé is essential to contextualizing the hypervisibility of people of color because it is historically (and thus ethically) motivated work. White Intellectuals like Eric Macé, Sylvie Tissot or Pierre Tévanian are using their intellectual platforms to produce more ethical scholarship: to question their own positionality as white people and to educate themselves so as to write about race in a way that does not oppress and coopt but recognizes and builds on the work of scholars of colors. Before they can tell stories of and with people of color, whites must do a work of recognition and know their own stories. This is a crucial issue, because white intellectuals have a public voice that is denied intellectuals of color and people of color in general.

One of the ways for white intellectuals to dismantle white universalism is to acknowledge and engage with their very positionality as white intellectuals, which is personal as well as historical work. Tévanian is a great example of an ethical white intellectual presence in France today. In a section of *La mécanique* titled “Le mal-être antiraciste,” Tévanian writes

that an ethical white scholar actively disrupts French universalism by disrupting their own so-called universal positionality. Tévanian questions his own 'success story' by engaging with France's meritocratic understanding of success. He writes: "J'ai dû faire deux fois moins d'efforts pour réussir ce que j'entreprenais mais auparavant, déjà, j'avais dû faire dix fois moins d'efforts pour seulement penser à l'entreprendre" (105). In light of his position, Tévanian advocates an antiracism that practices "treason": "Il faut au contraire accepter de se voir renvoyer à la face son statut de privilégié de la part de non-Blan(he)s – soucieux de nous rappeler cette réalité qu'on a tendance à oublier ou à mésestimer: que ce sont eux qui morflent et pas nous" (109). What Tévanian is advocating in writing about treason is what I think of as the formation of a new solidarity, which is, in my understanding, the work the organic intellectual can do.

Gramsci's concept of the organic intellectual is useful here because it is a position that is a process rather than fixed. Gramsci distinguishes two kinds of intellectuals:

there are the "traditional" professional intellectuals, literary, scientific and so on, whose position in the interstices of society has a certain inter-class aura about it but derives ultimately from past and present class relations and conceals an attachment to various historical class formations. Secondly, there are the "organic" intellectuals, the thinking and organising element of a particular fundamental social class. These organic intellectuals are distinguished less by their profession, which may be any job characteristic of their class, than by their function in directing the ideas and aspirations of the class to which they organically belong (131).

The organic intellectual, as I understand it, is also particularly pertinent to the kind of connected (that is, public) scholarship I am advocating because it develops a relation with a group through their already existing intellectuality as opposed to ‘teaching the masses’. In other words, it is a kind of intellectual who sees the knowledge and expertise already in the marginalized populations and who can create the conditions for debate with these populations and on those populations’ own terms. Re-imagining white public scholarship is disrupting/moving away from Rancière’s ‘space of consensus’ and re-evaluating what critical thinking is and does: “there is a whole school of so-called critical thought and art that, despite its oppositional rhetoric, is entirely integrated within the space of consensus.” *Bande de filles* and *Intouchables* are media products of this consensus, and so are antiracist organizations such as MRAP and NPNS.

This kind of solidarity can only emerge through a work of recognition and awareness, which is not to be confused with a work of self-flagellation. Indeed, Tévanian and others such as DiAngelo and Shannon Sullivan caution against falling into the pit of self-hatred that is one end of the spectrum of negative feelings that are counterproductive to social justice. In “On the need for a new ethos of white antiracism,” Sullivan explains how a state of guilt leads white people to use black people to generate their own sense of goodness and relieve their guilt (25 – 34). In *Knowing Otherwise*, Alexis Shotwell discusses the benefits of feeling the discomfort of shame in relation to racism, which is especially important for my purposes here given that France’s overall reaction has been to repudiate white guilt. Feeling bad, Shotwell argues, can produce solidarity:

It is important and appropriate for white people to feel uncomfortable about our own and other people's individual racism. But this only takes us so far. Negative affect is a good thing when it is both an appropriate response to loathsome social relations and provides a spur or a method for transforming those social relations" (73-74).

In her work, Shotwell is "looking for some kinds of negative affect that might make race differently visible to white people while simultaneously de-centering whiteness" (80). She is looking for what I call simply a state of discomfort, which is a state that I think is loathed in general precisely because it is not a very clear, well defined feeling. Unlike shame, which one might seek to alleviate by using marginalized others to feel better about oneself, discomfort demands to be engaged with. It can be dismissed, but my work is obviously a call not to dismiss it. In fact, it is a call to 'sit in it'. White people need to familiarize themselves with racial discomfort in order to build what DiAngelo calls racial stamina.

Re-inventing antiracism may start with recognition and feelings of discomfort, shame, guilt, but I agree with Ahmed that

declaring whiteness, or even 'admitting' to one's own racism, when the declaration is assumed to be 'evidence' of an anti-racist commitment, does not do what it says. In other words, putting whiteness into speech, as an object to be spoken about, however critically, is not an anti-racist action, and nor does it necessarily commit a state, institution or person to a form of action that we could describe as anti-racist ("Declarations of Whiteness," 3).

This statement from "Declarations of Whiteness: The Non-Performativity of Anti-Racism" is in keeping with Ahmed's cautious position regarding the role of public shame and repentance. In

other words, what can a re-imagined white public scholarship do? Even more radically, what does it have to give up in order to advance the cause of social justice, in the words of Audre Lorde?

I am not asking Sciamma, Toledano and Nakache to make different movies from the ones they made. Frankly, I don't know exactly what those different movies would look like. What I am asking is that they engage honestly with the questions and criticism that were put to them and use it in their future work. I am calling for white intellectuality to do the work of recognizing and questioning. What does it mean to claim to be outside of (racial) politics? What kind of privilege enables them not to be engaged politically, and how is that in itself a political position? What if, by thinking their positionality, they were able to finally tell a different story? Finally, I ask that they recognize, respect and value the agency of nonwhites. In the words of Mamadou Diouf:

As in colonial situations, residents of the suburbs are not only acted upon, but act. Individually and collectively, persons question, divert, dissolve, widen, and scorn the discourse and prescriptions of the triple heritage that envelops them: familial, colonial, and metropolitan. In this generative tension, they seize a territory (their banlieue) and vest it with social, cultural, and religious practices. In so doing, they forge a community that self-identifies by race, culture, religion, and, of course, membership in the French nation, itself a self-declared community. An area is designated—the suburbs—where they reinvent French identity, reintroducing cultural pluralism and reopening the debate on citizenship, race, and culture (44).

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5. The Color of Normative French A Discussion on Power, Language and Identity

The idea that the French language needs to be protected and defended is inscribed in a long tradition of state language policies¹³⁴ dating back to the 16th century. Ever since the ordinance of Villers-Cotterêts of 1539, the French state has claimed guardianship of the language and intervened in its use and dissemination. Five major events in particular can help visualize the process of the state's embedding in language. In the 16th century, the above-mentioned ordinance imposed the use of French in legal documents instead of Latin. The preservation of the French linguistic norm is so paramount to the dominant understanding of French identity that in 1635, Cardinal Richelieu created an institution charged with policing the use of French, the Académie Française. In 1883, as the French colonial empire was approaching its peak, the Alliance Française was created to promote French and francophone culture. Fighting against what it saw as an English invasion, the French government passed the 1975 Bas-Lauriol law stating that public notices, ads, etc. had to be in French. The law also prohibited the use of a foreign language expressions if there existed an equivalent in French. Then in 1992, French became the official language of France as part of a language policy that relies on state monolingualism. This language policy culminated with the passing of the Toubon law in 1994, whose mission was to protect the French language from English invasion in the following areas: advertising, audiovisual media, education and labor.

These policies have created but also ensured a strong bond between nation and language, which, over time has become an intrinsic and fundamental component of French

¹³⁴ For a detailed discussion of language policies in France as they relate to the language's connection to identity and its perpetual state of perceived insecurity, see Dennis Ager *Identity, Insecurity and Image* chapter one (15-41).

national identity and unity. A most salient example of this is the fact that French was seen as essential to the French Revolution because it was the means to diffuse their democratic ideals. Indeed, French urban populations and nobles spoke French for the most part, but rural populations did not and their ignorance was perceived as an obstacle to democracy, which explains why revolutionaries tried to impose the French language during their brief 'reign of terror'. In short, during the centuries France moved towards a democratic regime, French became a technology to unite and strengthen opposition to royal regimes via linguistic homogenization¹³⁵. French has been instrumentalized to promote the Republican ideals of universalism and meritocracy for 300 years.

The will to homogenize language use in metropolitan France also applied to the colonial empire. The use of French was imposed in particular in official documents and in education, with always the same goal of enlightening the colonized population through public education and the use of a common language. In *Linguistique et colonialisme*, French linguist Louis-Jean Calvet has shown very clearly the ways in which metropolitan France and colonial territories have suffered from this linguistic imperialism, and whose most recent iteration has taken on the neoliberal mask of *francophonie*. Calvet explains how the French colonizers were mired in an ideological perception of linguistic situations that led them to declare all African languages 'dialects' (51-52) because they were not perceived as equal means of communicating; only French was a 'language'. Calvet justly concludes: "le dialecte n'est jamais qu'une langue battue,

¹³⁵ For more detailed histories of French: Perret (1998) offers a concise and educational history of French; Chaurand (2012) combines a history of the syntax and phonetics of French with its social, political and cultural history. See de Certeau et al. (1986) for a detailed analysis of the emergence of French as national language. See also Huchon (2002); Rey et al. (2011).

et [...] la langue est un dialecte qui a réussi politiquement. (54). I examine in this section the unfortunate legacies of this belief in French's inherent superiority and prestige.

In today's France, French is a way to gauge a person's level of "integration" and therefore grant them (or not) citizenship status. In 2011, a new law regarding immigration requires that candidates for citizenship now prove a high degree of proficiency in French:

La loi du 16 juin 2011 relative à l'immigration, à l'intégration et à la nationalité [...] met l'accent sur l'assimilation linguistique et culturelle des étrangers postulant à la nationalité française : le niveau de maîtrise de la langue française attendu des nouveaux Français est relevé. Ils doivent avoir une connaissance suffisante de l'histoire, de la culture et de la société françaises, et adhérer aux principes et valeurs essentiels de la République (Ministère de l'Intérieur).

In this final section, I am looking at normative French from the perspective of race and gender and considering its use as a technology of white supremacy. How does the French language affect French residents' sense of belonging to the nation, and their acceptance into its fold, in light of its profound connection to national identity? What is the role of the colonial empire in the establishment of French as part of France's (white) identity? In France's monolingual, seemingly homogeneous tradition, how is difference (non-white, non-binary) expressed? Does French as a language have a color, like Québécois poet Michèle Lalonde suggests in her poem "Speak White"? In this section, I am interested in both the affective and political dimensions of the French language, but also in its linguistic dimension. More specifically, I am concerned with the relationship between the story we tell ourselves about language and how that narrative affects the way it is used in the context of diversity and

inclusion. In what ways is the French language a technology central to French white supremacy?

Linguistic Hegemony: Who Owns French?

In this section, I am looking at how French is instrumentalized to rule and exclude by looking at global (macro) and local (micro) situations, with the understanding that they are interconnected and inform each other to construct the imagined community of “French” and to enforce the power of white supremacy.

One Language, One Nation

France is conceived of as one nation with one language; it is thought of as monolingual and homogenous, despite the fact that it is, in fact, multilingual and heterogeneous¹³⁶. This conception of language is by no means unique to French. It is informed by a western, structuralist notion that language is a system (influenced by Saussure and Chomsky), a monolingual structure with defined boundaries and an autonomous existence, separate from other languages. In “Linguistic Utopias,” Mary Louise Pratt expands Benedict Anderson’s conception of nation-states as communities that are sovereign, bounded, arbitrary, and imagined by applying this notion to speech communities:

Behind Languge, behind Saussure’s diagram, stands the imagined of the modern, imagined community: discrete, sovereign, fraternal – a linguistic utopia. In the

¹³⁶ For more on the politics of language and identity see *Linguistic Identities and Policies in France and the French-speaking World* by Dawn Marley, Marie-Anne Hintze and Gabrielle Parker (1998).

Chomskyan tradition of maximally homogeneous object of study is achieved in the construct of the ideal speaker whose competence the theory is to account for while the 'deep, horizontal comradeship' Anderson talks about is embodied in the idea of competence as an innate, discrete resource all humans share (50-51).

Although this conception of nation and language as homogeneous is not unique to France, it is particularly strong there. Dennis Ager in *Identity, Insecurity and Image* discusses the bond established between nation and language. He examines how French is part of the state's unity apparatus in that it is deployed to prevent the disintegration of the nation state¹³⁷. Indeed, French as an ideological construct is directly connected to France's approach to diversity and fear of *communautarisme*, which is essentially a fear of de-unification. Ager explains that "France has felt the need to include the language among the other symbols of the state – the flag, the national anthem, the very name (République Française) and the three words which signify the underlying republican values (Liberté, Egalité, Fraternité). [...] French is, and has long been, *une affaire d'Etat*" (116). From this essentialist perspective, French is not simply a means of communicating but rather an intrinsic part of French identity. It explains why language policies in France attempt to directly shape its self-perception and not merely represent it (Ager, 128). French is the official language of the country but more importantly of its identity.

While it is natural for people to love their language, the French have shown a particularly strong affective attachment to the French linguistic standard itself, which is conceived of as a 'monument' one needs to respect and honor by mastering the way it functions (its grammar, syntax and vocabulary). What this implies for language speakers is that

¹³⁷ See chapter 2, pp. 42-62.

language has agency over them. In fact, a number of language-defense associations protecting this specific configuration of French have formed over the years and then been recognized by the state (particularly at the time of the Toubon Law), such as *Défense de la Langue Française* (1958) or *Avenir de la Langue Française* (1983), for instance. Indeed, there is a (The) right way of speaking and writing in French that one must acquire and master in order to ‘speak French.’ Standards of grammar and vocabulary use as well as (in particular) pronunciation need to be upheld.

In “*Les Français et la norme linguistique: une passion singulière*,” Anne Coppel discusses the ramifications of French people’s love of linguistic norms, from the way it served the political function in the 17th century of affirming the power of the state, to being the weapon for fighting ignorance and obscurantism in the 18th century, to the way it is still used today as a gauge of a person’s intelligence. She describes the way linguistic concerns intersect with political and affective ones: “L’exception linguistique française, c’est l’attachement non pas à la langue, ce qui est partagé dans toutes les cultures, mais à la norme, parce que la standardisation de la langue a accompagné la création de l’État centralisateur” (Coppel, 157). Indeed, for those who lament language changes and label them as regressions and transgressions,

la défense de la langue française n’est pas seulement la défense de notre patrimoine le plus précieux, c’est la civilisation qui est menacée [...] C’est une guerre qui doit être menée avec vigueur, car pour les puristes, la menace qui pèse sur la langue ne fait pas de doute : les Français parlent mal, la langue se dégrade, déplorent de génération en génération les tenants de la tradition” (159).

According to a BVA survey of March 2018, the French tend to agree with this view. 74% of the interviewees declared that the biggest threat to French was the poverty of its teaching in schools. 72% in fact declared that improving French classes should be the number priority of the education department. Of course, 75% agreed with the statement that French is an essential component of French identity. These numbers corroborate the national attachment to the language, but the rhetoric of the survey's report is particularly interesting:

(72%) pensent qu'il est avant tout prioritaire d'améliorer l'enseignement du français dans l'éducation nationale afin que la langue française **se porte mieux**¹³⁸. [...] Sept personnes sur dix disent être **prêtes à agir pour la langue française** [...] un Français sur deux (51%) pourrait confier à un organisme accrédité une délégation de pouvoirs lui permettant, **en son nom**, d'intervenir lors **d'abus préjudiciables à leur langue**.

In this text, French is not a constellation of language practices nor is it even a prestigious structure following the state's monolingual conception of language; it is a person who needs to be brought back to health and defended against aggressions¹³⁹. It is not only that language has agency over the users, but also that it is equally if not more important than them, which will be an important consideration later in this section.

The International 'Mood' of France's Linguistic Attachment

I contend that this national attachment creates a mood, in Jonathan Flatley's term, which in turn shapes the way French is perceived and disseminated abroad. In *Affective*

¹³⁸ All texts in bold are my emphases.

¹³⁹ Ager discusses for example the threat the spread of English represents to French in the form of France's fear of 'Franglais' in chapter five (98-115).

Mapping, Flatley conceives of mood as follows: “Following Heidegger, I take “mood” to refer to a kind of affective atmosphere, [...] in which intentions are formed, projects pursued, and particular affects can attach to particular objects” (19). What most interests me is the way Flatley sees mood as

a plural phenomenon; we only have access to the moods that we find around us, the moods into which we have been educated, and the moods that have been shaped or determined by the concrete historical context in which we coexist. As a concept, mood provides a way to articulate the shaping and structuring effect of historical context on our affective attachments (19-20).

Flatley visualizes mood as a kind of social foundation, but also, in Heidegger’s terms, as a way of being attuned to something. In terms of my argument, what this means is that the historically rooted national investment in and attachment to language provides/creates a mood, so to speak, which shapes how French and thus France are represented and perceived abroad. France’s belief in its civilizational superiority as well as the prestige of its language has contributed to the mythical France the outside world tends to cling to. I am, for instance, referring to common stereotypes attached to France: that the cuisine is fancy, the people cultured and well spoken, etc. I argue that this image of France is carefully and often unconsciously disseminated and at the same time sought out and reinforced by Francophiles. Since I am a teacher, I will be looking at the way this manifests in my French language classrooms. I found that my students are attuned to French in a way that is complex to define but that can may be catachrestically described as a kind of reverence or a submissive love. This in turn affects their perception of their own positionality in relation to the language. Because of

the atmosphere I have described, the students are acutely aware that this language does not belong to them. I contend that the teaching of French abroad carries with it this ideology and affective attachment.

I conducted an affect and language survey in the winter of 2015 and was able to gather information from a total of 40 students over six classes¹⁴⁰. I will not be giving here a full discussion of my findings but rather focus on the issue of how students felt about French. Claire Kramersch's in *The Multilingual Subject* documents that students of French perceived French "as having mythic powers to make learners feel 'more intelligent,' 'more educated'" (59). I found that to be the case as well for my study. Many wrote about how French allowed them into another culture and opened doors into a new world, describing feeling better rounded or smarter because of French. Overwhelmingly, students described learning French as a complex mind exercise such as doing a puzzle or doing math. When asked what speaking French was like for them, a number of students who later in the survey wrote that they rarely speak in French wrote about what it felt like to hear it. They wrote about French being like an 'afternoon tea', 'a walk in the forest', or talked about how it is 'music to [their] ears' or like 'reading poetry.' In line with Kramersch's findings, the students I surveyed heavily associate France and learning French with traditional or stereotypical cultural discourses on the country, the people, and the language (Kramersch, 59). Almost all of them associate French and France with elegance, culture, art, and fine food. Almost all of them showed a fascination with France as they construe it

¹⁴⁰ Most of them were intermediate French learners (200-level French). A few of them were beginner French learners (100-level French). The questionnaires were filled out anonymously in order to preserve the student-teacher relationship free of biases, since they are currently in class with the teachers that administered the questionnaire. They were given the option to respond in French or in English, but only one student chose to write in French. The only direct personal question I asked on the questionnaire was what they considered to be their native language. The survey can be found in the appendix section of this section.

through stereotypes, and 24 out of 40 students declared most feeling fascination when learning French, in answer to question seven. We can see here that most of the students have internalized a vision of France and French as monuments to respect and revere, which is perfectly in keeping France's 'mission civilisatrice.' Ager explains that "France [considered it] had a mission to civilise others by insisting that they benefit from her language, her **enlightened understanding** of the world and her culture" (192).

Kramersch is concerned with showing that learning a second language is an embodied experience that engages both mind and body and to show how the mind and body are interconnected, in order to advocate a concept of language as "a symbolic system that constructs the very reality it refers to and that acts upon the reality through the categories it imposes on it" (2). By showing how learning a language is an embodied experience that engages all the resources and literacies each student already has at their disposal, she questions the way SLA pedagogical approaches all seem to conceive of language as neutral, as "a communication tool for the achievement of social tasks" (Kramersch, 2). This view of language invites a kind of teaching whose goal is to bring learners to so-called 'native' language proficiency: "students are taught a standardized linguistic system with which they are expected to approximate a monolingual native speaker and reader" (Kramersch, 3).

In the teaching of French, the mystique of the native speaker proficiency exerts a pressure on students that affects their language use. Multilingual students¹⁴¹ in particular expressed that they did not use the language orally because their pronunciation was not 'right'. All 40 students in the survey expressed at some point or another the idea that there is a right way of speaking

¹⁴¹ In my survey, all the multilingual students were non-white.

in French, which they need to get to. Their own perception of the language, which I argue evolves out of the mood I described earlier, shapes what they think they need to achieve. Many of them described themselves as observers and listeners in the classroom, made silent by their inability to pronounce the language 'perfectly'.

The idea that there is a proper way to pronounce French is unquestioningly and often unconsciously taught by French teachers of French abroad, but it is also very important to students. I have been pointedly told time and again by students I teach or tutor that they want a French teacher from France, so they can learn the proper pronunciation: standard French, aka metropolitan French pronunciation. Any other way of speaking French, such as Quebecois or Senegalese French is deemed a deviation from the French metropolitan norm. Such a norm is of course a figment of the national imagination, since each region, each county, each individual even, practices the language with various accents and grammars that all vary in the way they negotiate the norm in place¹⁴². This norm has, however, tremendous power over the students. The interesting contradiction is that while they want to speak like a native speaker, their inability to produce 'perfect sounds', i.e. mimic the pronunciation of the ideal native speaker, is precisely what prevents them from speaking at all and thus from practicing so they can improve their pronunciation.

In "The Ownership of English," H.G. Widdowson asks the questions of what a native speaker is and who owns the language. Although his arguments are based on the idealized native English speaker norms, his points can be extended to the learning of French. In problematizing the seemingly unproblematic notion of the native speaker, Widdowson comes

¹⁴² In English, this led to the expression 'world Englishes' officialized with the creation of the International Committee of the Study of World Englishes (ICWE) in 1988. There is no equivalent for French.

to the following conclusion: “the authority to maintain the standard language is not consequent on a natural native-speaker endowment. It is claimed by a minority people who have the **power** to impose it. The custodians of standard English are self-elected members of a rather exclusive club” (379). The same is true of the maintenance of the standard of language in French, which is carried out at the pedagogical level. The native speaker standard, by nature impossible to meet for non-native speakers, ends up preserving the distance between French and non-French while nurturing a kind of longing between non-native language users and the language, which validates France’s feeling of superiority.

To conclude this section, it is useful to look at the “Why Study French?” UW French department pitch to students on the department website. It declares that “ [their] immersion into the linguistic, cultural, and literary richness of the **French speaking world** will broaden [their] personal horizons and make [them] better-informed citizens of the world.” That said, it also presents the learning of francophone literature/culture as somewhat secondary or peripheral to the learning of French culture: “You will **also** have a chance to **discover** the thriving discipline of Francophone literature, coming from regions such as the Caribbean, North Africa, Canada, and Guadeloupe.” In other words, you first need to learn the heart/center of the culture (France) and then, if you feel like it/have time for it, you can discover what is at its periphery. This approach can be thought of in terms of linguist Braj Kachru’s three concentric circles. He conceives of ‘World Englishes’ as circles, with the inner circle representing the traditional bases of English (England, the USA, etc.). In our case, the inner circle is France, and the outer circles represent former colonial sites. This implies that the ‘World Frenches’ used in the former colonies are derived from France’s French, not real French.

French in the Colonial Project: Becoming a Vehicle of National Identity

Even though it may seem contradictory to begin a discussion of French in relation to national identity by focusing on its dissemination abroad, it actually makes much sense in light of the colonies' role in shaping the French language's central role in the national ideal. Because French became an essential component of French identity in large part from contact with non-white, non-Christian populations, it is crucial to look at French in its colonial context in order to understand how it shapes the lives of non-white, non-heteronormative populations in today's French society. Well before it became the strongest symbol of French national identity, French was used as a tool to carry out France's civilizing mission in the regions it colonized. Indeed, French wasn't simply the language spoken by the colonizers. It was exported in a systematic and organized manner to Africa and Canada from the very beginning of colonization. In "Être français en Nouvelle-France," Belmessous explains:

Même s'il [le français] était devenu, depuis la fin du Moyen-Age, « l'un des caractères distinctifs de la nation et en tout cas un objet d'amour » pour les élites intellectuelles et politiques du royaume, **il n'était pas considéré comme une composante essentielle de l'identité nationale**. La situation en allait différemment au Canada en raison de la présence massive de populations amérindiennes qu'il fallait franciser. En choisissant de substituer les langues autochtones par la langue officielle du royaume, **les autorités instituaient clairement le français comme un critère nécessaire de l'identité coloniale**" (516).

French did not become an essential component of French identity until the revolution, even if, paradoxically, it was already an important part of the colonial identity. Before sustained efforts at *francisation* began in metropolitan France, the country was richly multilingual¹⁴³.

After the French Revolution, a more systematic undermining of local languages began and a language hierarchy was established, inscribed on the one hand in European discourses that claimed the superiority of French¹⁴⁴ (and European languages in general), and on the other hand in the republican belief of French as universal language of knowledge and education. In “A bas la francophonie!” Cécile Canut writes:

Le modèle d'uniformisation linguistique expérimenté en France après la Révolution (volonté affichée d'éradication des patois et dialectes du symbole pour empêcher les enfants de parler leur langue première en favorisant la délation, mise en place d'une forte hiérarchisation sociale des différentes langues, etc.) a été strictement reproduit dans les colonies, où, à la différence du système de l'indirect rule anglaise, aucune langue locale n'est prise en compte, ni codifiée, ni standardisée (143-144).

¹⁴³ These languages were called *patois*, however, following France's tradition of undermining languages other than French. For more on the issue of dialects in France, see Jean-William Lapierre (1988); Henriette Walter (1998); Claude Hagège (2002).

¹⁴⁴ In “La politique de la langue en France,” Anne Szulmajster-Celnikier describes the State's long-standing implication in matters of language in France. At the end of 18th century, the treaty of Rastatt unseats Latin as the language of European diplomacy in favor of French: “Il fait même figure de langue internationale, fondant ce mythe si durable d' « universalité », conforté par le fameux *Discours sur l'universalité de la langue française* de Rivarol, et répandu plus tard par Montesquieu, Voltaire et d'autres” (41). I tend to agree with Calvet that this is a sign of a “courant idéologique de guerre linguistique, axée à la fois vers l'intérieur (imposer le français en France comme langue d'Etat) et vers l'extérieur (démontrer la supériorité du français face aux autres langues d'Etat)” (71).

The local languages were not taken into account because the French did not find them valuable. The civilizing mission¹⁴⁵ needed to construct an Other whom it could civilize and who therefore was defined by its lack of everything that makes France a culture (its language, art, history, etc.). Calvet discusses the way the field of linguistics was complicit in the colonial practice of language oppression by unquestioningly conveying its ideology (*Linguistique et colonialisme*, 120-131).

I contend, like Alastair Pennycook in *English and the Discourse of Colonialism* (38), that at the same time as France was producing Others, it was producing itself. France's national identity is by nature an oppressive identity because it constructed itself by exploiting these Others and by construing its place as that of 'teacher'. Pennycook argues that material exploitation of the colonies and the concomitant scientific, religious and cultural actions of the colonizers are essentially a manifestation of colonial discourses. For him, colonialism is first and foremost a cultural process: "colonialism should not be seen merely as an historical period but rather [...] should be understood in terms of its legacies to European thought and culture" (41). It is in large part through violent interactions with the colonized involving cultural and human destruction that France invented the myth of its cultural and moral superiority¹⁴⁶.

¹⁴⁵ Whether the 'civilizing' mission actually worked or was even truly implemented could be the subject of another section. In *La malédiction francophone*, Ambroise Kom writes of the hypocrisy and superficiality of this mission (I hint at this as well in section three regarding the implementation of *laïcité* in Algeria). Kom writes that "l'école coloniale ne fut qu'un lointain appendice à la prétendue mission civilisatrice. [...] En dehors des écoles des missions qui devaient servir de canal aux hommes d'église pour transmettre la bonne parole, dans l'espoir de sauver quelques funes de la damnation, les écoles publiques se limitaient à quelques établissements d'enseignement primaire généralement installés dans les capitales administratives des colonies" (Kom, 107). In other words, it had never been truly about integration and still isn't about integration today in France. It was always first and foremost about submission to the system.

¹⁴⁶ In *The Wretched of the Earth*, Frantz Fanon wrote that "Europe is literally the creation of the Third World".

In France, French was conceived as the way to educate the masses, hence the efforts of the revolutionaries to implement it¹⁴⁷. From the beginning, there was a relation between speaking French and one's social and economic status. As class became racialized¹⁴⁸ in contact with non-white communities in the colonies that were considered inferior, French, which was already the language of the powerful in France, was used as a tool to undermine non-European languages and cultures. In *Linguistique et colonialisme*, Calvet describes two steps of linguistic colonization (60-79): the first step is the spread of the language to the upper classes of the colonized communities and then to lower classes; the second step is the spread of the language from city centers to smaller cities and villages. The tool for this was education. In "Language and Colonialism," Migge and Léglise explain that "colonisation gave rise to a (new) language hierarchy in which the language of the coloniser was inscribed as the most prestigious language and came to dominate the administrative and mercantile structure of each colony" (5-6). This language hierarchy has tremendous material consequences for the colonized people whose access to economic opportunity was dictated by their ability (or lack thereof) to speak French. This section addresses how this hierarchy plays out in contemporary France for (former and perceived) immigrants from the colonies. Indeed, these social and economic status ramifications were embedded in the instrumentalization of the language from the very

¹⁴⁷ The *francisation* of France was truly achieved a century later, with Jules Ferry's laws establishing school as free, secular and mandatory and making the teaching of grammar and pronunciation a significant portion of the curriculum.

¹⁴⁸ Scientific racism in France officially begins with Georges Buffon *Histoire naturelle générale et particulière, théorie de la terre, histoire naturelle de l'homme, animaux et quadrupèdes*, one of the first 'scientific' human racial classification arguing that Whites were a superior race (1749-1767). In the early 20th century, race was conceived from an essentialist perspective (racial essentialism) that is, solely as a biological phenomenon, core to a person's behavior and identity. See Smedley (2002), (2005) on racial essentialism. There was also the belief that linguistic, cultural, and social groups fundamentally existed along racial lines. These two beliefs form what is known as scientific racism. On the topic, see a history of scientific racism by Zack and Ladelle (2017); also Curell and Cogdell (2006). On the racialization of class in the US, see Webster (1992); Omi and Winant (2015). On the racialization of class in France, see Fassin and Fassin (2006); Delphy (2014).

beginning. Therefore, colonization is particularly important not as a historical period but rather in terms of its legacies.

Entire languages were ignored, destroyed, and devalued in the colonization process and the imposition of French on colonized people. In destroying or devaluing these languages, French colonizers were also destroying and devaluing epistemologies, knowledge production, and identities. For the most part, this destruction wasn't carried out with the specific intention on the part of the colonizer to eradicate languages, but was rather a by-product of not using those languages or limiting their use to very specific areas, and of propagating the notion that French was a superior language, implying or clearly stating that native languages were inferior. In *Decolonising the Mind*, Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o explains why the colonizer's linguistic oppression was also an act of cultural destruction:

Language as communication and as culture are then products of each other.

Communication creates culture: culture is a means of communication. **Language carries culture, and culture carries, particularly through orature and literature, the entire body of values by which we come to perceive ourselves and our place in the world.**

How people perceive themselves and affects how they look at their culture, at their places politics and at the social production of wealth, at their entire relationship to nature and to other beings. **Language is thus inseparable from ourselves as a community of human beings** with a specific form and character, a specific history, a specific relationship to the world (16).

Thiong'o uses two terms to talk about linguistic oppression: the cultural bomb and cultural alienation. The cultural bomb is a process of wiping out pre-colonial histories and identities,

which in turns alienate people from their culture. Cultural alienation is a product of the cultural bomb in that it is a separation between the body and the mind, which are “occupying two unrelated linguistic spheres in the same person” (28). Colonial alienation¹⁴⁹ is enacted by the "deliberate disassociation of the language of conceptualisation, of thinking, of formal education, of mental development, from the language of daily interaction in the home and in the community" (28). In other words, it was a process of emotionally and psychologically alienating people from themselves.

Indeed, French elites presented French as the language of science, progress, reason and neutrality while constructing non-white languages as inferior and therefore better suited to expressing emotions, which the elites also perceived as inferior. This ideology underpinned the justification for its imposition and for the dismissing of local languages in the colonies. Part of the constellation of issues/justifications undergirding the colonial project is that imposing French was much more convenient politically and economically for French colonizers than learning local languages. Learning local languages would have given power to the colonized communities. Instead, France kept that power for itself. In the true fashion of a hegemonic power, it used French to incorporate the elite of the colonized countries by guaranteeing better education and therefore economic prospects to those who learned it.

¹⁴⁹ In *Black Skins, White Masks*, Fanon, who is concerned with un-alienating the Black man, discusses the role of French in the alienation of the Black man. He writes: “Every colonized people—in other words, every people in whose soul an inferiority complex has been created by the death and burial of its local cultural originality—finds itself face to face with the language of the civilizing nation; that is, with the culture of the mother country. The colonized is elevated above his jungle status in proportion to his adoption of the mother country’s cultural standards. He becomes whiter as he renounces his blackness, his jungle” (9).

Francisation was the assimilation method favored by French officials and the use of French was central to this. Fanon in *Black Skins, White Masks*, writes of the power of language in the colonial project:

To speak a language is to take on a world, a culture. The Antilles Negro who wants to be white will be the whiter as he gains greater mastery of the cultural tool that language is [...] Historically, it must be understood that the Negro wants to speak French because it is the key that can open doors which were still barred to him fifty years ago (25).

While it is true that the colonial project was an ideological one, I am also very much interested in the role French plays and still plays in shaping economic prospects.

Diversité à la française: la francophonie

French and the Commercial Colonial Project

Much has been written on the fact that its civilizing mission was the official justification for France's colonial project¹⁵⁰. While this was definitely a justification for France's expansion, colonization was also an economic project with very real economic ramifications that are little talked about. The French language was key to the creation of the French empire, economically speaking, and therefore to assigning a place to people in the socio-economic hierarchy. The policy of language assimilation and destruction carried out in the colonies was a copy of what was happening in France, particularly after the French revolution. Arguing for the universalization of French, l'abbé Grégoire presented a condensed version of the linguistic policy/ideology of the French state at the convention of July 1793: "Il faut qu'on examine la

¹⁵⁰ See Aldrich (1996); Costantini (2008); Blanchard et al. (2014).

nécessité et **les moyens d’anéantir les patois et d’universaliser l’usage de la langue française**” because “dans l’étendue de toute la nation, tant de jargons sont autant de barrières qui gênent les mouvements du commerce.” This excerpt encapsulates how French was envisioned as a technology for France to prosper economically but also as profiting directly, in terms of prestige, from the annihilation of other languages. Multilingualism has always been considered a problem and an obstacle to France’s economic development, which explains in large part its monolingual policies.

Understanding the ways such colonial practices persist in the form of *la francophonie* is particularly useful to establish my argument that the linguistic ideology attached to French is a technology of white supremacy in France. While the official website for the francophone institution (Organisation Internationale de la Francophonie, OIF¹⁵¹) makes no mention of colonization as the reason for the presence of French in the world other than in France¹⁵², I am interested in considering the extent to which *la francophonie* is a neocolonial commercial project.

I will start with a seemingly simple definition of *la francophonie* and move my way through its ideological, political and economic dimensions. In this section, when I refer to *la francophonie* I am referring to the system of institutions codifying the interactions between francophone countries. On its “Qu’est-ce que la francophonie?” webpage, the OIF describes institutional francophonie’s purpose as two-fold: “[c’est un] dispositif institutionnel voué à

¹⁵¹ The OIF was created originally as agence de coopération culturelle et technique (ACCT) in 1970 and later became OIF.

¹⁵² The OIF pointedly ignores the colonial history of francophonie, including in its “Qu’est-ce que la Francophonie?” section. It reads: “Dès les premières décennies du XXe siècle, des francophones prennent conscience de l’existence d’un espace linguistique partagé, propice aux échanges et à l’enrichissement mutuel.” Apparently, French just appeared out of nowhere to coalesce/enable beautiful cultural exchanges. Colonization is also ignored in the Histoire de la francophonie section, starting this history in 1926.

promouvoir la langue française et les relations de coopération entre les 84 États et gouvernements membres ou observateurs de l’OIF.” In its mission statement, the OIF vaguely specifies what it means by ‘coopération’ by referring to *développement durable* (sustainable development), which is a reference to economic aims. Nowadays, the OIF sees itself as a political force, having added to its mission the ambitious dimensions of sustainable development and the implementation of human rights and world peace.

According to Robert Chaudenson, a French linguist, *la francophonie* today has little to do with the French language and its dissemination even if it is still officially stated as one of its major goals, and more to do with being a political institution that has moved away from solely cultural concerns. In “La place de la langue française dans la francophonie,” Chaudenson deplores how “La francophonie institutionnelle, en choisissant de devenir un mini-clone de l’ONU et un conglomérat informe de pays non alignés, sans grande volonté politique, a renoncé à mener une réelle politique de diffusion de la langue française en son sein.” Chaudenson argues that the OIF’s budget for education is not adequate to its mission of spreading French in the world. He also contends that investing in school as the sole vector of French dissemination no longer works given the poverty of the education in what he calls *l’école africaine*. Nevertheless, he does not question the very mission of the OIF to disseminate French but rather takes exception to its lack of investment in that mission. Of course, *la francophonie* was never solely a cultural and linguistic endeavor, and establishing French abroad was always a part of the political and economic colonial project.

This approach to *la francophonie*, whether it be critical (like Chaudenson’s) or not, relies on an understanding of *la francophonie* as separate from colonization. Chaudenson even begins

his article by shutting down the notion that it can be construed as a neocolonial project:

“Quoique, depuis trente ans, on assiste périodiquement à la résurgence du mythe de la francophonie comme entreprise néocoloniale ourdie par une France gaulliste nostalgique de sa domination coloniale perdue, je ne m’attarderai pas sur ce point dont il est facile de démontrer l’inanité.” Unfortunately, he goes on to pepper his article with neocolonial comments such as this one:

Qu’on n’aïlle surtout pas me taxer ici d’« afro-pessimisme » ou me qualifier sottement de « déclinologue ». Je suis, bien au contraire, un optimiste résolu et ne cesse de répéter que l’Afrique est le continent de l’avenir. [...] Comment pourrait-il en être autrement puisque **ce continent, encore inexploité et même, à certains égards, inexploré**, sera bientôt le seul à conserver des richesses naturelles, quand on aura vidé des leurs tous les autres continents ?

It is unclear from his article why Chaudenson finds it so regrettable that French is poorly disseminated in the world today by OIF, or why it is important to continue its spread. His use of the terms “inexploité” and “inexploré”, however, reveals a position that is shared by the French government. France needs Africa, economically speaking¹⁵³.

Even if today, in appearance, the spread of the French language is no longer a priority on the OIF’s list, it is still an essential aspect of its foundation and is certainly still used as a

¹⁵³ In *Présence française et abandon*, former president François Mitterrand wrote: “Sans l’Afrique, la France n’aura pas d’histoire au 21ème siècle” (237). After him, Jacques Chirac recognized that “sans l’Afrique, la France glisserait vers les rangs d’un pays de troisième ordre” (quoted in Philippe Leymarie (2008)). As a final example, former Minister of International Affairs Jacques Godfrain confirmed that “petit pays [la France], avec peu de pouvoir, nous pouvons mobiliser une planète en raison de nos relations avec 15 ou 20 pays africains” (quoted in Mbeki (2011)). These comments are in line with French politics of *Françafrique*, which is invested in maintaining privileged relations with its former African colonies.

benevolent front (benevolence that, as I and others have pointed out, is very debatable to begin with) for continuing involvement in African nations' governance and the exploitation of its resources. In fact, in "A New French Policy for Africa?" Xavier Renou describes the concrete economic functions of *la francophonie*, which explains why France is still particularly invested in Africa:

There were three traditional objectives to French African policy: (i) the preservation of an international status threatened by the loss of the second largest colonial empire in the world; (ii) the need to secure access to strategic resources; and (iii) the huge profits made out of a monopolistic situation (6).

Renou shows that prestige and status concerns cannot be untangled from *la francophonie's* capitalist concern. Ager in *Identity, Insecurity and Image* encapsulates this idea in the following statement: "The product which is 'on sale' to overseas clients is, firstly, the French language" (166). Analyzing the nature of *la francophonie*, Renou explains that "apart from its cultural dimension, the achievement of La Francophonie in sub-Saharan Africa implied: a negotiated transition to independence; Mafia-style relationships between heads of states; permanent military control and the preservation of markets for French companies" (9). This mix of forceful and diplomatic (neocolonial) methods to ensure France's presence and influence in Africa is proof that *la francophonie* is a continuation of the colonial project¹⁵⁴ and not a collaboration with African nations.

¹⁵⁴ For more on France's neocolonial actions, see Ager (1996). Aldrich and Connell (1992) examine the French DOM-TOMs (*départements et territoires d'outre-mer*) and France's overseas geopolitical interests in the context of France's colonial history and contemporary politics.

Indeed, *la francophonie* in the institution of OIF is key for the maintained influence of France on the international scene: “To attain these objectives and maintain its power over its former colonies, France had to pursue a global policy that would be economic, political and cultural. The concept of La Francophonie became the ideological and institutional framework for this policy” (Renou, 8). The civilizing mission turned “humanitarian” mission (a better brand name) has always been a vehicle and a front to justify the exploitation of people and their countries, in the same way that the slave trade was justified by European powers by claiming superiority over the “savage” Africans. Renou also remarks that French officials would periodically call for a new African policy while continuing business as usual in Africa, for example publicly encouraging democracy but in fact working to maintain the status quo by keeping traditionally pro French elites in power (16-17).

It is evident in French elected officials’ disrespectful discourses about Africa that when the OIF speaks of “promouvoir la diversité culturelle et linguistique,” it is not about an exchange¹⁵⁵ on equal footing between France and African countries but rather still a civilizing and exploiting mission. French philosopher Victor Hugo once stated during a state banquet in 1879 that

au dix-neuvième siècle, **le blanc a fait du noir un homme** ; au vingtième siècle, l’Europe fera de l’Afrique un monde. (Applaudissements) Refaire une Afrique nouvelle, rendre la vieille Afrique **maniable à la civilisation**, tel est le problème. L’Europe le résoudra. Allez, Peuples ! Emparez-vous de cette terre. **Prenez-la. A qui ? À personne.**

¹⁵⁵ Here it is important to note that France contributes a third of the OIF budget, and that it has from the beginning established alliances with older black Africans leaders such as Senghor, who are then strategically positioned in positions of power.

A century and a half later, Nicolas Sarkozy echoed these sentiments that Africans are uncivilized children in his Dakar speech of 2007. Current French president Emmanuel Macron also made disparaging neocolonial comments about Africa. Among others, during a press conference in Hamburg he stated, "The problems Africa face today are completely different ... and are civilisational" (Kane). Macron shows no sign of approaching *la francophonie* from a decolonial perspective. In fact, he upholds long-held ideological positions regarding Africa, which is conceived as a homogeneous uncivilized whole and held responsible for its political and socio-economic problems. The OIF's mission statements, its neocolonial practices and its instrumentalization to pursue French economic interests, but also the kind of official discourses I quoted above, are all part of the neocolonial and neoliberal apparatus designed to maintain French white supremacy in former colonies.

'French-ish' Literature

I would like to go back to the notion of "cultural diversity" promoted by the OIF and try to parse out what it means in a French context. In the introduction to *The Creolization of Theory*, Shu-mei Shih and Françoise Lionnet write that the main characteristic of French universalism is that it "assimilates within itself all forms of cultural diversity into a concept of Culture (or culture générale), hides geographic, racial, and other differences" (Shih and Lionnet, 15). Of course, the French language is central to this project of cultural assimilation. *La francophonie* is, to put it bluntly, France's concession to cultural diversity in a nation that thinks of itself as monocultural and monolingual. France, while proud of *la francophonie* (even though they see France as the center and the rest of the francophone world as the periphery) and its

'diversity,' has also been imposing severe restrictions on immigration since the 1980s¹⁵⁶ and made it increasingly difficult for French residents to become citizens, among other things by using French as a technology of exclusion. In other words, France likes to look diverse, thanks to *la francophonie*, but it prefers to keep diversity outside of France, in its proper place.

I discussed earlier the idea that, despite the fact that a variety of Frenches are spoken around the globe, only one kind of French is perceived to be correct and the standard to attain. The rest are perceived as quirky deviations at best, downright linguistic 'abuses' at worst. This conception of French has important real consequences that affect the lived experience of non-normative French people; French belongs to white France. You can see this at play in the contradictory relationship France has with francophone literature. On the one hand, writers who write in French are not categorized as French writers but as francophone writers. They are connected to France but do not belong. On the other hand, France has often conveniently claimed African intellectuals to establish French dominance in the world of ideas.

For example, this intellectual anxiety manifests in a reclaiming of these writers once they have become famous in the USA, where African American scholars promote their work.

For example, Frantz Fanon and Senegalese historian Cheikh Anta Diop are more widely read in

¹⁵⁶ Three laws in particular stand out, the Pasqua-Debré policies of 1986, 1993 and 1997. The 1986 policy restricts access to residency and facilitates expulsions. The 1993 policy strengthens even more conditions of entry in France but also brings back an older policy requiring that children born of foreign parents in France declare their desire to receive French citizenship when they turn 18 (*le droit du sol* will be re-established in 1998). In 1997 the trend continues with a policy allowing, among others, the authorities to confiscate the passports of foreigners who are in France illegally. An overview of French policies related to immigrant rights can be found here: <http://www.senat.fr/rap/l14-716/l14-71621.html>. President Sarkozy in 2007 asserted his concept of *immigration choisie* (chosen immigration) in the Hortefeux policy, which overall was designed to restrict family reunification. Remarkably, article 63 of the law allowed the collection of ethnic data, an unprecedented move in a country that has outlawed the collection of racial and ethnic statistics. It was declared unconstitutional and removed. As of February 2018, the Collomb asylum policy is in the works. I agree with the writers of "Loi sur l'immigration, « un projet ni humain ni efficace »" that the law, under guise of being more humane, is really designed to restrict the rights of refugees by shortening the period of time they can ask for asylum. The full text of the law in progress can be found here: <http://www.gisti.org/spip.php?article5841>.

American academia. Professors and writers from the Francophone world such as Manthia Diawara at New York University, Maryse Conde at Columbia University and Alain Mabanckou at University of California, Los Angeles are often visiting scholars or even permanently hired in US universities. Nicolas Sarkozy clearly expresses this anxiety in an essay titled “Pour une francophonie vivante et populaire” in *Le Figaro* in 2007. He writes:

Dans l'enseignement supérieur, il est urgent de commencer à réfléchir à la création de chaires francophones, quasi inexistantes en France, afin de retenir des talents littéraires comme Maryse Condé, Alain Mabanckou ou Achille Mbembe, qui ont fini par s'exiler aux États-Unis. **Le cœur et l'avenir de la francophonie sont de moins en moins français,** mais, paradoxalement, de plus en plus anglo-saxons.

What Sarkozy argues for, and it is very important, is a return to

une francophonie conforme à l'esprit de Senghor. Pour cela, nous devons, **nous Français,** nous impliquer davantage dans cette francophonie dont les porte-parole sont parfois **des auteurs étrangers,** eux qui se retrouvent courageusement, mais si seuls, à la défendre, à la place de ceux qui auraient dû en être les véritables avocats : les Français eux-mêmes.

In other words, let us remember that French belongs to the French; let us reclaim this power that is slowly sliding out of our hands. Sarkozy talks about a francophonie following Senghor's spirit because while Senghor was a prominent African intellectual who was at the origins of the Negritude movement that emerged in France as a response to racism, he was also engaged in the ideological apparatus deployed by France to secure its power in the colonies in complex

ways¹⁵⁷. Senghor's work was thoroughly taught in the French education system, a system that was one of the methods of advancement both of the colonizer's position and of the colonized's. He graduated from the University of Paris, where he received the *agrégation* in French Grammar. In 1983, France also claimed him by electing him, the first African and black person ever admitted, a member of the Académie Française. Politically, he was in favor of a 'French Commonwealth' and maintaining economic ties to France while still appealing to the Senegalese population. This made him valuable in the eyes of the French government. Even in its vision and scope, the Négritude movement of which he was a leader, was in line with France's essentialist understanding of language and culture. In "A bas la francophonie," Cécile Canut explains:

À travers le mouvement de la négritude, la volonté de revalorisation des langues africaines conduit les écrivains à opérer un mouvement de *feed back* visant à légitimer une différence de qualité entre les langues [...] Ainsi racialisées, les langues africaines, [...] appartiennent au règne de l'émotion, de la poésie, pendant que les langues occidentales donnent accès au règne de la raison. [...] Le renversement de paradigme, initié par les premiers écrivains pétris de culture européenne, sans rompre avec la formation discursive coloniale, renforce ainsi une mise en frontières culturelle fondée sur deux processus de généralisation : l'Afrique, par le nègre, s'oppose à l'Occident, et au Blanc, d'une part ; les langues sont inhérentes au sol et à l'âme des peuples, d'autre part (149-150).

¹⁵⁷ Ousmane Sembène criticized African elites like Léopold Senghor in his 1973 film *Xala* and *Ceddo* (1977) – the latter was actually banned in Senegal. In both movies, Sembène mocked the post liberation regimes' failures and excesses, especially Senghor's.

Senghor still today evokes conflicting emotions in collective memories. On the one hand, he was a brilliant intellectual who started a decisive movement for empowering and reclaiming African identities and fighting racism. On the other hand, this very position, coupled with his pro-France stance made him a worthy emblem of francophonie, and someone who wouldn't question France's power and would enhance France's status as a non-racist nation on the international scene. From a white supremacist perspective, Senghor was used as a token for maintaining power. He was both French and Senegalese, and neither at the same time.

Speaking French, Being French?

French and Race – To Use the Words or Not to Use the Words?

While France is mourning the loss of francophone writers made famous by the USA, it has constructed its national story in such a way that it ignores the impact colonial events have had on it. In the introduction to *The Creolization of Theory*, Shih and Lionnet list a number of these events and the ways they have shaped French intellectual life and thought production, showing how French culture – which is not a monolith – is not white but whitewashed. For example, they discuss the impact of the Algerian War and how it shaped the thoughts of prominent French thinkers like Lyotard. They point out that “it is well known that Derrida, Cixous, and Rancière were born in Algeria, but seldom is this information made explicitly relevant to their thought”(15). It may be well known, but as someone who grew up in the French education system, I was never taught this information. Worse, it had always been deemed irrelevant, in proper French universalist tradition. I contend that universalism is a depoliticizing and therefore whitewashing process designed to maintain white supremacy.

Derrida's and others' works are claimed by France and stripped of their context, denying the complex entanglements between France and the colonies that actually make up French thought.

In this section I am interested in looking at how this depoliticizing process, the stripping away of difference plays out within the language itself and the concepts we have or don't have to talk about difference. Growing up in France, there are many reasons why I took the color of my skin for granted and why I equated being French with being white, without even knowing I was doing it. As I've explained earlier, one of those reasons is that it's something that is inscribed in the texts of the French constitution. In France, the concept of ethnic minority doesn't exist because the French Republic does not recognize distinctions of origins, race or religion. I have personally experienced difficulties explaining to French family and friends what I work on because the language we have in French to talk about race and difference is incredibly stigmatized or non-existent in conversational, non-expert French. When using the word *race* in conversations I receive a range of responses from uncomfortable glances to outraged reactions. I have had to look to specialized social-justice-oriented scholarship to find a less pejoratively connoted term and I now use *questions raciales*.

Much of the language used to talk about difference in France is actually borrowed from English. I discuss in section one the stigmatization of the word *race* in political texts, for example. In my personal life, I remember growing up hearing this word only used as an insult (as in *ni que ta race!* or just *ta race!*¹⁵⁸) Pierre Tévanian in *La mécanique raciste* talks about the

¹⁵⁸ Both terms are slurs used to convey the equivalent of a racialized 'fuck you', as in 'fuck your race'.

material consequences of the linguistic poverty and rhetorical silence surrounding issues of racial difference:

Si les races n'existent pas en tant que réalités biologiques, **le racisme les fait exister en tant que croyances collectives avec les effets performatifs** que cela implique [...] Nier cette réalité en se contentant de clamer qu'il n'y a pas de races, pas de différences et pas de raisons de s'opposer revient à nier l'oppression objective et subjective que subissent les discriminés, et donc à les rendre implicitement responsables de leur relégation sociale (127-128).

Indeed, the effect of this denial is to erase marginalized populations' lived experience by purposefully denying them the language to talk about them. Shih and Lionnet speak to the importance of re-politicizing language, of "using the words". The movement of the Parti des Indigènes de la République (PIR) is a great example of a movement that is re-politicizing language.

In *Nous sommes les Indigènes de la République*, Houria Bouteldja pushes back against the idea that talking about race creates racial problems in the first place. In opposition to white universalism Bouteldja describes the concepts and tools created and used by the PIR:

les concepts d'"indigène", de "Blanc", de "races sociales", de "champ politique blanc", qui n'ont de pertinence que dans le cadre du clivage racial et postcolonial. Nous refusons de dire que nous sommes des "êtres universels". Ou plus exactement, nous refusons de jouer à un jeu dans lequel nous sommes les perdants" (378 – 379)

This statement is a testimony to the importance of words for people's self-representation. In creating/using these terms the PIR is establishing the non-universality of the socially accepted

language; it is the language of white privilege. This statement is crucial in two major ways to the re-imagining of white public scholarship: first, it is a kind of scholarship that is clearly refusing incorporation into the system it wants to dismantle by the very fact that it is creating its own rhetorical arsenal to create and articulate their position. Second, it highlights how ethical and honest scholarship cannot be divorced from a kind of activism, that is, the way I see it, divorced from history. The very act of historicizing our current moment is a radical act of resistance and a demand for recognition. It is also very powerful that Bouteldja and the members of the PIR have chosen the term *indigène* to identify their place in the French Republic. In French, the term immediately triggers images of half naked, 'uncivilized' brown people. It is not exactly construed as an insult but it is certainly a racial term used to hierarchize white French colonizers as superior and colonized populations as inferior. It is a term sticky with colonial affect and ideology. The PIR re-appropriated the term in the context of claiming national belonging, political agency and even more importantly, the power to shape and reshape what French means. Bouteldja's essay proves that having the words to talk about one's lived experience is paramount to actually benefiting from the rights theoretically granted to everyone.

The Discourse of National Identity – Oh-so-white!

The problem is not that the French dislike talking about race and therefore they don't have a way to talk about it. They do talk about race, but they simply refuse to acknowledge that that's what they're doing. White French participate in a rhetoric of 'origins'; a wide range of lexical fields that allows white (so-called progressive or not) French to be openly racist without

sounding racist. No one wants to sound racist since racism is understood as something only 'bad' people are guilty of. Yet, white French have ways to talk about difference. This discourse, I argue, is the discourse of national identity, which Gérard Noiriel in *A quoi sert l'identité nationale* analyses in depth. The discourse of national identity emphasizes (shared) origins as the cement of national belonging as well as the arbitrary designation of French as its carrier (98). As I have explained, historically, France has always been a multilingual country. The crushing of other languages was an act of power and domination; French was never intrinsically a symbol of France and French unity. It became one arbitrarily in the constructed story of France as a nation. This act in itself is an act of racial power. It was used to separate white French people from French people of color while at the same time denying that it was doing so and thus preserving white innocence.

Noiriel clearly identifies the implications of the discourse of national identity, which relies on an essentialist vision of language and culture. Responding to Nicolas Sarkozy's 2007 *immigration choisie* campaign, in which he stated that "la politique de l'immigration, c'est l'identité de la France dans trente ans. Ceux qui nous rejoignent doivent la respecter, tout en apportant ce qu'ils sont" (cited in Noiriel, 97-98), Noiriel remarks on the racial determinism of the comment:

Sélectionner les immigrants d'aujourd'hui à partir du critère des "valeurs républicaines" en affirmant qu'on protège ainsi ce que sera l'identité de la France dans le futur, c'est utiliser ces "valeurs" **exactement comme les experts de la politique d'immigration utilisaient la race dans les années 1920**, afin d'empêcher le métissage" (99).

Noiriel also points out that when that discourse was contested and questioned, Sarkozy framed himself as a victim of those who don't love France, as a truth teller unafraid of French haters: "Je veux dire la vérité aux Français, je veux être sincère, je veux être honnête" (Sarkozy's 2007 Besançon Speech cited in Noiriel, 100). Although Noiriel does not use those terms, I want to add to his point that Sarkozy's speech is a clear example of France's brand of white innocence, which is a kind of nationalism that deems any criticism of a national identity program as attacks on the truth and on people who are simply trying to respect and preserves the nation's roots. Sarkozy is practicing here the kind of so-called 'hard work' that is in fact, Gloria Wekker argues, an act of preservation of self-representation (78-79). Sarkozy positions himself as being a 'good' person working for the common good of France. In Wekker's words: "If one is working hard for the common good, how can one possibly be accused of racism?" (79).

The discourse of national identity, infused with a nostalgia and love for a mythical France¹⁵⁹, is characterized by a constellation of terms marking inclusion, forced inclusion in and exclusion from the nation's fold. I will analyze a few of these key terms in the subsequent paragraphs. The term *français de souche*¹⁶⁰ is a controversial term used to refer to French nationals who are not of recent immigration background. In short, it is a word used to refer to white French people without calling them white. The term is clever in that way, but also in the way that it de-historicizes and erases the history of immigration—that is the history of France—in the use of the term *souche*, which is a reference to a tree's roots. While the term is controversial in that it has been proudly adopted by extreme rightwing politics since the 19th century, it still appears in debates on multiculturalism and integration. In an article in *Le Figaro*,

¹⁵⁹ See my discussion of love and national feeling in section three.

¹⁶⁰ See Hervé Le Bras, « Les Français de souche existent-ils ? » for a history of the term.

former minister Claude Allègre and editor Denis Jeambar write that “l'identité nationale est un ensemble de valeurs, fruits d'une histoire associée à un territoire, c'est-à-dire une géographie. Une telle définition exclut toute référence ethnique. Le vocable « français de souche » n'a aucun sens.” For Allègre and Jeambar, the term *français de souche* does not make sense based on their understanding of national identity as a set of values associated to a territory in which ethnicity and race do not intervene. In the essay, they continue on to dismiss the term as antithetical to the values of freedom and fraternity the Republic stands for. I think the writers are missing the point. *Français de souche* exists precisely because of the dominant understanding of national identity as a set of values connected by geography. Dismissing it without discussing the racial implications of its use is yet another unhelpful display of colorblind ideology. *Français de souche* does not indeed refer to a scientific reality, but it does refer to a socio-economic reality. Over time, the term has been qualified in various ways but always for the purpose of separating white people from non-whites. During the Algerian occupation, it was implied that the *souche* was European. During the Algerian war, it was used to distinguish white French from Muslims in Algeria, in particular by De Gaulle (Bastié).

The term has been appropriated by Houria Bouteldja and turned into *souchien*¹⁶¹. She was sued for racial slur¹⁶² by the Agrif¹⁶³ after using the term on TV in 2007. The charges were dismissed in 2012, indicating that as far as the law is concerned, *Français de souche* do not exist

¹⁶¹ Bouteldja explained that she had used the term *souchien* and not *sous-chien*, pointing out that her words were being misrepresented. See a summary of the story here: https://www.huffingtonpost.fr/2012/01/25/souchiens-houria-bouteldja_n_1230353.html.

¹⁶² Since 1881, France prohibits the publication of slander inciting discrimination, hate or violence against a person or a group of people because of their origins, their ethnicity, their nationality or religious beliefs. The 1972 law insists on racial discrimination in particular, adding the punishment of civil servant practicing discrimination. In 1990 an amendment makes it illegal to deny the Holocaust.

¹⁶³ Alliance Générale contre le Racisme et pour le respect de l'Identité Française et chrétienne.

since the term does not refer to any particular group in France. It is quite telling that the Agrif saw this as an absence of protection for whites: “«Aujourd'hui la race blanche, enfin la couleur blanche, n'est pas du tout protégeable», affirme le porte-parole, qui craint «une jurisprudence très perverse» sur cette question”(Le Cain). It is also quite hypocritical considering that having protections in place specifically for whites would be a *communautariste* request, which is an accusation frequently thrown at Bouteldja and the PIR. In my view, the court’s decision to drop the suit is in keeping with the notion that white doesn’t exist, so to speak, as far as it is the universal.

Français de souche stands in opposition to another striking and controversial term, *français de papier*, which is most often used as an insult by the political right. In fact, Rogers Brubaker in *Citizenship and Nationhood in France and Germany* traces the term back to extreme right wing group L’Action Française. Brubaker explains that the term categorized newly naturalized citizens and contends that it led to denaturalization policies such as the one that took place under the Vichy Regime¹⁶⁴ but also to the Front National’s demands to suppress the French notion of *droit du sol* (you are French if you were born on French soil). The term, along with *français de souche*, supports the ideological construct of French identity as a matter of bloodline. The violent history of the term needs to be taken into account to measure the violence of its use today.

French politician Nadine Morano, member of the party Les Républicains (center-right) and member of the European Parliament used the term to qualify French antiracist activist and reporter Rokhaya Diallo on Twitter: "L'intolérance, l'arrogance, la suffisance de la militante

¹⁶⁴ See Serge Klarsfeld (1983); Asher Cohen, (1993).

Rokhaya Diallo qui combat la culture, les racines de la France et fait la propagande scandaleuse de la régression de la femme avec le hidjab. Française de papier.” Given that Diallo was born in France, in Paris to be exact, the only reason Morano called her a *Française de papier* is precisely because her black skin signals foreignness to Morano. One may dismiss this as an isolated albeit revealing incident, but the truth is that Diallo, who had been nominated by Emmanuel Macron as a member of France’s national digital council (the CNNum) in an effort to design more inclusive digital policies, was kicked out because of rightwing complaints¹⁶⁵ (!).

Other terms in French society have thinly veiled racial meanings. In the media, the term *racaille* is used to refer to a group of lazy young men, petty thieves, to be despised and feared. While it often includes *petits Blancs* (impoverished young white men living in French projects), it is now strongly racialized and is used in the media in large part to refer to perceived Arabic/Muslim looking men. In fact, if you look for the word in Google images, most of the images that will appear are images of young men of color wearing the trademark hoodies, sweatpants and other paraphernalia associated with them. You will also see an image of Nicolas Sarkozy who can be said to have revived the term in 2005 when he used it to assure a community in the projects that he would clean it up of its *racaille*¹⁶⁶. Similarly, *les banlieues* or *les quartiers sensibles* are euphemisms referring almost exclusively to the French projects. *Issu de l’immigration* conjures up images of racialized French and perceived immigrants that the media has taken great pains over decades to alternately depict as violent and dangerous, or as poor victims.

¹⁶⁵ See *The Guardian* story by Maboula Soumahoro.

¹⁶⁶ See “Nicolas Sarkozy fier de ses propos”: <http://lelab.europe1.fr/nicolas-sarkozy-fier-de-ses-propos-sur-la-racaille-et-le-karcher-2782717>.

In the context of the discourse of national identity, which claims nationality as the primary marker of identity and dismisses others to the category of *communautarisme* when claimed as a political category, I would like to examine to what extent French is used to decide who belongs and who doesn't by French authorities. For that, I will be looking at citizenship and education. I have explained earlier the crucial role assigned to the French language in regard to national belonging. This imperative has consequences for those who would like to receive official recognition of their Frenchness by the State by becoming French citizens. It also has consequences for the way non-white French residents or citizens are perceived and treated in society. Given the French passion for French linguistic norm, to what extent is it enough for non-white French residents and citizens to speak French, to be welcomed/integrated? To what extent is this love of linguistic norm a racial matter?

The Racialization of Language: the Case of School and the Citizenship Process

The pressure to learn and speak proper (read 'standard') French is at the heart of integration politics, and therefore one of the most fundamental aspects of French education. In 1994, the Toubon law¹⁶⁷ stated that the mastery of French was part of the fundamental aims of education. In 2001, in *Orientations sur l'avenir du collège, pour un collège républicain*, Jack Lang, former Minister of Education wrote: "Priorité absolue donnée à la maîtrise de la langue nationale, qui doit être la colonne vertébrale de l'enseignement maternel et élémentaire: parler, lire, écrire, doivent être l'ossature de l'école primaire." Young French people spend years studying the proper grammar of the language. They also spend years hearing the national

¹⁶⁷ The whole text of the law to be read here:
<https://www.legifrance.gouv.fr/affichTexte.do?cidTexte=LEGITEXT000005616341>.

attachment message, which is that French is to be respected, that it is the language of reason, progress, intelligence, and the language of belonging and goodness. What happens to those who do not or cannot conform to this ideal?

In “La construction de l’altérité à l’école de la République,” Christian Poiret analyzes how French is a gauge of marginalized others’ level of integration, but also of their worth and intelligence. In a study discussing “l’appréhension des familles issues des immigrations africaines sub-sahariennes par les personnels de l’éducation,” Poiret notes that students and their families’ degree of integration is measured in several ways: their ability to obey and respect school norms, to conform to “modes de vie valorisés à l’école” (156) and of course, their ability to learn and speak French. While he does not point out the vagueness of these requirements, I infer that it correlates with the fact that school in France, as discussed in section two, is the place for the dissemination of the Republic’s secularist and universalist ideals. Poiret notes several times that the students and their families’ ability to learn and speak French is also used to measure the students’ level of ‘evolution’. He quotes two kindergarten principals:

« Il y a d’autres familles africaines qui ont l’air extrêmement bien intégrées par rapport aux Maliens, **plus évoluées, c’est-à-dire parlant déjà le français d’une manière très correcte** et acceptant les apports de l’Europe et de la société du XXe siècle sans, comment vous dire ça... sans a priori raciaux... » [...] « Les familles africaines sont plus défavorisées que les autres familles, comment dire, plus... plus en retard. Hein, au niveau de la langue, au niveau du comportement, ils sont beaucoup plus lents. [...] Des

mères qui sont plus... qui sont moins dynamiques que les mères des autres ethnies»
(156-158).

The implications of these comments are clear. First, speaking French is a sign of integration and intelligence, which means that not speaking French signals failure to integrate and a lack of intelligence. Second, these abilities to integrate and learn French are connected to race (the word used in the text is *ethnie*). Third, academic and social success as well as intelligence depend upon racialized others' ability to assimilate into the dominant ideological system. Given the size of this particular study, it is not my purpose to generalize these racist comments and behaviors to all French teachers. However, the ideological system as I have described it invites and legitimizes this kind of behavior¹⁶⁸.

In *Quel français à l'école ?* Bertucci and Corblin remark that the very fact of being multilingual¹⁶⁹, which is the case for many racialized folk in France, is considered a problem: "L'accent mis sur la faiblesse des compétences d'une part, sur le besoin de renforcement de l'enseignement de la langue nationale d'autre part, se fait au détriment d'une attention au contexte d'enseignement, à la relation avec les autres langues vivantes étrangères et langues vivantes d'origine" (8). Indeed, speaking other languages or other Frenches is generally not considered an asset by the education system, even if that same system imposes the learning of foreign languages and seems to valorize them (to find a job, to meet other cultures, etc.) in

¹⁶⁸ Also see Maya Smith's qualitative study "Who is a Legitimate French Speaker?" and the similar treatment of a black teacher by a student's parent.

¹⁶⁹ Because of the hierarchization of languages, not all multilingualism is perceived negatively. Speaking French and a European language such as English or Spanish is seen as an asset, as being cosmopolitan. Speaking French and an Arabic language, for example, is seen as a hindrance to integration.

theory¹⁷⁰. Bertucci and Corblin explain that “le français n’est pas enseigné comme une langue vivante, puisque les élèves sont censés le parler en tant que langue maternelle” (9). This assumption creates a profound discrepancy between the lived experience of students and the way they are taught French, as if all French people came from the same social, cultural and linguistic background¹⁷¹.

These teaching methods enforce the illusion of a homogeneous country and polarize students whose (his)tory and lived experience do not conform to the one the Republic demands they integrate. Bertucci and Corbin make a refreshingly frank accusation: “Derrière ce monolinguisme dominant se manifestent un refus implicite du plurilinguisme et une résistance à l’altérité” (13). This resistance reinforces social exclusion of racialized students by the school system. School, in other words, does not take into account the multilingual situation of many students. In a small study they conducted in two classes in a middle school in Versailles, Bertuccin and Corblin show the prevalence of multilingualism in France. Of 53 questioned students, 29 confirmed speaking a language other than French at home. The authors remark that their multilingual reality is never addressed at school and that professors even sometimes said that for them, it was a private matter that they wouldn’t feel comfortable asking the students about (16).

The question is, is it enough to speak French to be accepted as French, both legally and socially? Several studies have shown that that isn’t the case. For example, Didier Fassin and

¹⁷⁰ In France, the second mandatory language is English. Third language options are most of the time limited to Spanish or German. Other languages from North Africa, for example, are very rarely offered in middle school and high school, even though Berber is the second most spoken language in France according to a 2013 report of the Comité consultatif pour la promotion des langues régionales et de la pluralité linguistique interne (cited in Slate Afrique).

¹⁷¹ See my discussion of the abstract/universal student in section two.

Sarah Mazouz's study "Qu'est-ce que devenir français ? La naturalisation comme rite d'institution républicain" show that

La pratique du français est généralement présentée comme l'élément essentiel de l'entretien d'assimilation. [...] Le test linguistique n'évalue pas seulement la capacité à s'exprimer correctement, **mais aussi la bonne volonté d'apprendre**. Par extension, l'entretien permet aussi d'examiner l'assimilation culturelle. (735-36)

First of all, the evaluation of a person's linguistic abilities is incredibly subjective, arbitrary and vague: it depends upon the administrator's interpretation of the current immigration directives and of his/her own perception of the candidate's French ability (to speak French well or well enough). But concretely, what does speaking 'well' mean ? The naturalization interview represents the way exclusion functions at a legal level, since it is a way of controlling who "deserve" to enter the closed circle of citizenship but also to preserve an appearance of homogeneity that's paramount to the national story. Furthermore, in *Identity, Insecurity, and Image* Ager explains that there is a very long tradition in France of condemning language uses deemed incorrect or faulty. These language practices are deemed attacks on France. Therefore, protecting language from non-standard uses is a way of protecting the nation. I will discuss later more in depth the role of the Académie Française in relation to language use.

More importantly and even more telling, this xenophobic purism manifests against those whose native language is French, cementing the idea that issues of race are intricately tied to French language conception and uses in contemporary France. In "Who Is a Legitimate French Speaker? The Senegalese in Paris and the Crossing of Linguistic and Social Borders," Maya Smith writes:

Ethnographic research conducted in Paris in the autumn of 2009 showed the link between linguistic competence and acceptance in French society to be questionable. [...] **Whatever their legal status**, an overwhelming majority [of participants] expressed an **inability to feel completely included** or integrated in French society, **even if they considered their language skills to be excellent** (319).

This study speaks to the idea that speaking French is not enough to be legitimized and recognized by French society. It shows how race is in the background of each political or social project connected to questions of identity: “while on the surface identity markers such as race and language ability may seem to be independent entities, they are actually inextricably linked to one another” (Smith, 318). Not only that, but it shows how French has been instrumentalized as part of the white supremacist ideological apparatus of the French Republic.

French Cultures, French Languages

The Defense of Normative French: L'Académie Française

As a centuries-old institution charged with the linguistic gatekeeping of the French language and enforcing its standard, L'Académie Française's only mission is literally, in its own words, “la défense de la langue française” and the dictionary¹⁷². It is not specified what it is defending the language from, but it is certainly revealing of a conception of language as a structure instead of as a set of language practices, which means that when changes are attempted to the structure, the Académie reacts negatively. Over the course of the 20th century, it has fought against the

¹⁷² See the mission statement here: <http://www.academie-francaise.fr/linstitution/les-missions>.

use of less masculine terminology¹⁷³ and the ‘invasion’ of English terminology since the 1980s¹⁷⁴. Overall l’Académie is a particularly conservative¹⁷⁵ institution whose role is to preserve and encourage the proper, ‘good’ practice of French. More recently, it has declared its opposition to inclusive language practices, declaring it a mortal danger to the language:

en cette occasion, c’est moins en gardienne de la norme qu’en garante de l’avenir qu’elle lance un cri d’alarme : devant cette aberration « inclusive », la langue française se trouve désormais en péril mortel, ce dont notre nation est dès aujourd’hui comptable devant les générations futures.

While it does not have much political power nowadays, it still holds great prestige and has participated in the legitimizing of a certain brand of racist thought. For instance, philosopher and public intellectual Alain Finkielkraut¹⁷⁶ was elected a new member of the Académie in 2014.

The institution might not have much political power but the story it tells about French permeates public discourse and media. A great example is how in March 2017, French pedagogical publishing house Hatier released the first textbook written in inclusive French, which is simply a method of feminizing French to get around the masculine as default. For example: *agriculteur.rice.s*, *maternel.le.s*, etc. The reaction from the media and from French

¹⁷³ See the 1984 and 2002 controversies, although the Académie Française relented in 2004: <http://www.academie-francaise.fr/actualites/la-feminisation-des-noms-de-metiers-fonctions-grades-ou-titres-mise-au-point-de-lacademie>.

¹⁷⁴ See the Toubon law of 1994.

¹⁷⁵ Only eight women have been members (starting in the 1980s) and from what I could tell it seems that no more than two men of color have been members.

¹⁷⁶ Finkielkraut is a very controversial and vocal public intellectual whose positions are racist and islamophobic. He is a fierce defender of the vision of national identity I have described earlier, and has written a number of books discussing it and lamenting its ‘destruction’. In an interview about his new book *L’identité malheureuse*, he says: “I am pained to see that the French mode of European civilization is threatened. France is in the process of transforming into a post-national and multicultural society. It seems to me that this enormous transformation does not bring anything good” (von Rohr and Leick).

linguists was immediate and furious. *Le Figaro* started a national controversy with its article “Un manuel scolaire écrit à la sauce féministe”(Pech). On French radio station Europe 1, radio host Raphaël Enthoven declared that inclusive writing is a “lifting¹⁷⁷ du langage qui croit abolir les injustices du passé en supprimant leur trace”. He also compared it to the newspeak of George Orwell’s *1984*. Linguist Alain Bentolila saw “un complot machiste dans la langue française manifeste une totale ignorance” (FigaroVox). Académie Française member Marc Fumaroli claimed that “il faut défendre la langue française contre les Trissotin du féminisme,” that it is a question of “grammaire, et non de la sociologie politique” (Tremolet de Villers). Science journalist Peggy Sastre, talked about “terrorisme intellectuel” (Mahler). Jean-Michel Blanquer, current Minister of Education, declared his opposition as well because he sees it as the source of useless controversies that are damaging to gender equality and is worried about what he calls “attaques répétées sur la langue française” and that “la langue française n'est pas à instrumentaliser pour des combats aussi légitimes soient-ils”(Galtier). Following the controversy, Prime Minister Edouard Philippe prohibited the use of inclusive writing in official government publications in November 2017. While a number of linguists and public figures have spoken in favor of the use of inclusive writing, the backlash against it was much fiercer and only 314 teachers have pledged to teach inclusive grammar to their students (Slate.fr).

The Hypocrisy of Normativity

Once French is considered in its proper historical context, it is also re-politicized. The backlash against such movements as inclusive writing is a response to the threat of lifting the

¹⁷⁷ I must point out that the use of this English loanword here is quite hypocritical in the context of criticizing language changes and transformations...

veil of ‘universalism’ and the fact that French has always been instrumentalized politically and ideologically in form and content by white French patriarchal powers. The backlash is an implicit avowal that saying *le masculin l’emporte sur le féminin* is not a trivial, neutral grammatical rule but representative of a way of thinking about gender relations in which women are forever derived from men. If it were as apolitical to use the masculine as default as the detractors of inclusive writing claim, then they wouldn’t have such an issue with changing it. Declaring that the current grammatical practice is note universal is a threat because it implies that the use of French by the dominant ideology is, in fact, white heteronormative, patriarchal *communautarisme* and *repli sur soi* masquerading as universalism. Simply put, I agree with blogger Aleeshay who writes for the blog Simonæ: “Le choix d’utiliser ou non l’écriture non-sexiste est politique. Il est révélateur de nos opinions en matière de féminisme et sur la place à accorder aux personnes qui ne sont pas des hommes cisgenres dans notre société. C’est pourquoi il nous paraît aussi important.”

Many studies have shown that French is indeed not a static language, that its masculinization is relatively recent (17th century) and that it used to have neutral pronouns¹⁷⁸. In short, despite the national story, French is a constellation of language practices, not a monolith.

If ideal of French as claimed/recognized and ‘owned’ by the Republic is white/whitewashed and heteronormative, French as a negotiated practice is absolutely not white and heteronormative, even when used by white and heteronormative folk like myself. Many terms in French find their origins in Arabic, a language it borrows from heavily. But the French also use Arabic words in

¹⁷⁸ See *Introduction à l’histoire de la langue française*, p. 113.

their every day language. For example, I grew up hearing my upper middle class white father say *pas besef* instead of *pas beaucoup* and talking about the *toubib* to refer to the doctor. When my siblings and I were being rowdy, my parents called us *zouaves*. When I was a teenager, I used without knowing it many words either created by kids from the *banlieues* or directly borrowed from Arabic. For example, to talk about a mess, we would use the word *dawa*. To talk about something we liked, we used the word *kiffer*. And of course, we used English words all the time as well.

My point is that these language uses and loanwords, although not considered proper French, are in fact very French even if they are not recognized as such. Kids' languages are in general rarely considered creative and interesting but rather destructive and disrespectful. And yet, privileged white kids use/appropriate the terms because it makes them look cool and edgy. As far as Arabic is concerned, most people using these terms don't know where they come from, which is quite revealing, and the language itself has overall a bad reputation in white, (upper) middle class families. I grew up being told that Arabic is harsh and violent, and that it's used in the *banlieues* to 'destroy' the French language. These comments were coming from people who used Arabic in their every day language without thinking twice about it.

My point is two fold. First of all, French has never been pure and has never been practiced as such. It has always been practiced and negotiated translingually. It is the ideological imposition of normative French that is oppressive and that produces 'others'. This sheds a light on the hypocrisy, sexism and racism of those who bemoan inclusive writing or vilify *banlieue* language. Second, white French have been appropriating words from languages they despise and from cultures they oppress all the while clinging on to the linguistic nostalgia

for a French that never was, and never teaching/learning about its entanglements with other languages and cultures. The following section articulates the creative ways in which French, considered from a translingual perspective, is practiced by non-normative others to express identities that are plural and transnational. Non-conforming individuals, despite France's national narrative about French, have always (re)claimed agency over the language. They don't need to be included or to integrate this national story. They are already there, telling their own story about French, in French.

Banlieues French and Non-Normative Frenches: Translingual and Local Practices

Inclusive writing is a great example of language as practice and of a reclaiming of the language as being limited only by the institutions that have claimed it. But nobody has (re)claimed French more fiercely than the young people from the *banlieues* who have developed their own terms and sometimes their own French language¹⁷⁹ to communicate but also to claim ownership of the language and nation as part of their identity, no matter how many times society has told them that they don't belong. In fact, I contend that they understand better than privileged white French what language can do and does to them. In "Langage et exclusion. La langue des cités en France," Zouhour Messili and Hamid Ben Aziza write that "la langue reflète le degré de prise en compte de la présence de l'autre" (1). The writers are referring to the way *banlieues* youths use language to express their anger and frustration, but I think the

¹⁷⁹ Zouhour Messili and Hmaid Ben Aziza in "Langage et exclusion. La langue des cités en France" offer an overview of how this language works.

idea this sentence conveys can be opened up to understanding *banlieues* youths' reaction to the way normative French has produced them to excluded them.

Because normative French is so intricately embedded in France' national identity construction, it represents for them all the ways in which they are denied full-fledged French citizenship. They understand that normative French is privilege white French, and that it's not acknowledging and respecting their presence. For them, it evokes "l'autorité, le pouvoir, le monde du travail qui leur est barré par le chômage ou la discrimination. Ce français normatif les renvoie à l'échec scolaire que connaissent beaucoup d'entre eux" (Messili and Aziza, 2). In other words, *banlieues* youths understand that normative French is denying them a legitimate identity, and so *banlieue* French is a way to

surmonter l'éclatement et l'instabilité liés à leur condition socio-économique et à leur sentiment de rejet par les autres et ainsi de se doter d'une unité de conscience. Le fait de dire, « nous ne parlons pas comme vous » est une procédure de résistance, de renvoi à l'autre de la pression qu'il exerce par le haut" (2).

In "Alternative Identities, Alternative French: Situating Language in La Banlieue"

Meredith Doran argues that *banlieue* French is a way to assert presence, importance, and identity in the dominant French society that rejects them. It is a way of claiming French identity and to exist within other identities that France denies as valuable and legitimate. She presents three main features of this sociolect. First, it is a product of multilingualism and multiculturalism marked by marginalization and perceived negatively by the system. Second, it has important symbolic value in that it sets itself apart from the dominant language and is viewed as an important component of identity. Finally, it gives those who use it the possibility

to create an alternative social space they control, a 'Third Space' in Bhabha's words, separate from the dominant social space that rejects them. Doran conceives of this 'other' French as a means to negotiate the parameters of the system. It legitimizes this language as not existing purely as reaction against a system of oppression, but as also having value in-and-of-itself. In my view, it is also an example of the fact that language is a social practice expressing a social reality.

What social reality is expressed by the current, accepted, mainstream language use? In "Les origines du genre grammatical" Patrizia Violi writes: "Il ne fait aucun doute que le genre, en tant que catégorie grammaticale, tend à être perçu comme le reflet d'un « ordre naturel » des choses, de sorte que ce ne sont plus les mots qui sont masculins ou féminins mais les choses auxquelles ils se réfèrent" (19). French conceived of as a structure to obey is thus forcing people to see themselves through the prism of masculine/feminine. In other words, normative French is white and heteronormative. How do people who don't think of themselves in binary terms, for example, express themselves/their reality in French given the binary nature of the language and the society it shapes? Without the approval of the powers in place, non-binary French people have begun creating their own pronouns and terminology. The Internet is a place where these conversations and language uses are invented, tried out, prototyped and re-designed. As a largely linguistic space, it has allowed people with little ability to organize politically (given the nature of France's position on *communautarisme*), the opportunity to create the reality that they are denied both linguistically and socially. They are also creating the space that turns them into their own object of research, with for example the blog *Unique en son genre*, which has catalogued non-binary terms in a "Petit dico de français neutre/inclusif"

and includes recently created inclusive subject pronouns such as *iel* and neutral pronouns such as *ille*, but also uses old Latin neutral ending *um*. YouTube videos abound providing public scholarship by those concerned with the who/what/how/why of their lived experiences such as Princ(ess)e – LGBT’s videos teaching viewers how to address non-binary people.

This space is a stark contrast to the archives of knowledge produced about non-heteronormative folx by normative French. Indeed, normative French is also a pathologizing language, in particular when it comes to questions of gender and sexuality. Up until 2010, being transsexual or *transgenre* was considered by French law to be a disorder¹⁸⁰, which has medical and social consequences for trans folx who are thus categorized as separate from mainstream France and in need to be ‘corrected’ from their affliction¹⁸¹. This view is still prevalent in mainstream society and there is still a lot of work to be done to undo the violence of this language. Karine Espineira and Maud-Yeuse Thomas discuss the violent treatment of transidentity in the French media, which they analyze through the figure of the pariah and by looking at documentaries on transidentity:

Des documentaires grand public affirment ainsi une supposée « fin des tabous » et le discours semble se transformer dans les émissions pour adultes. Cette tendance imprime un jeu d’aller-retour entre ordinaire et exotisme dans la sexualité ou le rapport à soi, sans qu’il soit question du marginal et/ou de marginalité.

¹⁸⁰ See Classification Internationale des Maladies, F64 “Troubles de l’identité sexuelle”: <http://apps.who.int/classifications/icd10/browse/2008/fr#F65.1>. Roselyne Bachelot, then Minister of Health, de-pathologized transidentity in 2010 (Brunet).

¹⁸¹ Up until April 2016, trans folx had to undergo a sex change operation, a psychiatric evaluation and obtain a judge’s approval in order to legally change their civil status (name and gender). The name and gender change is now free (Dupont).

Espineira and Thomas show how the media alternate between displaying transidentity of color as a spectacle, for example with documentaries on the Hijras of India, normalizing white transidentity by presenting it as “niches « pour souffler », « rebondir dans sa vie », « sortir de soi »,” and insisting on the marginalizing and (therefore voyeuristic) aspect of their situation. They also argue that what they call the *transsexualisme télévisuel* that emerges from these media representations is one that enforces instead of challenges gender binary. Indeed, French media has contributed to trans violence in two ways. First, they subscribe to it by containing transidentity within the sphere of what is acceptable, effectively doing the work of inclusionary violence. Second, they exoticize trans folk by focusing on sex changes and turning them into a spectacle.

You can see in Espineira and Thomas’ analysis that normative French frames transidentity in the media in such a way as to incorporate it, which is why it is so important for blogs like *Unique en son genre* to control their own representation and to talk about themselves in their own terms. The blog has been surveying non-binary folk about their language practices in a yearly survey carried out and analyzed out once a year since 2016. They gather essential and detailed data about how non-binary folk are practicing French but also about the need for language changes, such as the need for a neutral term and for the pronoun *iel* to be included in the dictionary. They also report on the violences, linguistic or otherwise, experienced by those interviewed, such as being (mis)gendered.

Conclusion: On the Need to Decolonize French

Alastair Pennycook's notion of local practice can be useful to imagine what doing away with normative French would look like. Instead of conceiving of language as a fixed structure that has agency over its users, Pennycook views language as emergent and considers instead what users do with language and sees them as having agency: "it is not that we use language as a pre-given entity in context, but rather that we produce language in our repeated local activities. Furthermore, these activities are parts of bundled practices, and as such they are always social, always historical and always local" (46). If we think of grammar as being the product of ideology and the product of repeating difference over time, Pennycook argues that we can then think of deviation as the norm, as creativity instead of error. Acts of invention are acts of resistance, especially inventing a different language from which one can posit a different reality for oneself.

Archives of non-conforming French are being built in that way online, such as, for example, Le Petit Momo created by Michel Buze. Le Petit Momo is a systematic and well-researched dictionary of French urban slang. Buze's hybrid endeavor is a perfect example of Pennycook's local practice but also of public scholarship. His dictionary legitimizes *banlieues* French as a sociolect but also as a worthy object of study. At the same time, he engages with academic French, citing research on the topic. The question of legitimacy is essential to obtain social but also legal recognition. By legitimacy I also mean that, for better or worse, non-conforming French identities often have to know how to speak normative French/the language of power or how to co-opt it to their advantage in order not to be dismissed and to be listened

to. In “De la lourdeur d’écrire un article universitaire intersexe quand on est soi-même intersexe,” professor Janik B. Charlebois writes

La parole intersexe est peu entendue dans nos sociétés, et encore moins dans la francophonie. Souvent perçue comme crue, émotive et non spécialiste, **elle est soumise à une intense mise en doute de sa légitimité**, qu’on mesure à celle de professionnels médicaux présumés neutres, désintéressés et apolitiques dans le cadre de leur prise en charge de l’intersexuation.

In her article, she discusses the violence of the delegitimizing process to non-conforming knowledge production, but also the fact that knowing the normative language is not always enough. Creating their own epistemologies, locating them both in and outside of normative, dominant epistemologies is a language practice essential to establishing legitimacy on their own terms.

I contend that normative French needs to be decolonized and decentered from the Hexagon. I attempted in this section to re-contextualize normative French within its colonial history and disrupt the notion that it is monolingual. French is a constellation of practices that emerge and have always emerged in contact with other languages, both locally and globally. These language practices are also identity practices, so to speak, which is why the linguistic hierarchies and asymmetries I discuss in this section have concrete, material consequences for marginalized French users. Changing our orientation to language is paramount to stop oppressing others. We are all already engaged in what Suresh Canagarajah calls ‘translingual practice,’ which is the understanding that we make meaning in language but also across languages. Canagarajah’s concept of translingual practice is therefore also useful to think about

our orientation to French. For Canagarajah, it's not about what language is but rather what users do with language: "We bring with us a capacity for social practice that enables us to give meaning to words and construct patterns out of disparate grammars by seeking alignment between cognitive, social, and physical contexts" (Canagarajah, Kindle edition). Translingualism is an attitude more than a method, which questions the idea that conforming to one language practice is best because it is simpler/easier and the right thing to do, and reveals that it is actually done at the expense of other language practices and is therefore a tool of power to silence certain voices.

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Appendix

Survey: Considering Emotions & Affect in French Language Learning

Questions

Please answer these as thoroughly as you can. Remember that you can type or write your answers, and that you can write your name or leave it anonymous.

1. What do you consider to be your native language?
2. How would you describe your experience learning French? Choose a phrase, an expression, or a metaphor that best captures your experience learning to speak in French.
 - a. Learning French is like..
 - b. Speaking French is like...
 - c. Writing in French is like...
3. What do you associate France with?

France is....

4. If you had to describe yourself in French class, from the perspective of the teacher or a classmate, how would you describe yourself?
5. Do you feel like a different person sometimes when you change languages/when you speak French? Please explain your answer.
6. Are there sounds you don't like to make or that are hard for you to make in French?
Please choose one sound that is most difficult for you.

Making this sound is like....

7. What emotions do you feel most when learning French/in French class? Please circle your answers:

happiness/joy	frustration
anger/irritation	disappointment
fear/anxiety	disillusion
disgust	guilt
fascination	apathy
pride	hopelessness
wonder	powerlessness
enthusiasm	confusion
boredom	alienation
shame	

8. What is one of your most positive experiences/moments of learning French?

How did it make you feel?

9. What is one of your least positive experiences/moments of learning French? How did it make you feel?

10. Under what conditions do you feel most uncomfortable and unlikely to speak in French?

11. Under what conditions do you feel most comfortable to speak French?

12. Do you feel like you have enough time to learn French? Please explain.

13. Please finish the following sentences:

a. With French I can ...

b. With French I cannot ...

14. Please finish the following sentences:

a. In French I am

b. In French I am not ...

Concluding Thoughts

On Abolishing Nations & in Praise of Transnational Communities

In “La Prieta,” Gloria Anzaldúa writes:

I am a wind-swayed bridge, a crossroads inhabited by whirlwinds. Gloria, the facilitator, Gloria the mediator, straddling the walls between abysses. “Your allegiance is to La Raza, the Chicano movement,” say the members of my race. “Your allegiance is to the Third World,” say my Black and Asian friends. “Your allegiance is to your gender, to women,” say the feminists. Then there’s my allegiance to the Gay movement, to the socialist revolution, to the New Age, to magic and the occult. And there’s my affinity to literature, to the world of the artist. What am I? *A third world lesbian feminist with Marxist and mystic leanings. They would chop me up into little fragments and tag each piece with a label*¹⁸² (Moraga and Anzaldúa, 205).

Anzaldúa’s words speak to the violence of being apprehended as singular instead plural. Her use of the word ‘allegiance’ is particularly appropriate in the context of France’s categorization of people and ranking of identities. In France, it’s not only that there is only one identity you can claim – French – it is above all that there is only one way of being French. Yet people relate to Frenchness in different ways; they are attuned to nationality differently, depending on context, sex, gender, class, and race. Unfortunately, there is only one way of being French that has political, legal, social and economic legitimacy, and that is the white, Christian, heterosexual, cisgender way.

¹⁸² My emphases in bold throughout.

In "The Possibilities of Open and No Borders," Harald Bauder writes that "borders serve as a tool to manage national labor markets, foreign affairs agendas, and security concerns; they create identities of belonging and non-belonging" (77). I wrote four chapters on the ways France as a nation creates identities of non-belonging, and I agree with Bauder that borders are morally wrong:

Another materialist perspective, rooted in feminist scholarship and antiracist and anticolonial struggles, opposes borders because of the role they play in the formation of oppressive subject identities. National borders, in particular, have created the subject "migrant" and associated identities, like the "good" immigrant who is hard-working and docile or the "bad" queue-jumping refugee (Ande et al. 2009). **The national border has thus been at the core of contemporary practices of oppression, subordination, and political exclusion** (80).

Borders are oppressive because they create an 'us' and a 'them' but I want to add that they are also fundamentally oppressive because they are not simply a threshold. They are a space that is hard to leave. Once you cross them you can never get rid of them, especially if you are a person of color. You are stuck as the person who crossed forever. It doesn't matter that you may not have crossed the border personally (your parents or grandparents did) and that you were born in that nation. It will keep asking you to justify and deserve your existence every day of your life. All kinds of oppressive systemic practices will be justified by the hegemonic power that sees you as carrying the border with you at all times. You will have problems with the authorities regardless of what you have (not) done. You will have a hard time getting the job you want. What I have come to realize after writing 250 pages on French national identity, is

that paradoxically, national identity doesn't matter. Being French does not protect you or give you the rights that supposedly come with being French. Being white does.

Therefore, at the end of this project, I have come to the conclusion that we need to abolish frontiers and move to ways of belonging that are transnational or even a-national. The project I've worked on for the past four years as well as the current international news absolutely confirm the need, in my view, to imagine new ways of being political/legal communities. Nation-states are oppressive structures with toxic ideologies supporting all of the '-isms" (racism, neoliberalism, colonialism, etc.) and creating hateful solidarities and fragmenting people and cultures.

Food for Thought

Working under the constraints of capital – Time and Money – I was unable to explore and develop certain questions that I nonetheless found to be very important. I would have liked to have more time to think through how whiteness is a system that is also limiting and oppressive to itself. I couldn't figure out a way of doing it without implying something I don't believe or condone, which is that white people need to be decent because it's in their moral and economic interest. I am referring, for example, to arguments such as these: "Immigrants help the economy!"; "Immigrants deserve to be here!" (does that mean we're already deserving since we are already here?) "It's good for us (whites) to learn about tolerance," etc. These arguments imply that the onus is on marginalized others (here, non-white immigrants) to prove their exceptionality and that their existence is a great lesson in tolerance for white folk.

Because I needed more time to make an ethical argument on the topic, I decided not to explore it.

On the flip side of this, I think it would be useful to examine more in depth the white position of 'victim,' the fact that they feel attacked. Like Sadri Khiari, I wonder why whites in France took the PIR's positions and discourses as personal attacks. In *Pour une politique de la racaille*, Khiari remarks that when the PIR said "Nous, Noirs, Arabes, musulmans, etc." white people felt attacked, but that they don't feel that way when a group of people such as blue collar workers does the same thing "Nous, les ouvriers" even if they are not blue collar workers themselves (Khiari, 89). He writes: "C'est peut-être finalement que ces combats semblent plus légitimes. Non pas que l'antiracisme le soit moins dans l'esprits des personnes dont je parle, mais il ne l'est qu'à condition de s'inscrire dans le cadre d'un combat considéré comme vraiment légitime par les Blancs, c'est-à-dire une lutte sociale et universaliste" (89-90). I agree with Khiari. At the same time I wonder what can be done with this defensiveness, so that what Khiari and others write can be listened to by those who need to hear it.

This takes me to the question of 'feeling bad' (Shotwell) and the kind of solidarity it may produce. It would be very productive to analyze more in depth white solidarity looking at feelings such as discomfort. In particular, I am interested in putting in conversation apathy as a social practice, DiAngelo's concept of stamina, the feeling of discomfort and the white neoliberal concept of 'hard work'. For example, I am concerned with what counts as (hard) work and with how white antiracists associate antiracism with feeling good and (oft-perfunctory) punctual antiracist acts that don't require sustained or profound effort.

In relation to the creation of non-coercive and imaginative knowledge, I would have liked to delve into the French iterations of Afro-Futurism. Afro-Futurism's refutation of temporal linearity would have been particularly helpful to my historicizing process:

La structure temporelle de l'afro-futurisme est encore plus intrigante que celle d'un trou noir. Elle ne distord pas le temps, ni ne l'étend : elle le disloque. **L'afro-futurisme réfute la linéarité. Il va et vient, prédit et altère... à la fois le passé, le présent et le futur.** Il ne dénie pas son Histoire, mais ne s'en satisfait pas non plus (Mawena Yehouessi).

The creation of a position from which to criticize and comment on the system is also practiced in non-fiction writing. The work of Fred Moten and Stefano Harney in *The Undercommons* is really inspiring in that sense because they have created/imagined/theorized a rhetorical space or a linguistic position that is not operative of institutions. They are using and not using the language of the university to criticize it and resist it at the same time. They are following some of the rules but not playing the game:

...the undercommons is not a realm where we rebel and we create critique; it is not a place where we "take arms against a sea of troubles/and by opposing end them." The undercommons is a space and time which is always here. Our goal – and the "we" is always the right mode of address here – is not to end the troubles but to end the world that created those particular troubles as the ones that must be opposed... (Moten and Stefano, 9).

Their text is interested in the machinery of modernity making, of what the neocolonial settler university is doing to the undercommons. The problem is that the definition of the university is that it cannot trace the history of its own production. How do you study the thing that doesn't

want to be studied or has never been thought of as an object of study? This text tries to imagine a positionality that can turn the university into an object of knowledge. In fewer words, it is a study of what creates power.

Finally, conceptually, I wish I had time to explore what neoliberalism looks like in France and how the concept of racial capitalism can shed light on France's current relationship with Africa (Francafrique). Cedric Robinson argued that racialization in Europe was a colonial process involving invasion, settlement, expropriation, and racial hierarchy. He insisted that modern European nationalism was held up with racialist myths - what he calls 'European racialism' (Robinson, 67) - and he also insisted on the process of differentiation at work in European civilization (instead of homogenization, which is what I argued). He was concerned with the fact that "the tendency of European civilization through capitalism was thus not to homogenize but to differentiate—to exaggerate regional, subcultural, and dialectical differences into 'racial' ones" (Robinson, 26).

I am interested in how Robinson's concept of racial capitalism may be useful to theorize France's current economic and political foreign policy with former African colonies. I think that it would strengthen a materialist approach to the issues I raise in my project, thus bringing to the fore the stakes of doing the work of dismantling white supremacy. It would also re-locate France in Africa as an integral actor in and of the colonial project and of the ongoing colonial practices I describe in my last section.

Towards Ethical Scholarship: A Little Manifesto

I have come to understand that ethical scholarship for me begins with creating conditions for learning and debating on non-coercive grounds. In other words, I am interested in developing a relationship with communities through their existing intellectuality as opposed to coming in to 'teach the masses.' I am concerned with empowering and being empowered, as opposed to reproducing hierarchies of power. In order to that, I often dwell in uncomfortable mental spaces that challenge my frame of reference and my understanding of the world. I read, listen to, follow and learn from marginalized folk who have been doing the painful, never ending work of fighting for the right and privilege to live full, safe lives abounding with opportunities.

I believe that discomfort is part of most real, honest learning experiences involved in the questioning of one's worldviews and belief systems. Yet, it is not something institutions talk about when describing the wonders of learning. It is not something they practice, either. They also don't talk about the labor involved in accepting new knowledge and grappling with how to use it to produce systemic changes. Finally, they don't address the difficulty and the importance of saying "I am wrong" or "I made a mistake," when necessary, and to accept it and behave accordingly.

I am invested in tearing the seams between institutions and structures. I strive to be an intellectual who embraces the discomfort, labor and pains along with the joys of being a life-long learner because I believe it is the way to produce ethical scholarship and to be a local and global citizen collaborating with communities to create intellectual formations and knowledge anchored in social justice principles.

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