

NOUS SOMMES LA FRANCE:
FRENCH IDENTITY IN A NEW ERA

By

Rachel Aboukhair

Submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for Departmental Honors in
the Department of Film, Television and Digital Media
Texas Christian University
Fort Worth, Texas

12/14/15

NOUS SOMMES LA FRANCE:
FRENCH IDENTITY IN A NEW ERA

Project Approved

Supervising Professor: Colin, Tait, Ph.D.

Department of Film, Television, and Digital Media

Joel Timmer, Ph.D.

Department of Film, Television, and Digital Media

Daniel Juan Gil, Ph.D.

Department of English

ABSTRACT

This thesis is about multiculturalism and immigration in contemporary French society as represented by French cinema. This project explores themes of immigration, integration, racism, oppression, and compassion through immigrant and minority stories in film. The main question of my thesis is what it means to be French as a minority and/or immigration in modern French society (specifically, from the 90s to today) in the context of the rising political and social opposition toward immigration. My study seeks to gain an understanding of the powerful country that once colonized the regions from where its newest immigrants seek refuge.

Through political and academic scholarship on these films, as well as on French socio-political issues, my project explores the concept of “closed borders” that is gaining popularity in France and the opposing sentiments of inclusion, fraternity, and integration, especially after the Charlie Hebdo attacks in Paris. By applying the stories and information from these films, books, and articles, as well as my personal experience studying abroad in Paris after the Charlie attacks, I hope to more completely understand the politics of race, religion, and multiculturalism in France and who is welcome to stand under the French flag and chant “*Nous Sommes la France.*”

TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION	1
APPROACHING THE QUESTION	5
<i>LA HAINE</i> AND THE FALLING SOCIETY	7
<i>WELCOME</i> AND PROBLEMATIC HOSPITALITY.....	13
COLONIALIST MYTH AND THE WHITE GAZE	17
RECONCILIATION AND SEIZING IDENTITY	23

It was January 16th 2015, my second day in Paris. I had arrived at Charles de Gaulle International Airport in Paris the previous day. I would be studying as an exchange student for four months on a semester-long program. The directors met me and my fellow classmates at the airport, and helped us find taxis to take to our respective French homestays. That same evening at a welcoming dinner, our program director announced solemnly, "Tomorrow our orientation is canceled because of the Charlie protests! The metros will be closed and the streets full of protestors."

There was a pause as the students murmured amongst themselves. We had heard about Charlie, of course. It was all over the news -- on every TV screen in the airport as I waited for my flight. One girl in the program who had arrived earlier than the rest of us had even heard the gunfire while on a walk with her parents. The director continued, "It is our policy to tell you not to go to these protests." Yet he paused with a look that said "But you should." He continued, "It is a defining moment in French history. But it is our policy to tell you not to go." He had warned us twice not to go but we all knew it was the classic cool teacher statement. *I'm saying I should tell you not to so that if you do I won't get in trouble.*

So the next morning, my host-mom Christine and my jet-lagged self took the metro, two hours prior to the demonstration. The metros were scheduled to close around noon to accommodate the massive citywide protest of 3 million participants. *Je Suis Charlie* signs were ubiquitous. Hundreds of candles and pens were shaped into memorials for the murdered journalists; pens representing the spirit of

cartoonists and journalists. Soon, we were millions gathered around a statue of Freedom in *Place de la République*.

As a film student and a Francophile, I had come to France with a preconceived idea of the culture entirely composed of images, soundbites, and cinema. Before my sojourn in France, I watched and researched dozens of French films and TV shows, namely ones that portrayed French multiculturalism and immigrant identity. My objective was to piece together political issues and personal identity from these media and to balance what was portrayed in art forms was the political theatre.

There was a mounting tension rising during the elections of 2015. Extreme right wing groups like *Le Front National*, founded by Marine Le Pen, had gained considerable popularity in recent years. *Le Front National*, despite being an extremist party received 24% of the electoral vote in 2014. Choice quotes from Marine Le Pen at political rallies include, "The people have spoken loud and clear. They no longer want to be led by those outside our borders...they want to be protected from globalization and take back the reins of their destiny."¹

In 2015, Although Le Pen's party didn't win the majority of the vote, other, far right groups with similar ideologies gained a massive percentage of councils.² Most consider this trend disturbing and a massive step backward for the once liberal country.

¹ <http://www.reuters.com/article/2014/05/25/us-eu-election-france-idUSBREA400CP20140525>

² <https://www.rt.com/news/245097-front-national-elections-france/>

The event that sparked this national outrage was an attack by Muslim extremists on the irreverent journal Charlie Hebdo. It was a violent, horrific example of what French politics fears the most: outside people, ideologies, and religion. Foreigners who invade France too easily; not to become French, but rather to destroy the myth of it. The myth of France is at stake. France's myths are older than America's. They were built over hundreds of years and curated the image of an ideal nation-state long before they were made aware of the contributions globalization and immigration had begun to make.³ The main tension over the ideological territory is the old myth of white France against the newer immigrant myth of France as a new home. Statistically, the old was winning.

However, on January 16th, I saw something completely new emerge from the battleground of *Place de la République*, and it looked something like this:

³ Hargreaves, Alec G. (2007-03-16). *Multi-Ethnic France: Immigration, Politics, Culture and Society* (Kindle Locations 414). Taylor and Francis. Kindle Edition.

Signs and plaques were everywhere. Ours said, "*Je Suis Charlie.*" Some said "*Nous Sommes Tous Charlie,*" but the most interesting phrase of all was "*Nous Sommes la France.*" It was written on signs and waved



proudly above heads. After a while, it was chanted by dozens of young men and women who had climbed onto the statue. I can personally attest that the majority of

the people on the statue were not white French, but rather black and Arab. This is a story about the novelty of this image. Mainly, it is a story about old vs. new. Which one is more dominant and which is more real? Can we reconcile the white with the non-white? And in this context, what does the slogan, “*Nous Sommes la France*” really mean?

Approaching the Question

Qui est la France? This is a question that has followed contemporary French society since the early 1990s. Traditional European (namely French) history is built on colonialism and international power and influence. France colonized much of North Africa, central Africa, and some of the Middle East. This colonialism, obliterated after World War II, is still a part of France. 8.6% of the population are immigrants.⁴ African and Arab immigrants grew increasingly until they became a substantial minority. By 2012, 17% of immigrants in France were from Algeria, Morocco, or Tunisia.⁵ This 17% was pushed to the outskirts of Paris by the government who feared the “Other” that it had cultivated abroad.

It often seems to be the case that the ‘people’ have espoused this desire. France, as Le Pen said, is afraid of globalization. As many first world countries open their borders to refugees and immigrants alike, France gradually closes hers to protect from those ‘outside.’ Fears are caused by insecurity, and France’s fear stems from the insecurity of her identity and sovereignty: the possibility that

⁴ http://www.insee.fr/fr/themes/tableau.asp?reg_id=0&ref_id=NATTEF02131

⁵ <http://www.ofii.fr/>

immigrants, especially non-white, non-secular ones, would overthrow the carefully constructed, traditional structure of the old country. This marginalization is best personified in the *banlieues*; the run-down suburbs on the edge of Paris where substandard education and hospitality are the lot of first-generation immigrants⁶. For a while, these young multi-nationals were not even acknowledged by official French statistics, a reflection on their perceived lack of importance by the French government.

According to “Multi-Ethnic France: Immigration, Politics, Culture and Society,” most of the children born to immigrants automatically become French nationals on reaching adulthood or in some cases at birth without having to go through any formal application procedures, which means that neither they nor their interests as immigrants were properly represented.⁷ The genealogy of immigrant children is mostly untraceable as there was no formal system of documenting their arrival on French soil. Thus, in the official mind of the state, the formal integration of immigrants and their descendants has until recently gone hand in hand with their obliteration as a distinct component of French society.⁸ In other words, the idea of “Frenchness” has remained mostly untarnished by any complicating factors such as non-French people tearing away at the borders of the country.

⁶ <https://sejed.revues.org/342>

⁷ Hargreaves, Alec G. (2007-03-16). *Multi-Ethnic France: Immigration, Politics, Culture and Society* (Kindle Locations 356-358). Taylor and Francis. Kindle Edition.

⁸ Hargreaves, Alec G. (2007-03-16). *Multi-Ethnic France: Immigration, Politics, Culture and Society* (Kindle Locations 360-362). Taylor and Francis. Kindle Edition.

The construction of borders is synonymous with the construction of a nation. National identity is contingent upon political borders, and that which is contained within composes a nation's culture. Inconveniently, the definitions of political and cultural boundaries never completely overlap. The state cannot control what is contained within its precise borders, which, in this case, may be diverse minorities who do not fit into the diagram of French identity. Hargreaves explains, "Cultural communities have sought to fulfill their sense of nationhood by constructing and defending state boundaries against outsiders, while states have frequently attempted to control or in some cases eliminate cultural diversity within their borders." ⁹

Thus, the nature of insecure communities and nation-states may rely on the exclusion of others who would call attention to the ambiguity of these borders. Such an ambiguity causes borders to be drawn in the wrong places, as shown in the film *La Haine*.

***La Haine* and the falling society**

French cinema has been an effective medium through which it has been possible to explore these political issues through personal stories. The most potent films have been those that have used personal stories of immigrants living in France. The first and most notable film to address these problems is *La Haine*. *La Haine*, a film by Matthieu Kassovitz, was released in 1995 and quickly gained widespread

⁹ Hargreaves, Alec G. (2007-03-16). *Multi-Ethnic France: Immigration, Politics, Culture and Society* (Kindle Locations 3095-3098). Taylor and Francis. Kindle Edition.

attention for its controversial subject matter. It follows three young men in the *banlieues* of Paris after a huge city-wide, anti-police riot has left their town destroyed, schools cancelled, and their friend Abdel in the hospital in a coma. *La Haine* depicts the day after this incident. This movie is controversial because it pits the three young men, an Arab, a Jew, and an Afro-French guy, against the white-French police who seek to destroy them. The police represent the state and the three men represent the oppressed minorities for whom the state has no interest or empathy.

The film uses live footage from French riots that took place in the early to late 90s, which lends to the rawness of the story. The other aspect of the movie that provides the movie authenticity is the use of the *verlan*, a type of French slang so distinct from proper French that subtitles are added for the benefit of the French viewer. It's a type of urban slang that inverts words and obscures their meaning. For example, "*français*" becomes "*cèfran*" and "*arabe*" becomes "*beur*."¹⁰ This inversion of French language is demonstrative of the inversion of French culture that takes place among this class of people. These forgotten immigrants are the several members of one Jewish family who all live together in one apartment; the shy Arabs; and the Afro-French in single-parent households. These are the lives of Vinz, Saïd, and Hubert, who are the itinerant youth in the streets. With no school, they wander about the city, but not free from the hostility of police who crash their

¹⁰ <http://french.about.com/od/vocabulary/a/verlan.htm>

rooftop party, prevent them from visiting their friend in the hospital, and, in a more sinister turn, take two of them hostage to torture and humiliate them.

These three young men belong nowhere, and their fate is predicted by an opening narration from Hubert. "It's the story of a man falling from a building, saying all the while to himself, 'So far, so good.' But the importance isn't how you fall, it's how you land." The threesome is prevented from entering the hospital and is painfully out of place at an art show into which they sneaked. As they leave unceremoniously, the curator declares more accurately than he knows, "The malaise of the *banlieues*." Saïd, with a fake ID of someone named David, is rejected a cab ride because there's "no way" his name could be David. It is abundantly clear that they are completely unprepared for upper class French society, or even for a world outside their limited outskirts of hopelessness. Saïd and Hubert, the two most obviously foreign, are kidnapped by policemen and used as a demonstration of how to interrogate. Although the scene deals with the subject matter with some light, comic undertones, the reality is actually very disturbing. These are people who wish to live, but their future is marred by violence, both real and potential. The violence is from a state that sees no use for them and has no desire to integrate them into its world. In one touching sequence, the boys pass a billboard that says "*Le monde est à vous*," meaning, "The world is yours". After several events from their day in which they suffer one rejection after another, Saïd passes by it and casually spray paints an "n" over the "v," converting it into "The world is ours."

It is a touching gesture of optimism from a boy who has spent the day treating the city as his personal playground. However, the sadness of the billboard is that the world is not really theirs. In fact, the world they occupy is hardly theirs at all. It is a world that withholds the opportunities promised to French citizens from immigrants and Jews. The three friends are emblematic of the problem of minorities: invisible to the French. They traverse Paris, see all its nooks and crannies and participate in its uprising, yet they leave no footprints. They are like spirits without full French bodies, ignored by the middle class who scoffs at their clothing and largely unseen by the state, which offers them the most meager of housing and education and blames them for their own shortcomings when they demand more.

Indeed, it is unclear whether their massive demonstration had any effect at all. Vinz, Saïd, and Hubert watch the subsequent news broadcasts. They hush each other and adjust the antennas to be able to see their faces and those of their friends on the news. They feel that the only evidence of their significance is if they are captured on television, be it throwing rocks, shouting, or chanting. They obsessively monitor the TV, spotting all their acquaintances as if it were an exciting debut on a game show. The media is the only proof that these people occupy territory in the country, both in the 90s and today. In a provocative early scene, the three sit in an empty playground until a news station van pulls up and asks them for commentary on the riot. They immediately respond with violence, shouting, "Turn off the camera, this isn't a zoo!" and throwing pebbles and insults until they leave. You'd

think they'd give them an interview, since they love being on TV. Or perhaps they know if they respond belligerently they will appear on TV?

The answer isn't completely evident, although it's most likely that those who are raised and bred in violence can only respond in kind. If teenagers have never heard a kind word, how could they give one? Vinz is the character that most fully embodies this problem. He has a major identity struggle that unfolds throughout the film until the tragic ending. He is a Jew through and through. He's been to Israel, there's a menorah in his house. He is an Ashkenazi, white Jew in strong contrast to his black friend Hubert. Vinz is the angriest character with the most to prove. He practices his DeNiro-esque monologue in the mirror and fantasizes of being a gangster, the way he perceives the boxing champion Hubert to be. Most importantly, he stole a gun from a police officer during the riot, a fact that is widely broadcast as cause for emergency. Vinz views his landscape like a video game. Saïd cowers from it, Hubert is wisely detached from it, but Vinz engages with it the most, like a young boy playing cowboys and Indians.

In this case, he is the Indian hunted by the police cowboys. He seeks a street-cred identity of a gangster thug, something that his Jewish identity can't provide him. He speaks with bravado about killing a cop and idealizes doing jail time. "Like you," he says to Hubert. Hubert dryly responds, "I've never been in jail."

"Oh..."

This idea of identity is only as concrete as perception. If we remember the deviation of cultural boundaries from political ones, we see that the definition of

“borders” is loosely defined. If we can’t define the borders of our country, how can we define those within ourselves? Vinz, who struggles the most with this, has a room plastered with American paraphernalia and posters. These boys try to embody American gangsterisms like the De Niro monologue because they feel they’re not really French.

Vinz pulls out his gun and Hubert encourages him to kill a skinhead they have cornered. Is he goading him or does he actually want to witness a murder? It is open to interpretation. Either way, Vinz is too overcome by his humanity to do it, and emotionally turns away. Vinz is no longer ignorant of what real-world violence means, and he doesn’t wish to espouse the hatred and homicide of racists and bigots and gives the gun to Hubert for safekeeping. Unfortunately, the world is not as enlightened as he, and as the three plan to return home, a police car pulls up. A policeman in street clothes captures Vinz, theatrically waving a gun at his head until it accidentally discharges, immediately killing him. The cop is taken aback, but has no time to collect himself- Hubert takes the gun Vinz gave him and points it at the cop, who points his own gun at him, too.

Saïd’s helpless face is between the two as Hubert’s narration returns, this time with a revision. “It’s the story of a society that falls, saying to itself, ‘So far, so good; so far, so good.’ But the importance is not the fall. It’s the way it lands.” Saïd closes his eyes and a gunshot is heard. Violence and death are inescapable for the three outsiders, and even if they have the veil lifted from their eyes, death follows them. They are stalked by a system that rejects them and ensures their demise.

“Multi-Ethnic France” documents the long and embarrassing history of French colonization. France’s colonial presence was a great source of national pride and power, and the “way in which the empire was liquidated,” primarily due to Algeria’s independence in 1962, “helped to make of French colonialism another field of public amnesia.” It also describes how few memorials or museums exist honoring this colonial past, indicative of how France wishes to highlight that section of its history book with black ink. “Multi-Ethnic France” suggests that the memories of colonialism have been forced back into public discourse “in part because of the settlement of immigrant minorities originating in former colonies.” Their plight of discrimination has egged itself into French political agendas since it reaches a level that cannot be ignored. These are the “echoes” of French colonialism that has come back to haunt the sovereign state. These echoes are Saïd and Hubert, an Arab and an African. Vinz has a place in this discussion because of the baffling existence of anti-Semitism in the country. These youth represented by our three characters are the echoes of colonialism that need to be erased; the backlash of countries that endured abuse and now seek asylum.

Welcome and Problematic Hospitality

Thus, the fear of these minorities gaining any secure standing in modern French society stems from the fact that it would loosen France’s control over its history and geography, and consequently its pride. However, research and psychology indicate that immigrant minorities inevitably adopt the cultural norms and codes of their new country. Although immigrant parents are keen on

maintaining their original cultural standards within France, their children become French as “they pass through the educational system and mix with children from the majority population,” and “internalize cultural codes of the dominant population.” Moreover, youngsters of a minority population wish to adopt the standard of their country as a rite of passage into society. Nobody wishes to be different from the majority, and remaining different is nearly impossible as one is subjected to the formal education system. On top of that, these minorities are concentrated in urban areas, which rules out the possibility of maintaining a detached, Amish-like community.

Such a problem of defining a nation by its boundaries is the heart of the Calais border crisis, documented in the 2009 film *Welcome* by Philippe Lioret. Calais is a port town in France sought after by Middle Eastern immigrants as a stopping point on their way to Britain. Britain’s atmosphere is much more open to immigrants and is therefore the utopia that they seek as they flee from violence and into a new life. It has become such a political burden that a new law, which is highlighted in the film, prevents French citizens from aiding aliens. That is where the story of the two characters of *Welcome* comes in. An older French swim coach (Simon) trains a Kurdish refugee (Bilal) to swim the English Channel so he can be reunited with his girlfriend who has emigrated to London. Simon is one of the only characters who feels compassion toward Bilal in the film. All other Frenchmen are suspicious and hostile, adopting the attitude of the government. One goes so far as to report his neighbor to the police for seeing Bilal in his apartment.

Lioret, in describing his film, compares laws against aiding immigrants to laws against aiding Jews during the reign of Hitler. Indeed, France is guilty of complying with such laws during its occupation, and “detention centers” and camps abounded in France and all of Europe. While some say that this comparison is too strong, the parallel plight of Jews and immigrants is impossible to ignore. Brutality and lack of compassion in the face of hopelessness is demoralizing and destructive not only to victims but also to abusers. Four hundred and fifty people immigrants died trying to swim the English Channel in 2009, as does the protagonist of the film.¹¹ The problem of modern immigration is as massive and unwieldy as the ocean in which these migrants die. What is most demoralizing about this issue is that it bears uncanny resemblance to the issues highlighted in *La Haine* a decade earlier. The resistance to foreigners and governmental brutality is still present despite the turn of the century. The modern migrants occupying French territories are met with the brutality of human indifference. Much like the *banlieues* of Hubert, Saïd, and Vinz, Bilal and other Kurds are compartmentalized in camps, where they are conveniently out of sight and mind from the government and citizens.

“Liberal Multiculturalism and the Ethics of Hospitality in the Age of Globalization,” an essay by Meyda Yegenoglu¹², points out the dichotomy of hospitality in nation-states such as France. Although France has welcomed

¹¹ Cox, David. “Welcome highlights British hypocrisy as well as French Brutality.” *The Guardian*. Nov. 9, 2009.

¹² Meyda Yegenoglu, *Liberal Multiculturalism and the Ethics of Hospitality in the Age of Globalization*. *Postmodern Culture*. Volume 13, Number 2, January 2003.

immigrants and refugees, the question of hospitality is something it fears.

“Welcoming the other in the form of codified multiculturalist tolerance implies a conditional welcoming, as the hospitality offered remains limited within law and jurisdiction.” Ergo, the refugees are offered ceremonial shelter but not the shelter offered to citizens. “This kind of tolerance does not result in a fundamental modification of the host subject's mode of inhabiting the territory that is deemed to be solely within his/her possession. Multiculturalist respect and tolerance implies the conditional welcoming of the guest within the prescribed limits of the law and hence implies a reassertion of mastery over the national space as it enables the subject to appropriate a place for itself--an empty and universal and therefore sovereign place--from which the other is welcomed.”¹³ In other words, France welcomes as long as it retains control over the sovereign and divinely-bestowed soil on which the refugees set foot.

As Yegenoglu explains, France as the host must assert that the territory is solely within her possession. This place may be a refuge, but it will never be a home as long as France is its sole past, present, and future possessor. It is a hospitality bred without generosity. Anything more ample than a camp might cause sovereign ownership to be revoked. This hypothesis so forcefully describes the central motivation behind marginalization and is linked to fear of globalization. France is a large, powerful nation-state. This identity is bloated and self-indulgent, yet it is used

¹³Yegenoglu, Meyda. *Liberal Multiculturalism and the Ethics of Hospitality in the Age of Globalization*. Post-Modern Culture & John Hopkins University Press. Volume 13, Number 2, January 2003

to reinforce the idea of sovereignty and control. If France cedes any sort of self-interest to rehabilitate first or second generation immigrants, than it runs the risk of ceding its sovereignty as well. If France has mastery over the national space, then it has mastery over the narrative. If globalization is the enemy of French society, then, as Yegenoglu points out, France cannot acknowledge “alternative histories, traditions, and cultures that have hitherto remained silent under the ruins of the project of modernity and colonialism.”

Colonialist Myth and the White Gaze

This version of hospitality allows for the persecution of immigrants. The host persecutes his guests so that they don't overturn the tables and take over the house. Another equally disturbing motivation for persecuting immigrants is deconstructed in George Yancy's essay “Colonial gazing: the production of the Body as ‘Other’.” In his essay, Yancy follows European colonial history and how the Europeans, as colonizers, gave themselves the power to define the Black body on their own terms. These colonial definitions have a lasting effect, from which violence inevitably follows. Black bodies stand “diametrically opposed to whites.”¹⁴ He continues, “It is my sense that the myth of Europe...is fundamentally predicated upon tropes of whiteness, bringing luminosity and light to bear upon the dark world...of Africa.” So, the dynamic of perceived racial differences between white and Black/Arab is one of superior vs. inferior. In the battle of myths, the European

¹⁴ Yancy, George. "Colonial Gazing: The Production of the Body as "Other"." *Western Journal of Black Studies* 32.1 (2008): 3-4. *ProQuest*. Web. 12 Nov. 2015.

side perceives itself as the natural-born winner. “Colonial invasive powers bring with them their own myths, beliefs, and forms of colonial ordering...that is designed to distinguish between a form of hierarchy where the colonizer...is superior in all things, while the native...is inferior.”¹¹ It’s an old propaganda, but one that permeates the timeline of history and allows for the inequities of modern culture.

It is easy to see how colonial propaganda described by Yancy affects the story of *Welcome*, and the real political paradigm that informs it. One of the most natural human instincts is compassion,¹⁵ yet the first response of these communities is to expel refugees and those who help them. As the advantaged, socioeconomically stable French citizen, why is the natural instinct to exclude foreigners; or, people who are represented in cinema by Bilal, Hubert, and Saïd? What happened to *fraternité*? Is this the same country that fostered the enlightenment and prominent humanist philosophers? The pompousness of this propaganda is as empty as papier-mâché, yet they don’t only occur in France. The constitution of the United States puts forth that all men have inalienable rights of life and liberty; except when they don’t. All *men* have these rights- and those at the top get to decide who qualifies for such a title. As we all know, many categories of people were not considered worthy of these rights for several decades, if not centuries. Women’s Suffrage forced the state to consider that women could participate in national spaces. People of color were considered sub-human until the Civil Rights movement

¹⁵ http://greatergood.berkeley.edu/article/item/the_compassionate_instinct

of the 60s. The pre-set definition of *men* didn't allow for the inclusion of women and people of color until they seized the definition for themselves.

Yancy points out that the "irony is that this universal humanism was shaped through an ideology of exclusion and misanthropy."¹⁶ In fact, it still is. Modern humanist attitude, even in the case of philanthropy, positions itself at the top of non-Western formations that it considers savage. In addition, philosophies regarding humanism and the qualities of ethical civilization developed at the same time as the violence of Western colonialism.¹³ Hence, the idea of Western/European humanity and humanism "functioned as an ideological category, in the name of which violence toward the Other could be enacted with little or no remorse."

Perhaps not surprisingly, French humanism did not simply fail to include the "Other" as part of its transcendental revelation, but rather the whole axis of this brand of humanism spins on the exclusion of the "Other." The meaning of this myth is exclusionary. Those who seize power over land and borders also seize power over the definition of those within. Colonizers formed an idea of "human" with a clear demarcation between white and Black. White, western Europeans became the standard and default type of human, while the rest were exiled to status of the "Other." Moreover, native people subject to French colonialism lost the power to define themselves and had to resign themselves to the roles assigned by their suppressors. When we see foreigners as things or objects rather than people, it

¹⁶ Yancy, George. "Colonial Gazing: The Production of the Body as "Other"." *Western Journal of Black Studies* 32.1 (2008): 5. *ProQuest*. Web. 12 Nov. 2015.

becomes easier to treat them as invaders of our delicate humanity. Not each individual makes the decision to don the lens of superiority by birthright. But that at the top presumably informs that at the bottom through the water we drink: education, history books, broadcast news, and legislation. When a nation endorses this systematic dehumanization through the modes of education, approved history, legislation, and border control, it is impossible for certain myths and propaganda not to permeate the subconscious of citizens.

If French human identity is predicated on exclusion, then foreign entities threaten to dismantle the borders of French identity. France is not a country that is defined in loose terms. It becomes more closed to maintain its identity, to the point where encouraging any intrusion is punishable in court. The problem with identity is that it is constructed by “myths.” Meaning that it is composed of ideas that we have defined in our own terms, and these new definitions can only diminish the original. If we try to weave together all these different fabrics, wouldn’t it only tarnish the original? The French philosopher Roland Barthes’ essay on myths describes the development and enforcement of myths in old societies, mainly in the media. Myths are created by words and signs and convert images into a desired meaning. One notable example is the image of an African boy in front of the French flag on a 1957 edition of *Paris Match*.



“There are formal limits to myth, not substantial ones. It can consist of modes of writing or of representations; not only written discourse, but also photography, cinema, reporting, sport, shows, publicity, all these can serve as a support to mythical speech,” says Barthes. This African boy represents a colonial France that has absorbed a foreign boy into its paradigm. He pledges allegiance to France and does not burden his country with duality or self-defined representation. He is represented on France’s terms, in a way that would not threaten these formal lines of myth. Like Balil, he can take only what France has offered him, but instead of a refugee camp he is limited to the territory of poster-boy of French colonial power. As Barthes describes it, “I see very well what it signifies to me: that France is a great Empire, that all her sons, without any colour discrimination, faithfully serve under

her flag, and that there is no better answer to the detractors of an alleged colonialism than the zeal shown by this Negro in serving his so-called oppressors.”¹⁷ Maybe this French boy, although exalted on the cover of a prestigious publication, is not so different from the boys of *La Haine*. His representation only serves the purpose that French media wishes to propagate. The media is making him play a role in which his being is absorbed into the myth of France. Referring back to Yancy, this African boy exists within the “white hegemonic colonial order of things,” and his body “bears the imprint of the colonial gaze, its myths and its lies. There is a coalescing of the signifier with the signified.”¹⁸

Did the French media give any indication that the youth of the *banlieues* existed before they broke out in riots? Vinz only saw himself on TV when in an act of violence. The media uses both the *Paris Match* boy and the *banlieues* boys to add to the strength of colonial propaganda. “The idea is to get the colonized to accept the colonialists point of reference as the only point of reference.”¹³ The former shows the power of French cultural influence, and the latter the inevitable result of letting immigrants live on their own terms. This image of the African boy is “tamed and put at a distance...it becomes the accomplice of the concept of French imperialism: once made use of, it becomes artificial.”¹²

This artificiality of social segregation is the reality of French multiculturalism for the past few decades. Vinz knew it, and his break from what the system wanted

¹⁷ Barthes, Roland, and Annette Lavers. "Myth Today." *Mythologies*. New York: Hill and Wang, 1972. 116-118. Print.

¹⁸ Barthes, Roland, and Annette Lavers. "Myth Today." *Mythologies*. New York: Hill and Wang, 1972. 6. Print.

him to be resulted in his demise. Anything that grows outside the lines of these myths cannot survive. Bilal found this out too, when he lived on the edge of French borders and tried to define his life in his own terms. Immigration is the current crisis of this myth. These immigrants seek out the myth of French strength and impenetrability. However, when they arrive, they see that the myth does not extend to them. This myth can only survive while it excludes those who do not belong to its genealogy. Saïd knew this when he spray-painted over "*Le Monde est à Vous*": that was a myth that could not possibly extend to him and all he could do was indulge in his own.

Reconciliation and Seizing Identity

That was the form of the myth until January 7, 2015 when two armed Muslim extremists murdered the cartoonists at the *Charlie Hebdo* offices. What everyone feared the most had come to pass: the fortress of France had been penetrated by foreign religion and ideology and extremism, and it had left a wake of brutal violence. It seemed that le Front National and Marie Le Pen and every far right politician were right. When I arrived at Charles de Gaulle, our study abroad program directors put me and another student in a taxi to take us to our host families. Before our taxi could leave the airport, two cops stopped us and opened my side of the taxi. The cop flashed her badge.

"Could I ask you a few questions?"

She asked me where we were going and who reserved the taxi for us. When they let us go, I asked the taxi driver for an explanation. "They wanted to make sure

I wasn't a spy," he said. It was nerve wracking. Paris was on lock-down and I was here to witness it. Was this the society that is falling, in Hubert's words?

At least, that's what I wondered, until January 16th, when a new myth would arise at *Place de la République*. Christine (my host mom) and I had to leave early since it was announced the metro would close after noon. We got a coffee at a café in the square. The walls were plastered with different covers of *Charlie Hebdo* issues- all obscene, subversive, and mostly funny. People chose to gather at this square because it holds the most powerful symbols of France. These symbols signify myths, as Barthes would say. There is one main statue in the square. The centerpiece is of a triumphant woman representing the Republic, holding a wreath. On the lower tier are three sub statues, all women. Above each is inscribed its symbol: Liberty, Equality, and Fraternity (Brotherhood). In front of the base of the statue is a bronze lion. This is the statue around which we gathered that day for reasons that are obvious yet underexamined. A republic is something that belongs to the people, so in that moment, this space belonged to the myth of republic and freedom of speech.

We came carrying symbols: pens symbolizing freedom of expression, signs reading "*Je suis Charlie*", symbolizing solidarity in the face of terrorism. Some of the most surprising signs read, "*Je suis juif, je suis chrétien, je suis musulman, je suis Charlie.*"¹⁹ Young people of all races participated in the demonstration. In fact, people of minority races participated the most. This was an image of France that I

¹⁹ I am Jewish, I am Christian, I am Muslim, I am Charlie.

wouldn't find in the annals of cinema or in broadcast journalism: it was an image of minorities at the forefront of patriotism and participation, taking full advantage of the moment. At first, we gathered around the base of the statue for a rally, on the side that read "*Fraternité.*" Then, gradually, people started climbing the statue with French flags. The first two to climb were two young men. Their figures were blurred against the sun. One climbed first, the other handed him their flags, then the first helped the other up and they waved their flags triumphantly to the sound of cheers. One man was Arab and the other was Black. They stood under the statue of Brotherhood and waved French flags, chanting "*Nous Sommes la France!*"

How could this be that in an era of social fracturing they were the first to climb the statue and claim this space as theirs? They were the counter- Saïd and Hubert. Instead of two young men teetering on the edge of existence and death, they took this moment to claim what they believed to be theirs: a place in the Republic and in brotherhood. At first it seemed like something revolutionary: two Others breaking from their roles assigned by birth on French soil. Instead of dark faces lost in a crowd, they pushed themselves to the top. Was it revolutionary, or was it really people seeking the origins of French myth?

Although humanist ideology was spun with the thread of exclusivity, French people came together that day with signs defining themselves on plurality. *Je suis juif, je suis chrétien...je suis Charlie.* Charlie was the banner under which we marched, under which *all* of us marched. Citizens of all race and religion, plus one study abroad student. We were seeking a new definition of who we are as a nation-

state. We are all Charlie, meaning we are all one even why violence tries to intimidate us. Why else would we come to this place in the center of Paris where the cornerstones of society were immortalized in triumphant bronze and marble?

On n'a pas peur, is one of the phrases we chanted in unison. We are not afraid. When most expected xenophobic and anti-Arab rhetoric to erupt from the *Charlie Hebdo* attacks, 8 million French people came to claim what politics and politicians and textbooks and *Paris Match* would not give them: Liberty, Brotherhood, and Equality. What they showed me was the real French identity that I couldn't see through media and politics- one that a violent system tried to stamp out. When Arabs and Blacks and Jews and Whites all stood on the same statue waving the same flag, saluting the same principles and defining France on their own terms, the artificiality of political myth as empty as used ammunition faded away like thin smoke. As the French humanist philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre said, "*Il n'y a de réalité que dans l'action.*" There is no reality except in action. Images and screens and headlines printed in bold font stand on one side, and action stands on the other.

The journey back from the land of myth defines our identities. In the conclusion of his essay, George Yancy described an African woman who was subjected to the dehumanizing examination of white France. He says of her journey back to South Africa, "One can only imagine how [she] felt as she learned to re-inhabit her body, to re-relate to it... everywhere she looked she found herself reconfigured by white gazes that distorted and imprisoned her. As she measured

her soul by the tape of a white French world...one wonders whether or not she had dogged strength to keep herself from being torn asunder."²⁰

Globalization is inevitable. Sadly, integration and assimilation is not. As long as the Other is subjected to the white, superior, colonialist gaze, it will never be accepted. But these people at *Place de la République* showed the same conquest as Yancy's African subject. In that moment, they refused to measure themselves by the tape of a white French world. Since those at the top wouldn't grant them an identity, they seized it for themselves. If I learned one lesson from my time abroad and my research, it would be this: do not let yourself be defined by myths. Whatever is an illusion, erase it, and build your own identity on your own terms.

That is the reconciliation between those two images: *Paris Match* and the citizens at *Place de la République*. The former was of those at the top trying to absorb a threat to identity, and the latter was of those labeled as the threat creating a new identity for themselves. I saw that the old myth of France, of equal opportunity and solidarity, had been for too long clouded by a new myth that propped itself up like a bronze lion to keep the undesired forces out. What happened at the top didn't trickle down to the bottom. *Donc*, the question is answered. *Nous Sommes la France* means that identity can be seized for itself.

One final quote from Barthes:

²⁰ Yancy, George. "Colonial Gazing: The Production of the Body as "Other"." *Western Journal of Black Studies* 32.1 (2008): 14. *ProQuest*. Web. 9 Nov. 2015.

“This is what we must seek: a reconciliation between reality and men, between description and explanation between object and knowledge.”²¹

Do as Saïd did, and spray-paint a new meaning on top of an outdated one. Seek this reconciliation, within others or within yourself, and you shall find it. At least, I found it January 16, 2015. I was, as Barthes would say, demystified.



²¹ Barthes, Roland, and Annette Lavers. "Myth Today." *Mythologies*. New York: Hill and Wang, 1972. 159. Print.

