

“IS THIS REALLY LIBERTY, EQUALITY, FRATERNITY?”:
THE NTM AFFAIR, FRENCH CULTURAL POLITICS, AND AMERICANIZATION
AS CULTURAL MISCEGENATION

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In his article “No More Song and Dance: French Radio Broadcast Quotas, *Chansons*, and Cultural Exceptions,” James Petterson argues that the passage of a 1996 French law requiring radio stations to broadcast a minimum of 40 percent Francophone music was essentially a function of capitalist greed couched in nationalist rhetoric.¹ While Petterson accounts for the broad ranging discourses of homogenization and globalization at play in these attempts to preserve French culture, he minimizes the law’s presumptive goal—to limit the influence of American popular music on French youth.² Indeed, the French legislature passed a similar law guarding the French language from Americanisms in 1994.³ The quota system for French broadcasters is thus part of a larger reaction against a particular breed of globalization known as “Americanization.”

A primary target of these anti-Americanization efforts was American hip hop which was quickly growing in popularity among the children of France’s working class Sub-Saharan African and Arab immigrants.⁴ Beginning in the late 1980s the influence of American hip hop culture began to show up as graffiti, street dancing, and rap in the marginalized lower-income neighborhoods and housing projects of the French suburbs, or *banlieues*. By the early 1990s, French youth had found in rapping a voice to air their dissent from what they saw as an increasingly xenophobic and oppressive system.⁵ The object of criticism in much early French rap was the rise of Jean-Marie Le Pen’s rightist *Front National* party (FN). The FN came to power in the early 1990s on an anti-immigration platform attracting as much as 20 percent of the vote in national elections.⁶ Using slogans like “France for the French” and “immigration equals unemployment” the FN employed a rationale that echoes Petterson’s nationalistic and economic reading of the 1994 and 1996 anti-Americanization measures.⁷

Though Americanization is routinely read as a capitalistic phenomenon, a subtext of racism pervades its discourse. As Laurent Mucchielli notes in his “Rap Music and French Society as Viewed by Youth of the *Cités* (housing projects)”: “Behind the material injustices, rappers see a system of social segregation aimed specially at the youthful descendants of immigrants.”⁸ I have termed this discourse of protectionism that seeks to keep European cultures pure Americanization as cultural miscegenation. This thesis proposes that there exists a nexus in which European national identities have equated their own fears of cultural miscegenation from immigrant communities with the *already* culturally miscegenated model of America. To be sure, the same instinct that seeks to protect national markets also seeks to protect national identity. Thus, we should add to the discourse on Americanization as unchecked capitalism a second discourse of Americanization as cultural miscegenation—or “racial intermixture.” In this study, I will bring this thesis to bear on the subject of French rap in the early 1990s with a special emphasis on the racially integrated and aptly named group, NTM, an acronym for “*Nique Ta Mère*” [Fuck Your Mother].

From the imprisonment of groups for anti-establishment speech to the founding of a “multi-ethnic alliance and political movement with hip hop at its core,” I hope to illustrate how French rappers first adopted, then adapted a hyper-political sub-genre of American rap to fight the oppression that it saw in the French state’s moves to insulate its culture from miscegenation.⁹ In doing so, I hope to depict a country struggling to maintain its identity confronted with rising immigration from its former colonies. In the introduction to their recent study, *The Color of Liberty: Histories of Race in France*, Sue Peabody and Tyler Stovall characterize this struggle as evocative of the French: “contradiction between republican universalism and racial particularism.”¹⁰ Though the French have prided themselves on their governmentally sanctioned egalitarianism since the 1789 Revolution, the country’s population has been relatively homogeneous until the last 20 years.¹¹ As the country faced increased struggles with racial inequality over the course of the 1980s and 1990s the French rappers NTM asked in their 1991 song “*Le Monde de Demain*” [Tomorrow’s World]: “*Est-ce que c’est vraiment de la liberté, égalité, fraternité?*” [Is this really liberty, equality, fraternity?].¹²

“Fear of a Black Planet”

The title track of the 1990 album *Fear of a Black Planet: The Counterattack on World Supremacy* by the politically outspoken hip hop group Public Enemy features the lines: “Black man, black woman: black baby. White man, white woman: white baby. White man, black woman: black baby. Black man, white woman: black baby.”¹³ The lyrics reference the infamous “one drop rule” of American racial-sexual politics whereby a child of one white and one black parent, grandparent, great-grandparent, etc., is deemed black. If one drop of black blood runs through your veins, you are black. Blackness is thus constructed as an impurity that taints and subsumes whiteness.¹⁴

The issue of miscegenation is invoked again in a later verse of “Fear of a Black Planet” when Chuck D, the group’s front man, posits Europe as the implied source of the constructed racial purity—and therefore the foil to the impure black. Chuck D asks: “What is pure? Who is pure? Is it European? I ain’t sure.”¹⁵ On “Fear of a Black Planet” Public Enemy’s message is clear: the “browning” of America, to use the parlance of Latin-American essayist Richard Rodriguez, calls into question the global hegemonic structures that privilege whiteness.¹⁶ The question then remains: what happens to Western (read: white) hegemony when America, the cultural, economic, and military leader of the Western world, becomes predominantly non-white?

The problem that Chuck D wants to stress is that in the figuration of the one drop rule, whiteness is recessive and subordinate to blackness and therefore needs to be protected against impurity. But as he astutely comments in “Fear of a Black Planet,” the one drop rule and the idea of whiteness that it is meant to protect are ultimately self-defeating and untenable. Hence, the fear that whiteness will eventually “fall prey” to blackness. It is this fear that I wish to focus on in the current study. It is a fear of loss and a fear of impurity. But rather than focusing on the proliferation of *racial* miscegenation that Chuck D sees on the horizon, I want to look at the effects of a hybridization that already predominates—that is *cultural* miscegenation.

America in the Eyes of Europe

In a rapidly growing body of scholarship on the role of American culture outside of the U.S., authors have characterized European responses to American cultural products as a highly ambivalent mixture of fascination and fear—a love/hate relationship.¹⁷ As Rob Kroes observes in his study of American culture in Europe: “These scholars’ common focus was the dual nature, the Januslike face, of American culture as it has been perceived and received in Europe.”¹⁸ On the fascination side of the Janus face, the authors describe a reception that formulates the U.S. as the “New World”—a diverse, vibrant, democratic, and egalitarian society in contrast to the “Old World’s” homogeneity, drudgery, monarchy, and age-old class stratification.¹⁹ The alienation produced by industrialization and the tradition of nobility by birthright, are thrown out the window in this “New World” figuration. In this way, Europeans have shaped a fantasy of America—with American help of course—as a land of new beginnings and authentic life experience.

On the fear side, the authors describe a formulation of “America, Inc.” as an overtly capitalistic society with no regard for local vernacular and non-commercial artistic expressions. America’s commodification processes, described as “Coca-Colonization” and “McDonaldization,” thus threaten to drown out the European voices, leaving them marginalized and alienated by the commercial juggernaut.²⁰ Kroes refers to the common use of the term “Americanization” to describe this formulation which: “normally serves in a discourse of rejection to point to the variety of processes through which America exerts its dismal influence on European cultures.”²¹ Europeans—again, not without the help of Americans—have thus constructed a contrary view of the U.S. as a homogenized land of electronic media, mass culture, malls, and fast food.

Underlying the discourse of Americanization as commercialization, however, is a subtext of racial discourse that has eluded discussion in much of the scholarship on European reception of American cultural products. The language used to describe the cultural flow of Americanization includes many instances of “hybridity,” “creolization,” and “cross-fertilization,” but in very few cases do scholars address the racial undertones of this language. Heidi Fehrenbach and Ute Poiger nicely summarize this racialized discourse, and the dearth of studies addressing it, in their introduction to *Transactions, Transgressions, Transformations: American Culture in Western Europe and Japan*:

[S]ome of the most popular American cultural imports have been adapted from the cultures of various American racial and ethnic minorities, and have been employed by nations to confront and reformulate their own notions of racial difference. *This is an understudied subject.* . . . Much of American culture—like ragtime, jazz, rock ‘n’ roll—has been rooted in African-American culture, and audiences from the United States and abroad have often felt titillated and/or repelled by what they perceive as racial transgressions contained in these varieties of American culture. [my emphasis]²²

As Fehrenbach and Poiger recognize, the “racial transgressions” of much American culture complicates the Americanization as commercialization formula. In addition, the

same fascination/fear ambivalence (or titillation/repulsion) in the discourse on commerce is evident in this less studied discourse on race.

Americanization as Cultural Miscegenation

In an effort to nuance the discourse on Americanization as commercialization, fill the lacuna that Fehrenbach and Poiget address, and add to our understanding of the set of processes known as Americanization, I would like to posit an alternate, companion reading of these processes, which I have referred to as the Americanization as cultural miscegenation thesis. I do not wish to deny the capitalist mechanisms and motivations of Americanization, but rather to address the subtext of race, sex, and gender employed to define Americanization and thereby motivate anti-American sentiment and promote protective nationalism. Just as Chuck D saw notions of European purity complicated by the one drop rule in “Fear of a Black Planet,” I see formulations designed to maintain European national identities as premised on fears of *cultural* miscegenation.

Ralph Ellison noted in his 1970 essay “What America Would Be Like without Blacks”:

Despite his racial difference and social status, something indisputably American about Negroes not only raised doubts about the white man’s value system but aroused the troubling suspicion that whatever else the true American is, he is also somehow black.²³

The language of creolization that permeates the literature on Americanization underscores this construction of America not only as a culturally miscegenated society of European races but specifically as a “blackened” society. In Eric Lott’s reading of blackface minstrelsy, “Love and Theft: The Racial Unconscious of Blackface Minstrelsy,” there is also the implication that the simulacra resulting from this: “racial intercourse that creolized black cultural forms as it ‘blackened’ the dominant culture [is] a process that in one sense makes it difficult to talk about racial transgression at all.”²⁴ Lott is pointing to an important fabrication inherent in this discourse of miscegenation. “Creolization” and “blackening” are two racial metaphors—one black to white and the other white to black—for acculturative processes. Since racial stereotypes are constructed by mapping racial fictions onto cultural practices, however, it becomes impossible to speak of cultural miscegenation, or boundary crossing, when there is already rampant multiplicity in cultural practice.

While I am well aware of the mythic status and inherent paradoxes of the cultural miscegenation idea, as was Chuck D, I want to stress that as a mode of discourse about culture, especially music, the idea of cultural miscegenation remains a powerful concept for the protection of a group’s practices. When culture is given a racial referent it becomes attached to the bodies of a social group making culture more “real.” In effect, by racializing culture humans make culture part of their bodily identity—part of them—rather than an amorphous web of ideas to be interpreted in a poststructuralist mode as the user sees fit.

By conflating culture with race, Europeans, as well as Americans, have found a language with which to discuss their struggle for identity in terms less ephemeral than culture—terms of race and sex. The fixity of these terms make the instability of cultural

identity less apparent and therefore more easily deployed to protective means. As a social construction itself, the idea of Europe as an integrated whole benefits from the stability of this figuration. Constructions of race “that were so central to the development of modern national identities” thus sustain the tenuous hold that nineteenth-century nationalisms still have in Europe.²⁵ Since America is Europe’s closest ally as well as potentially its greatest adversary, it is constructed as a foil to Europe—a relatively new country that has already succumbed to cultural miscegenation, indeed some would argue, founded on that notion. Thus, there exists a nexus in which European national identities have equated their own fears of cultural miscegenation from immigrant communities with the already culturally miscegenated model of America. Additionally, I would argue that America is constructed as creolized or blackened in part because it is one of the few ways that Europeans can differentiate themselves from what is otherwise a shared “Western” racial and cultural ancestry with Americans.

In the next sections, I will focus this discussion of Americanization as cultural miscegenation by examining the cultural politics of French rap and a microcosm of its racialized discourse known as the “NTM Affair.”

The Emergence of French Hip Hop: “Arrival, Adoption, and Adaptation”

In his seminal work on the history of French rap, “The Evolution of French Rap Music and Hip Hop Culture in the 1980s and 1990s,” Andre Prévos describes three basic stages in the emergence of the form.²⁶ The first he describes as the “arrival” of rap in France, a period dominated by the figure of Afrika Bambaataa and his Zulu Nation movement from the early to late 1980s. The Zulu Nation was a model for urban education and community building that Bambaataa first used to aid primarily black lower class neighborhoods in the Bronx.²⁷ The movement employed an empowering Afrocentrism to promote community with rap music and hip hop culture at its core. As Prévos explains, Bambaataa introduced New York rap and its attendant breakdancing (or smurfing) and graffiti art to one lower-class North-Paris *banlieu*, and the style grew from there as Bambaataa’s music and the music of other U.S. artists became commercially available in France. This focus on the *banlieues*—the equivalent of the American black ghetto—in French rap remains an important part of the identification of its performers with the lower class, predominantly non-white immigrant communities from which the form got its first footing in France. The rappers from the peripheral *banlieues* still maintain a stance of authenticity in French rap today, just as U.S. rap continues to center itself in the urban black ghetto.

Prévos describes the second stage of French rap as the “adoption” stage wherein French rappers began to emulate the U.S. styles in their native language. The milestone in this period was the first compilation of French rappers, *Rapattitudes*, released on the *Labelle Noir* record label in 1990.²⁸ As the name of the label indicates, French hip hop had already become associated with the blackness of the American form. Additionally, Prévos conjectures that the title of the compilation and the names of the groups contained therein (such as NTM and A.L.A.R.M.E.) may have been derived from an important American rap act gaining recognition at the time, the group NWA (Niggaz With Attitude).²⁹ The French artists emulated the styles of their American counterparts and transferred the political, social, and economic themes prevalent in U.S. raps at the time to their own struggles against oppression. Along with Bambaataa’s uplifting Afrocentrism,

Chuck D's hyper-political raps and NWA and KRS-One's social commentary on the U.S. police state offered emerging French rappers the primary models for their use of rap as a tool of political dissent.

As the styles developed and subgenres proliferated in both the U.S. and France, however, the themes of socio-political commentary remained prominent in French raps while their American counterparts proliferated such in number and theme that the political activism characterizing early 1990s rap became a less common feature of American rap on the whole.³⁰ Prévos dubbed this divergence of U.S. and French styles the "adaptation" stage, as French rappers began to make the form their own politically, linguistically, and performatively. While American artists in large part began choosing less political themes such as sex, drugs, and money—often unapologetically glorifying the three—French rappers tended to maintain closer ties to the early 1990s leftist-inspired ideology of the hip hop "underground" anti-popularity and its avoidance of "selling out."³¹ In fact, critiques of the recording industry and capitalism in general remain a central theme of French rap.³² In addition, the tendency of French rap to eschew the near ubiquitous misogyny evident in American rap is a further extension of the leftist political ideology that early on defined both U.S. and French styles.

Another notable development in French rap was the emergence of a form of speech in the *banlieues* termed "*verlan*" that Hisham Aidi describes as: "hipsterist wordplay in which syllables are reversed (for example, '*noires*' [blacks] become '*renois*,' and '*arabe*' becomes '*beur*')."³³ While American rap is known for its wordplay and redefinition of terminologies, this wordplay is uniquely French in its formulations. The speech formed an important part of the French rap scene and helped spawn the title for the popular radio program and interracial music festival "Black, *Blanc*, *Beur*" (also the title of the first collection of essays on French rap).³⁴ At the same time, *verlan*'s use as a "resistance vernacular" has garnered political and cultural criticism from guardians of the French language.³⁵

While this brief summary offers only a glimpse of the history of French rap, I hope it will provide a workable background of the ways that American styles influenced French practitioners. While many of the above assertions constitute general trends and are not to be definitive of the entire field of rap, the dialogue that continues between the two largest national audiences for rap music, France and the U.S., tends to take place between more overtly politically minded sub groups of the genre. Thus the tradition of political dissent in early 1990s U.S. rap groups like Chuck D's Public Enemy, KRS-One's BDP, and to an extent, NWA seems to be alive and well in France.

The "NTM Affair"

On Bastille Day, July 14, 1995, the Paris-based rap group, NTM, was set to take the stage at the "*Rendez-vous de la Liberté*" music festival in the southeastern French town of La Seyne-sur-Mer. The festival, organized by the anti-racist association *SOS racism*, featured the interracial hard-core rap group NTM, as well as MC Solaar, pop singer Patrick Bruel, and a host of politicians and intellectuals associated with the French Socialist Party.³⁶ The concert's promoters arranged the Bastille Day festival to reassert the French doctrine of liberty, equality, and fraternity in the face of troubling developments in French national politics.³⁷ The nearby cities of Toulon and Orange had recently elected right-wing mayors that ran on the anti-immigration platform of the ultra-

nationalist FN. Although the promoters of the festival intended the artists and politicians to speak out against the FN's racist and xenophobic views, NTM's performance at the event far exceeded their goals, sparking a national debate on the place of free speech in French society.

About halfway through their set, NTM was getting the crowd psyched up for their controversial song, "Police," with chants of "*nique la police*" [fuck the police]. The two members of NTM, Joey Star (Didier Morville) and Kool Shen (Bruno Lopes), had written the song two years earlier in response to what they saw as rampant police brutality in their native *banlieues*. The police on duty at the event, understandably offended by the verbal assaults, detained the rappers and later filed a lawsuit against NTM.³⁸ The verdict that was handed down more than a year later sentenced the two rappers to three months in jail, a six-month performance ban, and a total of FF50,000 (approx. \$8,000) in fines. Though NTM's performance at this festival celebrating French liberty was protected by freedom of expression laws, the statutes applied only to artistic expression, not speech between songs, as the prosecution successfully argued NTM's chants were.

As Prévost states in his 1998 article, "Hip Hop, Rap, and Repression in France and in the United States:" "laws governing artistic freedom are significantly more extensive in France than in the United States."³⁹ Indeed, American rap groups throughout the 1990s met legal challenges over issues of free speech from right-wing politicians and public morality groups such as Tipper Gore's PRMC (Parent's Music Resource Committee) but seldom met consequences as severe as the judgment passed on NTM. The American rapper, Ice T met similar protest over his 1992 song "Cop Killer." Because of clear rulings upholding First Amendment rights, however, in most cases in the U.S. it is the record companies, not the courts which decide the fate of the music or musician. This was the case with Ice-T's "Cop Killer," which was eventually removed from the album after the record company submitted to public pressure.

Regarding the "NTM Affair," Paul Silverstein writes in an article on French protest rap: "The irony of the arrest and verdict were by no means lost on the larger French public, as the incident escalated into a full-scale, nation-wide '*affaire*.'"⁴⁰ Following a groundswell of public opinion against the NTM ruling, French courts suspended the prison time when the appeals process was complete. After the decision to suspend the sentences was announced, members of the FN issued a statement in an article for the French daily, *Le Figaro*, blaming American "politiquement correct" [political correctness] for interfering in French politics.⁴¹

French Cultural Politics

The primary irony seen by the French press in the "NTM Affair" was that over the previous years the FN leader Jean-Marie Le Pen had given numerous speeches in which he publicly expressed racist attitudes and denied the Holocaust—both crimes under French law.⁴² Le Pen's ultranationalist party had risen to power over the course of the early 90s garnering as much as 20% of the vote in national elections.⁴³ The fall of the Berlin Wall and the concomitant increase in immigration and restructuring of allegiances all over Europe was accompanied by a widespread resurgence of exclusive nationalisms such as those espoused by the FN. This pan-European sea change was further complicated by France's increased struggle to accommodate the fast-growing population of the children of immigrants from its former colonies concentrated in the *banlieues*. The

impact of the FN on national policy, especially that regarding culture, was, however, far greater than its 20% national support might indicate.

In 1994, the French Legislature passed the “Toubon law” which guards “the French language against Americanisms, Arabisms, and a variety of word plays (such as *verlan*) that mark the everyday language of the *banlieues* and the base of rap discourse.”⁴⁴ As Hisham Aidi writes in “B-Boys in ‘*Les Banlieues*’: Hip Hop Culture in France”: “The popularity of hip hop is partly responsible for the infamous Toubon law of 1994.”⁴⁵ Steve Cannon discusses these *banlieu* “resistance vernaculars” as part of a larger “resistance by young people of minority ethnic origin to the racism, oppression, and social marginalization they experience within France’s *banlieues* and in its major towns and cities.”⁴⁶ As the passage of the Toubon law indicated, the French government saw no place for the creolized or “*Cefron*” [melting pot] language of the *banlieu* youth in public life.

In 1996, the Legislature passed the Carignon law, a related measure that implemented a 40% quota for Francophone music to limit the influence of Anglophone music that was viewed as over-represented on radio play lists.⁴⁷ The measure, which sought to limit the influences of American music and reign in the growing popularity of rap, instead had the effect of aiding homegrown Francophone rap, given the paucity of successful French pop acts that performed in genres other than hip hop. As Paul Silverstein notes: “French gangsta rap groups like NTM, while clearly the anathema of French conservative political parties, have ironically benefited from their laws.”⁴⁸ Though these laws could not have been passed without the support of center and left party members, the rise of the FN reflects a wider resurgence of the cultural protectivism that characterizes these moves by the French government.

NTM’s criticism of the police, then, comes out of a view from the margins of French society in the *banlieues* that conflates this increasingly nationalistic government and the police officers that enforce its laws as one “police state.” Inspired by the prototypical acronymic hip hop group, NWA, NTM’s song “Police” uses many of the same protest strategies as NWA’s 1988 song “Fuck tha Police.” In addition, NTM takes an authenticist stance, often citing their roots in the lower-class suburb of St. Denis just as NWA celebrated its working class black neighborhood of LA’s Compton.⁴⁹ However, they are careful to distance themselves from being seen as mere copies of West Coast gangsta rap. Indeed, their style is markedly different from NWA’s and their subject matter is more overtly political in its orientation. As Prévos notes: “Their search for social relevancy and artistic activism led them either to transform pre-existing ideologies . . . or to create their own in a piece-meal fashion.”⁵⁰

A 1997 remix of NTM’s “Police,” entitled “*Nique la Police*” constitutes a direct response to the “NTM Affair” from which they had recently emerged. Embedded in the track are samples of their American influences from the politically outspoken rappers of the late 1980s and early 1990s. The samples include NWA’s original “Fuck the Police,” KRS-One’s “Sound of da Police,” and Busta Rhymes’s “Woo-Ha, Got You All in Check” as well as a sample of “France’s Little Sparrow,” Edith Piaf singing “*Non, Je Ne Regrette Rien*” [I Don’t Regret Anything]. This juxtaposition of classic and contemporary rap tracks with a sample of Piaf’s signature tune is a particularly poignant example of how synchronic and diachronic overlay can be used to construct an oppositional statement. Here NTM’s intention is to respond to the “NTM Affair” by

saying in effect “*we don’t regret what we said!*” By using France’s beloved Piaf to make this statement NTM appropriates an iconic symbol of Frenchness that at the same time had the sexualized feminine equivalent of “street cred[ibility]” that the modern hyper-masculine and lower-class *banlieuesard* rappers maintain. In effect, NTM is pointing, albeit indirectly, to the hypocrisy of the whole “*affaire*.”

The primary sample of NTM’s “Nique la Police” remix is a brief loop of “‘woo-woo,’ that’s the sound of da police” from the KRS-One track mentioned above. The song also includes a statement of protest against the police that conjures up notions of continued state oppression as a continuation of slavery. In his *Spectacular Vernaculars*, Russell A. Potter comments on the protest strategy and then quotes KRS-One’s rap:

[I]n a powerful moment in his 1993 track “Sound of da Police,” KRS offers a subversive etymology for “[police] officer,” reeling off a rapid-fire verbal morph:

‘Overseer, overseer, overseer, oveseer
Offa-seer, offa-seer, offa-seer, officer
Yeah, officer, from overseer
Ya need a little clarity? Check tha similarity!’⁵¹

Through sampling, NTM engages in an intertextuality that has the potential to activate a whole set of oppositional meanings from its American predecessors, as in this case, or from its French compatriots, as in the case of the Piaf sample.

Since NTM’s political and cultural critique is largely premised on the assertion that France’s largely black and Arab *banlieu* population is marginalized by the oppressive police state’s actions, it is important to consider French conceptions of nationality and naturalization. The French Embassy’s web site posits “Three main models of integration for foreigners and immigrants”:

1. The so-called German ethnic model according to which nationality is conferred chiefly by descent, language, culture, and religion; foreign “ethnic” groups are regarded as being impossible to assimilate and the policy does not therefore aim to transform them into nationals.
2. The so-called French “political” model, according to which nationality together with citizenship is based largely on acceptance of the *droit du sol*, which is a combination of residence and place of birth and in which “ethnic” identities are confined to private life rather than spilling over into the public sphere; the implicit aim is the individual integration of each immigrant by schools and other institutions.
3. The British/US model in which minorities are recognized (in community life, but not legally) as political players; here, ideological differences may lead to collective forms of segregation: ethnic neighborhoods, and segregation in social activities and in the workplace.⁵²

Based on this model, the French government does not collect statistics for race or ethnicity in its national censuses. While in theory this stance is laudable, in practice it turns its back on the clearly racialized lines of class division represented in the *banlieues*.⁵³ This French model warns of ethnic neighborhoods, but has all but reinforced such segregation in its overwhelmingly black and Arab *cités*—the housing projects that thousands of immigrants from France’s former colonies now call home.

The French government’s tripartite scheme is notable for the value judgement that it places on models one and three. Especially apropos of this discussion is the language in part 3 implying that “ethnic neighborhoods” are unique to the U.S. and U.K. when there are clearly ethnic neighborhoods throughout France. It is also interesting to note that the term “*droit du sol*” is left untranslated on the website, but means roughly, “right to soil.” Although this formulation of France’s ideas on naturalization in relation to its views of other nations’ models is highly problematic, for our purposes here, I would like to highlight the way the French model allows for expressions of ethnicity in the home but not in public.

This ideal of “secular public culture” is central to recent moves by the French government to prohibit Jews and Muslims from wearing their traditional yarmulkes and head scarves in public schools.⁵⁴ The proposed legislation which was recently written into law after a vote of 276-20 in the National Assembly:

forbids religious apparel and signs that “conspicuously show” a student’s religious affiliation. While Jewish skullcaps and large Christian crosses would also be banned, authorities have made clear that it is aimed at removing Islamic headscarves from classrooms.⁵⁵

The day of the vote Prime Minister Jean-Pierre Raffarin was quoted as saying: “We wanted to send a strong and rapid signal.”⁵⁶ The signal will no doubt prove most clear to France’s estimated five million Muslims, considering that the law will be tantamount to prohibiting an education for many French Muslim girls.

The French notion of secular public culture that rationalizes the headscarf law and underlies the above model for naturalization asserts that as long as you adopt French *culture*, you can become French. As Elizabeth Vihlen writes of post-WWII France in “Jammin’ on the Champs-Elysees”: “French leaders, facing the United States’ economic and military strength, worked to develop France’s own economic and military resources, but maintained that it was French peoples’ high regard for culture that made their country great.”⁵⁷ As Vihlen notes, in light of their diminished military and economic strength, the French have found *culture* to be their *piece de resistance* for the world. Indeed, the French concept of National culture is intimately tied up in nineteenth-century conceptions of “high culture” as the German, *Kultur*. But as she goes on to note:

American jazz could be used by Europeans without the risk of losing their European-ness. For most of the French critics, musicians, and fans, the blackness of jazz was precisely what made it unthreatening to French culture and therefore acceptable.⁵⁸

Unlike the French love affair with American jazz, in the 1950s, however, the 1990s rap phenomenon was adopted as an artistic tool of political dissent by a much-increased non-white population in France.⁵⁹ This oppositional music was coming predominantly from within, not from without, foregrounding an emergent national crisis of identity.

In her groundbreaking 1992 study, *Georges Bizet, Carmen*, Susan McClary digs through the layers of racialized and gendered meanings embedded in Bizet's early musical engagement with "the racial Other who has infiltrated home turf."⁶⁰ As McClary describes, the exotic becomes far less easy to romanticize after it moves in next door. Unlike the small itinerant pockets of Bizet's 1870s gypsy figures and 1950s American jazz expatriates, however, the exotic voices of 1990s French rappers were expressing the growing opposition of a vastly increased community on the peripheries of French society. The number of racial Others was reaching critical mass, coming to a tipping point. Perhaps most importantly, this huge subaltern class was comprised of native-born French citizens. In a sense, then, it became harder to take off the "minstrel mask" by 1990 because the demographic face of France itself was increasingly ethnically hybrid.⁶¹

Though grassroots pressure ultimately led to the suspension of Joey Starr and Kool Shen's prison sentences, French law found NTM's statements to be legal as art but illegal as speech. As Prévos explains: "They were condemned because they stepped out of their 'performer's domain' and came back into the so-called 'citizen's domain' where protections under the rules of free expression are different and less comprehensive."⁶² Read in tandem with the French model for naturalization we can draw a corollary, albeit a problematic one, between the individual's protection at home and in art. In effect, French law states that you may practice your ethnicity at home and air your grievances in art but not in public and not in political speech. In a way, the French model makes political dissent in art less threatening through its feminizing association with the home. Though this figuration is somewhat complicated by the conception of French art as that society's "patrimony," I would argue that this dichotomy, which genders the private and art female and the public and politics male, further marginalizes dissenting voices from public debate.⁶³ In effect, by confining ethnicity and true free speech to the private and the artistic realms, this model acts to diminish calls to direct political action.

Conclusions

As the French government attempted to naturalize (Silverstein writes: "or perhaps civiliz[e]") its ethnic minorities in order to protect its national character, as we have seen with the Toubon and Carignon laws, a focus on the deleterious effects of Americanization came to the fore.⁶⁴ Though Americanization is routinely read as a capitalistic phenomenon, the subtext of racism that pervades its discourse is entrenched in this naturalization model that privileges French culture. As discussed earlier, I have termed the perception of this discourse of protectionism that seeks to keep national cultures pure "Americanization as cultural miscegenation." While France prides itself on its colorblindness and many Americans continue to look to France as a model of racial understanding, this view needs to be nuanced.

In the introduction to *The Color of Liberty: Histories of Race in France*, Peabody and Stovall argue that the emergent racial tensions commonly viewed as an effect of "the rise of so-called second-generation immigrants in the 1980s" was actually a process that began with the quasi-scientific theories on race proposed by eighteenth- and nineteenth-

century theorists such as Buffon.⁶⁵ While the French embassy maintains that French culture is the only requisite for citizenship, Peabody and Stovall insist on a conflation of race and culture in French thinking, writing: “French racial attitudes in general were and remain based on a mixture of biological and cultural factors.”⁶⁶

The idea of the modern nation-state and the nineteenth-century nationalisms that accompany the idea, are premised on the idea of a state for a certain people—in the sense of an ethnic group.⁶⁷ Indeed, the term “nation” originated as a concept closer in meaning to “ethnicity” than to “country.” Therefore, I would argue that in protecting a French culture premised on notions of ethnic Gallic and Frankish culture, modern France is implicitly racializing “secular public culture.”⁶⁸ As Fehrenbach and Poiget note: “[E]ven as ideas about biological racial hierarchies lost credibility in the aftermath of facism, efforts to articulate notions of national identity based on cultural and racial differences have continued.”⁶⁹

In effect, the French position on cultural preservation, as expressed by the tripartite model on the French Embassy’s web site, sees America and its cultural products as fragmentary, hybridized, or creolized. This creolization, while discussed in linguistic terms by Americanization scholars such as Rob Kroes, also has obvious racial implications.⁷⁰ Thus, I read the French state’s moves to insulate its culture from Americanization as an expression of a fear of cultural miscegenation. While many of the motives for maintaining French identity are readily justifiable in light of the commodifying effects of the global capitalism that Americanization has come to represent, the means for constructing these protective barriers has left many feeling marginalized.

NTM’s oppositional response to this marginalization is nicely encapsulated in their song, “*Le Monde de Demain*” [Tomorrow’s World] from their 1991 album *Authentik*. On the track Kool Shen and Joey Star rap about the marginalization of the *banlieu* experience, noting in the title that the baby boom of the 1970s immigrant communities, of which they were a part, will greatly affect the demographics of the future:

*Et si cela est comme ça
C'est que depuis trop longtemps
Des gens tournent le dos
Aux problèmes cruciaux
Aux problèmes sociaux. . . .
Est-ce que c'est vraiment de la liberté, égalité, fraternité
J'en ai bien peur! . . .
Oh oui c'est triste à dire
Mais tu n'as pas compris
Pourquoi les jeunes de mon quartier vivent dans cet état d'esprit
La délinquance avance
Et tout ceci a un sens
Car la violence coule dans les veines
De celui qui a la haine.*

[And if that’s the way it is

It's because for too long
People have been turning their back
On the crucial problems
The social problems. . . .
Is this really Liberty, Equality, Fraternity?
I'm afraid it is! . . .
Oh yes, it's sad to say,
But you never did understand
Why the kids in my neighborhood have the mentality they do
Delinquency goes on,
And it all has a meaning
Because when you've got hate,
Violence runs in your veins.]⁷¹

In noting how “for too long, people have been turning their back/On the crucial problems,” NTM’s Joey Star and Kool Shen highlight the French government’s erasure of race from the national census and national debate. By marginalizing immigrant communities and outlawing their “Americanized” protest strategies, the French government is attempting to sweep difference under the carpet in the name of a supposed all-inclusive ideal of French culture. But as NTM continues to argue, denying immigrant communities their identities will only stoke a fire already out of control. In their view, France will only be able to live up to its republican ideals of *liberté, égalité, fraternité* when it addresses the problem of race head on. By expressing their views in a musical form adopted from black American protest music and then adapted to give voice to their particular concerns, NTM seeks to foreground an international debate about race and culture that has local consequences for them and the next generation of kids in the *banlieues*.

¹ James Petterson, “No More Song and Dance: French Radio Broadcast Quotas, *Chansons*, and Cultural Exceptions,” in Heide Fehrenbach and Ute G. Poiger, eds., *Transactions, Transgressions, Transformations: American Culture in Western Europe and Japan* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2000), 109-123. Petterson writes: “In other words, the imposition of broadcast quotas implies the legislative disguise of the monetary interests of those enterprises whose assets are described as cultural.” Many thanks to Prof. Susan Cook and my fellow students in the “Exporting American Music” seminar at UW-Madison for their help in working out the concepts and conclusions of this study.

² Paul Silverstein, “Why Are We Waiting to Start the Fire?: French Gangsta Rap and the Critique of State Capitalism,” in *Black, Blanc, Beur*, 53; Hisham Aidi, “B-Boys in ‘Les Banlieues’: Hip Hop Culture in France,” on *Africana.com*, http://africana.com/articles/daily/index_20000130.asp, accessed November 18, 2003; Petterson, 111.

³ Aidi, “B-Boys.”

⁴ Aidi, “B-Boys.” Aidi writes: “The popularity of hip hop is partly responsible for the infamous Toubon Law of 1994, which guards the French language against Americanisms.”

⁵ André J. M. Prévos, “The Evolution of French Rap Music and Hip Hop Culture in the 1980s and 1990s,” in *The French Review*, vol. 69, no. 5 (April 1996), 716-721; Laurent Mucchielli, “Rap

Music and French Society as Viewed by Youth of the ‘Cités,’” http://cesdip.msh-paris.fr/pi_99_2.htm, accessed November 18, 2003.

⁶ Prévos, “Hip Hop, Rap, and Repression in France and the United States,” in *Popular Music and Society*, vol. 22, no. 2 (Summer 1998), 67.

⁷ Paul Tullis, “Parlez-vous F*** You?: In France Rap is Public Enemy No. 1,” *The Source*, May 1997, 54.

⁸ Mucchielli.

⁹ Aidi. See also Prévos, “Evolution,” 713-718 and for a discussion of the history of miscegenation in France see Claude Blanckaert’s “Of Monstrous *Métis*? Hybridity, Fear of Miscegenation, and Patriotism from Buffon to Paul Broca,” in *The Color of Liberty: Histories of Race in France*, Sue Peabody and Tyler Stovall eds. (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003), 42-71.

¹⁰ Peabody and Stovall, “Introduction: Race, France, Histories” in *The Color of Liberty*, 4.

¹¹ Peabody and Stovall, “Introduction: Race, France, Histories” in *The Color of Liberty*, 1-7.

Peabody and Stovall note: “After World War II, the vast immigration of colonial nationals created a hitherto unexperienced degree of cultural and ethnic pluralism, from which French Society is still reeling today.” The authors also note: “the fact that racial tension has constituted a major issue in French public life during the last twenty years.”

¹² NTM, “Le Monde de Demain” on *Authentik* (Sony International, 1991); The translation is Mucchielli’s.

¹³ Public Enemy, “Fear of a Black Planet,” on *Fear of a Black Planet: The Counterattack on World Supremacy* (Def Jam, 1990).

¹⁴ Richard Rodriguez, *Brown: The Last Discovery of America* (New York: Viking Penguin, 2002), xi. Though he discusses this construction at length, Rodriguez uses “brown” rather than “black” as a metaphor for “blood that is blended.”

¹⁵ Public Enemy, *Fear of a Black Planet*.

¹⁶ Rodriguez, *Brown*, xi-xv.

¹⁷ John Dean and Jean-Paul Gabilliet, eds., *European Readings of American Popular Culture* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1996), xv-llii; Heide Fehrenbach and Ute G. Poiger, eds., *Transactions, Transgressions, Transformations: American Culture in Western Europe and Japan* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2000), xii-xl; Reinhold Wagnleitner and Elaine Tyler May, eds., *“Here, There and Everywhere”: The Foreign Politics of American Popular Culture* (Hanover: University Press of New England, 2000), 1-11; Rob Kroes, *If You’ve Seen One You’ve Seen the Mall: Europeans and American Mass Culture* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1996), ix-xiv; Rob Kroes, Robert W. Rydell, and Doeko F. J. Bosscher, eds., *Cultural Transmissions and Receptions: American Mass Culture in Europe* (Amsterdam: VU Press, 1993), vi-xii; Mike-Frank G. Epitropoulos and Victor Roudometof, eds., *American Culture in Europe: Interdisciplinary Perspectives* (Westport: Praeger, 1998), 1-14.

¹⁸ Kroes, “If You’ve Seen One You’ve Seen the Mall,” x.

¹⁹ Fehrenbach and Poiger, xiii-xiv.

²⁰ Reinhold Wagnleitner, *Coca-Colonization and the Cold War: The Cultural Mission of the United States in Austria After the Second World War* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1994); Barry Smart, “Resisting McDonaldization: Theory, Process and Critique,” in *Resisting McDonaldization*, ed. Barry Smart (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 1999).

²¹ Kroes, “If You’ve Seen One You’ve Seen the Mall,” x-xi.

²² Fehrenbach and Poiger, xv-xvi.

²³ Ralph Ellison, “What America Would Be Like without Blacks,” cited in Cornel West, *Race Matters* (New York: Vintage Books, 1994), 3.

²⁴ Eric Lott, “Love and Theft: The Racial Unconscious of Blackface Minstrelsy,” in *Representations*, no.39 (Summer 1992), 23-50.

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- ²⁵ Fehrenbach and Poiger, xvi.
- ²⁶ Prévos, "Evolution," 713-725.
- ²⁷ Aidi; Prévos, "Evolution," 714-715.
- ²⁸ Various Artists, *Rapattitudes* (Labelle Noir, 1990).
- ²⁹ Prévos, "Evolution," 716.
- ³⁰ Prévos, "Evolution," 718-720.
- ³¹ Aidi.
- ³² Prévos, "Two Decades of Rap in France: Emergence, Developments, Prospects," in *Black, Blanc, Beur: Rap Music and Hip-Hop Culture in the Francophone World*, ed. Alain-Philippe Durand (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 2002), 16-17.
- ³³ Aidi.
- ³⁴ Durand, *Black, Blanc, Beur*.
- ³⁵ Mitchell, 8.
- ³⁶ Prévos, *Hip Hop, Rap, and Repression*, 67.
- ³⁷ Aidi.
- ³⁸ Prévos, "Hip Hop, Rap, and Repression," 73-76.
- ³⁹ Prévos, "Hip Hop, Rap, and Repression," 80.
- ⁴⁰ Silverstein, 46.
- ⁴¹ Veziante de Veziens, "La France touchée par le 'politiquement correct,'" *Le Figaro*, November 16, 1996, 16.
- ⁴² Aidi.
- ⁴³ Paul Tullis, "Parlez-vous F*** You?," *The Source*, March 1997, 48.
- ⁴⁴ Silverstein, 53.
- ⁴⁵ Aidi, "B-Boys."
- ⁴⁶ Steve Cannon, "Paname City Rapping: B-Boys in the *Banlieues* and Beyond," in *Post-Colonial Cultures in France*, ed. Alec Hargreaves and Mark McKinney (London: Routledge, 1997), 150.
- ⁴⁷ Petterson, "No More Song and Dance," 109-123. Petterson refers to the law as the "Pelchat Amendment."
- ⁴⁸ Silverstein, 53.
- ⁴⁹ NWA, *Straight Outta Compton* (Priority Records, 1988).
- ⁵⁰ Prévos, "Rap, Hip Hop, and Repression," 64.
- ⁵¹ Russell A. Potter, *Spectacular Vernaculars: Hip Hop and the Politics of Postmodernism* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1995), 150. Citing lyrics from KRS-One (L. Parker), "Sound of da Police," on *Return of the Boom-Bap* (Jive/RCA, 1993).
- ⁵² Emmanuel Peignard, "Immigration in France," on the French Embassy Website, <http://info-france-use.org/atoz/immigration.asp>, accessed Dec. 2, 2003.
- ⁵³ For a critique of this (non)practice see David Orland, "Connerly's Racial Privacy Institute: The Unhappy French Connection" on *Vdare.com* (May 28 2003), http://www.vdare.com/misc/orland_racial_privacy.htm, accessed December 9, 2003.
- ⁵⁴ Christopher Caldwell, "In Europe, 'Secular' Doesn't Quite Translate," *The New York Times*, December 21, 2003, 10; Patrick E. Tyler, "Democracy Reigns, but Uneasy Lies the Head That Wears the Crown," *The New York Times*, December 28, 2003, 5.
- ⁵⁵ Elaine Ganley, "Parliament Adopts Law Banning Islamic Headscarves in Public Schools," *The Associated Press*, March 3, 2004, BC cycle.
- ⁵⁶ Ganley, "Parliament Adopts Law."
- ⁵⁷ Elizabeth Vihlen, "Jammin' on the Champs-Élysées: Jazz, France, and the 1950s," in *Here, There, and Everywhere*, 150.
- ⁵⁸ Vihlen, 150.
- ⁵⁹ Mitchell, 7.
- ⁶⁰ Susan McClary, *Georges Bizet, Carmen* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 34.

⁶¹ Lott, 23-31. See Lott for a discussion of “the minstrel mask.”

⁶² Prévos, “Hip Hop, Rap, and Repression.”

⁶³ McClary, *Carmen*, 31. McClary describes the manner in which “The East [the Other] as a whole became ‘feminized.’” In the case of 1990s France, it seems the Other is doubly feminized.

⁶⁴ Silverstein, 47.

⁶⁵ Peabody and Stovall, 5-6.

⁶⁶ Peabody and Stovall, 4.

⁶⁷ Appiah, Kwame Anthony, *In My Father’s House: Africa in the Philosophy of Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 47-72.

⁶⁸ Peabody and Stovall, 2.

⁶⁹ Fehrenbach and Poiget, xvi.

⁷⁰ Kroes, *If You’ve Seen One You’ve Seen the Mall*, 163.

⁷¹ NTM, “Le Monde de Demain” on *Authentik* (Sony International, 1991); French lyrics adapted from <http://www.patleck.com/lyrics/>, accessed April 2, 2003; English translation from Mucchielli.