

# *Deny and Punish: A French History of Concealed Violence*

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**M**Y COUNTRY HAS FORGED an enduring mythology about itself. The myth starts with our motto, Liberty, Equality, Fraternity, and ends with the UN's Universal Declaration of Human Rights. And yet, France has harbored two of the most prominent slave-trade ports (Bordeaux and Nantes), it has been one of the most ferocious slave-owning transatlantic powers, and it has quickly evolved into an equally fierce colonial empire that then imported back home its technologies of torture and genocide. The Vichy government and its active collaboration with the occupying Nazi regime constitute one of the best-documented examples of a historical event effectively filtered by the power of denial in France, with approximately eighty thousand French Jews dying during this traumatic period.

It took Robert Paxton's 1972 book, *Vichy France: Old Guard and New Order, 1940–1944*, to put an end to the myth of a resistant France.<sup>1</sup> I was taught about this myth buster in a history class, at age twenty, only because I attended Sciences-Po, one of France's elite academic institutions. It is fair to say that most people in France today still ignore Robert Paxton. My professor referred to this episode in French historiography as *la Paxtonisation de l'Histoire*. This is also known as the Paxton Revolution, which illustrates powerfully what France needs before it can face its demons: shame. A prominent American scholar published a densely referenced book that forced the entire French historical community to somewhat publicly acknowledge an inconvenient fact: France was an anti-Semitic country that welcomed and encouraged the Nazi enterprise.

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<sup>1</sup> Robert Paxton, *Vichy France: Old Guard and New Order, 1940–1944* (New York: Knopf, 1972).

Unfortunately, France's slave-owning and colonial history has not been "Paxtonized." The ongoing denial of the traumatic history connecting White French and Black/Arab French is at the root of two intersecting issues that are central to our understanding of what made the *Charlie Hebdo* attacks possible: (1) racial tensions between the beneficiaries of French colonialism and France's former colonial subjects; and (2) the cultivation of a concomitant competition between the victims of imperial France's history of violence. On the topics of slavery and colonization, the French government excels at fostering silence about the extent of its historical record of crimes against humanity. For instance, article 4 of a 2005 law concerning the history connecting France's former *colons* to its colonized populations proposed to introduce a passage in educational textbooks that would present the "positive aspects" of colonization.<sup>2</sup> This sparked a heated controversy and this article of law was eventually repealed.<sup>3</sup> Once juxtaposed to post-Paxton expressions of national shame about the Shoah and Nazi collaboration, this episode fuels a belief—and one that has been exploited ever since by conspiracy theorists, radical Afrocentrists, and numerous populist voices among the non-White French population—that France favors Jews over Blacks and Arabs. This assumption echoes the old anti-Semitic trope of the conspiring Jew quietly and invisibly manipulating White France.

Of course, one cannot deny that the Holocaust did take place in Europe, that France was eventually exposed as a collaborationist state, and that it all happened fewer than a hundred years ago. As a consequence, France has had to face that part of its history and make amends. That is an indisputable truth. The result is that the Shoah is indeed treated differently and separately from slavery and colonization as objects of public, popular, and political discourses. With this differential treatment comes the concomitant competition I mentioned earlier between some of the historical victims of the French Republic. French Jews should have never been unfairly put under the spotlight as both the agent and the stake of this history, as fodder for the myth of a postcolonial France. Debunking this myth necessitates that we extract and identify truths and facts about the French state's cyclical history of antagonism with fabricated enemies from within: the Bretons and non-French-speaking minorities, Protestants (as epitomized by the Saint Bartholomew's Day massacre of 1572), Jews, French Muslims, and the list goes on.

As Roland Barthes famously explained, myths constitute a second order of meaning in which existing signs are hollowed out and filled with an ideologically inflected meaning that is articulated to the values and interests of the ruling classes.<sup>4</sup> In this particular case, White Catholic France has been dedicated to the skillful whitewashing of its history of racism and persecution, henceforth repackaged under the mythological rubric of an equalitarian, race-neutral, and secular republican citizenship. The aforementioned resurgence of conspiracy theories about "Jews ruling the world in secret" among non-White French populations perfectly illustrates the transfer of guilt and accountability that has fueled and revamped this myth in the past decade. During this period, the terrain of anti-Semitism has been largely (yet not exclusively) occupied

<sup>2</sup> *Loi n° 2005-158 du 23 février 2005 portant reconnaissance de la Nation et contribution nationale en faveur des Français rapatriés*, <http://legifrance.gouv.fr/affichTexte.do?cidTexte=JORFTEXT000000444898> (accessed May 1, 2015).

<sup>3</sup> *Décret n° 2006-160 du 15 février 2006 portant abrogation du deuxième alinéa de l'article 4 de la loi n° 2005-158 du 23 février 2005 portant reconnaissance de la Nation et contribution nationale en faveur des Français rapatriés*, [http://legifrance.gouv.fr/affichTexte.do?jsessionid=8DE753C7B9797F24381A749BE09C399F.tpdila10v\\_3?cidTexte=JORFTEXT000000264006&dateTexte=20060216](http://legifrance.gouv.fr/affichTexte.do?jsessionid=8DE753C7B9797F24381A749BE09C399F.tpdila10v_3?cidTexte=JORFTEXT000000264006&dateTexte=20060216) (accessed May 1, 2015).

<sup>4</sup> Roland Barthes, *Mythologies*, trans. A. Lavers (New York: Hill and Wang, 1972).

by non-White French, to the point that the French state, which remains overly represented by White Catholic men, has managed to entirely deflect anti-Semitism away from that very state. This transfer of guilt was enabled and encouraged by politicians and by the mainstream media. Successive French governments exploited this competition between victims to their advantage. Hence, it is now the descendants of those people of color who fought for a free France (the Senegalese *Tirailleurs*, for instance), who belonged to unoccupied France (during the war, Brazzaville was the capital of Free France), and who have little to do with collaborationism who must make amends when it comes to anti-Semitism. This transfer of guilt was perfectly illustrated by François Hollande on July 14, 2014, when he stated: “The Israel-Palestine conflict cannot be imported [into France]”<sup>5</sup>—a statement that has become a self-fulfilling prophecy.

Until that statement, which was reproduced countless times in the media, demonstrations against Israel in France were mostly focused on the illegal occupation and settlement of Palestinian territories. Following that statement, a new myth emerged: French anti-Semitism is no longer White and Catholic. Here, we find in an almost-too-obvious form the materialization of a very common and popular way of understanding and describing colonial rules and policies under the rubric “divide and rule.” It is also where this short essay becomes really personal. During that summer of 2014, I took my second trip to Canada with my partner. We were making our final decision on whether or not we would migrate from France. While walking in Montreal’s Mile End (a central, mostly Anglophone neighborhood), I was struck by how many Orthodox Jews were walking down the streets. I told my partner: “If they feel safe here, this must be a good place for us to be moving to.” We then pondered about 1920s Europe and wondered when the first Jews who migrated decided it was time to leave, even if nothing major had happened—yet—in their country. Then, we thought that we might be exaggerating, that France was not so bad. Still, wouldn’t it be easier to live as a mixed-race queer couple in Canada? We then made up our minds to migrate.

Hence, when I first heard about the attack at *Charlie Hebdo*’s headquarters, and then learned the next day about the murderous hostage crisis at the Hyper Casher, I thought that things were not only accelerating but also escalating. When it became clear that the attackers were Muslims, I realized that the prophecy was fulfilled. Most importantly, I knew that from then on, it was going to get “real ugly real fast” for French Muslims and, by association, non-White French people. Still, I was not anticipating the enforcement of the French version of the Patriot Act, namely, the Antiterrorism Act that went into effect in November 2014. Journalist Jonathan Klur explains: “Until then, apology for terrorist acts was a simple press offense under the Act on Freedom of the Press of 1881. It is the antiterrorist law of November 14, 2014, that inscribed the offense into the criminal code, with the possibility of immediate appearance [before a judge].”<sup>6</sup>

<sup>5</sup> “Le conflit israélo-palestinien ne peut pas s’importer.” François Béguin and Laurent Borredon, “La France s’inquiète d’une ‘importation’ du conflit israélo-palestinien,” *Le Monde*, July 14, 2014, [http://www.lemonde.fr/societe/article/2014/07/14/manifestations-pro-palestiniennes-cazeneuve-appelle-a-la-vigilance\\_4457238\\_3224.html#20ZLBmq1X68swg2j.99](http://www.lemonde.fr/societe/article/2014/07/14/manifestations-pro-palestiniennes-cazeneuve-appelle-a-la-vigilance_4457238_3224.html#20ZLBmq1X68swg2j.99) (accessed May 15, 2015).

<sup>6</sup> “Jusque novembre 2014, l’apologie des actes de terrorisme constituait un simple délit de presse relevant de la loi sur la liberté de la presse de 1881. C’est la loi du 14 novembre 2014 sur ‘la lutte contre le terrorisme’ qui a fait basculer le délit dans le code pénal, avec la possibilité de comparution immédiate.” Jonathan Klur, “Qu’est-ce que l’apologie du terrorisme?” *le JDD*, January 29, 2015, <http://www.lejdd.fr/Societe/Justice/Qu-est-ce-que-le-delit-d-apologie-du-terrorisme-715312> (accessed February 1, 2015).

This amendment to the law led to an unprecedented number of arrests and convictions, as if France had suddenly awakened as a totalitarian state, with its very own political police paradoxically co-opting the notion of free speech as a means to prevent people from speaking their minds: “The Ministry of Justice lists, on Wednesday January 21, 117 procedures for ‘apology for terrorist acts’ and ‘incitement to racial hatred,’ out of the 251 criminal proceedings initiated since the attack on *Charlie Hebdo*, on January 7.”<sup>7</sup> The next step was even more surprising and terrifying, as the French police came for Muslim children: “On Wednesday, January 28th, in Nice, Ahmed, an 8 year old boy and his father, were summoned by the Nice St Augustin’s Police. The 8 year old was accused of condoning terrorism as he opposed *Charlie Hebdo*’s cartoons.”<sup>8</sup> This statement was quickly followed by the news of another kid being put in police custody: Ayman, nine years old.<sup>9</sup> Muslim children are thus dehumanized and no longer considered and treated as children. They are Muslims and therefore possible terrorists-in-the-making. Once again, what a self-fulfilling prophecy! What better way to turn Muslim populations against the state than brutalizing Muslim children because of their religion and assumed intrinsic violence, as if French and Muslim were incompatible categories. And how ironic that both the Kouachi brothers and Amedy Coulibaly’s wife were wards of the state.<sup>10</sup> As the French journalist Rokhaya Diallo put it, shortly after the events:

Why not face the facts? The Koran did not produce these monsters. They were born in France, they grew up here. These killers are very much the product of French social realities. The mad, murderous rage at the basis of their actions is not the result of a religious teaching transmitted by their families; it originated in the French sociopolitical context. Otherwise, how can one explain why in proportion to the number of Muslims present on its soil, France sends more jihadists to Syria than a country historically and predominantly Muslim like Egypt?<sup>11</sup>

Such assumptions of incommensurability between the secular Republic and the rights of its Muslim citizens were recently made evident by the controversy that was sparked by Béziers

<sup>7</sup> “Le ministère de la justice recense, mercredi 21 janvier, 117 procédures pour ‘apologie du terrorisme’ et ‘provocation à la haine raciale,’ sur 251 procédures pénales ouvertes depuis l’attaque de *Charlie Hebdo*, le 7 janvier.” Lucie Soullier, “Apologie du terrorisme, la justice face à l’urgence,” *Le Monde*, January 22, 2015, [http://www.lemonde.fr/societe/article/2015/01/22/apologie-du-terrorisme-la-justice-face-a-l-urgence\\_4560603\\_3224.html](http://www.lemonde.fr/societe/article/2015/01/22/apologie-du-terrorisme-la-justice-face-a-l-urgence_4560603_3224.html) (accessed January 22, 2015).

<sup>8</sup> The Collective against Islamophobia in France (CFIC), “Ahmed 8 Years, Sued for Apology of Terrorism,” January 28, 2015, <http://www.islamophobie.net/articles/2015/01/28/ahmed-8-years-sued-apology-terrorism> (accessed February 1, 2015).

<sup>9</sup> Rachid Barbouch, “Un enfant de 9 ans accusé d’apologie du terrorisme,” *Mediapart*, January 31, 2015, <http://blogs.mediapart.fr/blog/rachid-barbouch/310115/un-enfant-de-9-ans-accuse-dapologie-au-terrorisme> (accessed February 1, 2015).

<sup>10</sup> Eugénie Bastié, “Les frères Kouachi: Des ‘gamins inoffensifs’ qui ont passé six ans en Corrèze,” *Le Figaro*, January 9, 2015, <http://www.lefigaro.fr/actualite-france/2015/01/09/01016-20150109ARTFIG00041-les-freres-kouachi-des-gamins-inoffensifs-qui-ont-passe-six-ans-en-correze.php> (accessed January 12, 2015).

<sup>11</sup> “Et pourquoi ne regardons-nous pas les choses en face? Ce n’est pas le Coran qui a produit ces monstres. Ils sont nés en France, ils ont grandi ici. Ces tueurs sont le fruit de réalités sociales bien françaises. Cette rage folle et meurtrière qui les anime n’est pas le fruit d’un enseignement religieux transmis par leurs familles mais la production d’un contexte socio-politique français. Sinon, comment expliquer qu’en proportion du nombre de musulmans présents sur son sol, la France envoie plus de djihadistes en Syrie que les pays historiquement et majoritairement musulmans comme l’Égypte?” Rokhaya Diallo, “À force de déni, la France a créé ses propres monstres,” *Huffington Post*, January 14, 2015, [http://www.huffingtonpost.fr/rokhaya-diallo/charlie-hebdo-terrorisme-islam\\_b\\_6468790.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.fr/rokhaya-diallo/charlie-hebdo-terrorisme-islam_b_6468790.html) (accessed January 16, 2015).

mayor Robert Ménard's ethnic bookkeeping activities and that directly intersects with memories of collaborationism. Ménard revealed that he was keeping records of the religious affiliations of children schooled in his town, using people's names as evidence of their religious and ethnic affiliations. On the basis of this most unreliable method of data collection, Ménard stated that 64.6 percent of the children in Béziers were Muslims: "These are official figures. Like it or not, the city hall knows, for each classroom, the names of the children. I know we do not have the right to do that, but it is still being done."<sup>12</sup>

In France, *le profilage communautaire*—a legal jargon allowing the state to address racial profiling without acknowledging race or racism as effective categories—is liable to a penalty of five years in prison and a €300,000 fine in accordance with article 226-19 of the Criminal Code. The *Loi informatique et libertés* (Information Technologies and Freedom Act, 1978) prohibits the collection and recording of information showing directly or indirectly racial or ethnic origins, as well as religious affiliation. A law that states that a name cannot be linked to a person's ethnicity or religion resurrects the specter of the Vichy regime and must be understood in its aftermath. A proposal for the first racial census ever conducted in France was passed on September 27, 1940, following a German order on the status of the Jews in the occupied area. The infamous "Tulard File" legalized the enforcement of racist laws instigating the use of "Jew" signage as a way to publicly identify businesses owned by Jewish people and eventually to facilitate the location and capture of Jews as part of the Final Solution. This troubling and traumatic history continues to animate French resistance against the collection of ethnic statistics. Furthermore, the French republican refusal to embrace a multicultural social and political mode of governance also explains this hostility toward racial data keeping. As a result, statistics about ethnicity are used, merely as measurement tools, in only three very specific institutional fields: immigration, the prison system, and academia. Data about ethnicity are not intended, and therefore not used, as a means to establish corrective measures of systemic and historical inequalities.

This taboo against ethnic statistics is so strong in France that simply uttering the word "race" or bringing up race as a social issue is enough to label the offender a "racist." As a matter of fact, on May 13, 2013, the very word "race" was banned from the French Constitution.<sup>13</sup> In a way, the French Parliament thus makes official and enforces a kind of coercive color blindness. The disappearance of the word "race" from our Constitution is depriving French communities of a concept that is essential if we ever wish to effectively deconstruct and overcome White supremacy in our country. Race is a social construct stemming from a long and complex colonial history, during which arbitrarily defined racial categories enabled and justified social inequalities among the differently racialized subjects of empire. In order to analyze and attempt to resolve racial discrimination in France and come to terms with the country's colonial legacy, acknowledging race and race-thinking is but a minimal—and necessary—first step. An active category that operates through its denial, race is lived and felt as an element of everyday life in France. Let us think,

<sup>12</sup> "Ce sont les chiffres de ma mairie. Pardon de vous dire que le maire a, classe par classe, les noms des enfants. Je sais que je n'ai pas le droit mais on le fait." Caroline Piquet, "Devant les enquêteurs, Ménard nie l'existence de fichage ethnique d'écoliers à Béziers," *Le Figaro*, May 6, 2015, <http://www.lefigaro.fr/actualite-france/2015/05/05/01016-20150505ARTFIG00110--beziers-robert-menard-classe-les-ecoliers-par-religion-en-fonction-de-leur-prenom.php> (accessed May 15, 2015).

<sup>13</sup> *Le Monde*/AFP, "L'Assemblée nationale supprime le mot 'race' de la législation," *Le Monde*, May 16, 2013, [http://www.lemonde.fr/politique/article/2013/05/16/1-assemblee-nationale-supprime-le-mot-race-de-la-legislation\\_3272514\\_823448.html](http://www.lemonde.fr/politique/article/2013/05/16/1-assemblee-nationale-supprime-le-mot-race-de-la-legislation_3272514_823448.html) (accessed May 17, 2015).



for instance, of the term *Noire*. In France, where the French language prevails and Anglicism is ardently fought, most people will not use the French word *Noire* (Black) to describe me; they will say instead *la Black*, as if to somewhat relegate this racial category or epithet to the peripheries of *francité* (Frenchness). This explains why, growing up in France as a Black girl, I experienced denial long before the word was explained to me and long before I became an activist obsessed with the necessity to reclaim national narratives.

In France, what gets mislabeled or simply not mentioned easily escapes public scrutiny. For example, since race is not debatable, and since color blindness is the state-sanctioned norm, claims about racial discrimination are often rearticulated as expressions of one's inability to adapt to French standards—read: White France's standards. This absence of conceptualization of race as a social construct makes the argument for dismantling systemic racism inoperative. In France, racism is a personal issue, not a political one. This is why in French popular and official languages, mythologies and omissions are as political as it gets. Living in France and trying to discuss White supremacy while being Black is like being seated at the family table in Thomas Vinterberg's movie *Festen*. You know all the dirty secrets and wonder when they will surface. But what baffles you the most is that your guests (in this case, foreign correspondents, tourists, students) seem incapable of registering how dysfunctional this family is. It actually took the 2002 presidential election, with Jean-Marie Le Pen on the second-round ballot, for the rest of the world to really start acknowledging that there were racial tensions in France, even though the rise of Le Pen's neo-Fascist Front national (FN) started as far back as the 1980s. Until then, the French state and large segments of its White population had not realized that there were practical limits to the concept of assimilation. In France, migrants and/or non-Whites are expected to abandon their particularities and learn how to "fit in" if they are ever to gain the trust of the motherland; they must meet yet another French utopian requirement: blending in the "republican crucible."

Hence, it came as a shock when hundreds of young North Africans marched across France toward Paris, from October 15 to December 3, 1983, demanding equal rights and an end to police brutality. The March for Equality and against Racism (*Marche pour l'égalité et contre le racismisme*) was the first of its kind and the beginning of a new deal with the descendants of migrants from the former colonies. Instead of following their parents' lead—that is, privileging a spirit of respectability politics and cultural assimilation—the new generation started to demand equal treatment across differences. This new visibility fueled the escalation of xenophobia as White France was now facing the fact that former immigrants would not return "home." As a further provocation, their children had decided they were not to be silenced or ignored.

It is at this historical juncture that the FN rose to prominence. Once a minor Far Right group, the FN seized the opportunity provided by the increased visibility and the dissenting voices of non-White members of the French nation. The slogan developed by the FN in the 1980s, "La France tu l'aimes ou tu la quittes" (France, love it or leave it), sums up perfectly how France failed to deal with its colonial past. Many non-White French have not chosen to be part of this nation to begin with. They were either enslaved (in the West Indies) or made into second-class citizens (in Africa) before becoming French. "Love it or leave it," when uttered in this French context, implies that there is a place where non-Whites are *really from* and can go back to. I, for instance, am constantly asked where I am "really from," since my answer, "Je suis de Lyon," seems to never satisfy White citizens. Where else, if not in a historical, ideological, and epistemic terrain founded on colonial race-thinking and White supremacy, would my blackness be grounds

to presume that I am not or cannot be French? Or that my family hasn't been for generations? In addition to the veiled racism behind such micro-aggressions badgering us about our true origins, the very idea that non-White French could be kicked out of France is, to say the least, both unrealistic and extremely dubious. Yet it took fewer than thirty years for this racist rhetoric to transit from the Far Right to the French political mainstream. In April 2006 President Nicolas Sarkozy recycled the sentence: "If some are annoyed with being in France, I say this with a smile but with firmness: they shall not be disturbed to leave a country they do not like."<sup>14</sup>

At this particular historical juncture, it is perceived as an aggression against *le modèle républicain* (the republican model) to be not White while wearing one's natural hair or a veil, speaking Creole or Arabic, or refusing to drink wine or eat pork. Only in such a context would a word like *communautarisme* become so negatively connoted and ardently fought against. It implies that the *communautés* are dividing *the* community—the *national* community—with their patois, traditions, and/or religions. This term—*communautarisme*—has been proficiently used during the past three decades as a way to stigmatize non-White French populations and make them the agent of their own exclusion and marginalization. As a response, and as I mentioned earlier, many members of the younger non-White generations have espoused oppositional strategies: they refuse to erase their particularities; they assert their diversity in the face of alienation and oppression; and ultimately, they demand respect. These movements based on various and intersecting identities (Muslim, Black, Arab, etc.) have in turn confirmed and justified White France's fear of becoming a multicultural country, thus contributing to the widening divide between a racially neutral yet inferentially White France and its "others."

To sum up, young Blacks and Arabs are now overtly defying the French myth of an indivisible Republic. They have stopped asking to be treated as if they were White French and have started to demand respect as French people of color. In the conclusion of his 2012 song "Lettre à la République," rapper Kery James perfectly captured this evolution in the ways young non-White French imagine their social and political locations:

Hard to feel French without the Stockholm syndrome  
 Because I'm Black, Muslim, from the ghetto and proud of it.  
 When you see me, you put a face on what the other France hates.  
 These are the same hypocrites that speak to us of diversity,  
 Expressing racism in the guise of secularism,  
 Dream of a singular French, with a single identity  
 Bent on discriminating, the same minorities  
 Facing the same voters, same fears are waved.  
 Turning communities against one another, to hide poverty.  
 Nobody be surprised if tomorrow things blows up.  
 How can one love a country that refuses to respect us?  
 Far from transparent artists, I wrote this text as a mirror  
 That France looks to it if she wants to see her reflection.

<sup>14</sup> "S'il y en a que ça gênent d'être en France, je le dis avec le sourire mais avec fermeté, qu'ils ne se gênent pas pour quitter un pays qu'ils n'aiment pas." Le Huffpost, "Sarkozy a dit 'La France tu l'aimes ou tu la quittes.' Ou presque . . .," *Le Huffington Post*, March 13, 2012, [http://www.huffingtonpost.fr/2012/03/13/sarkozy-france-aime-quitte-banlieues\\_n\\_1340946.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.fr/2012/03/13/sarkozy-france-aime-quitte-banlieues_n_1340946.html) (accessed February 1, 2015).

She will see illusions about herself vanish.  
 I'm not lacking in affection.  
 Understand that I no longer expect her to love me<sup>15</sup>

It took thirty years for the heirs of postcolonial immigration to go from walking peacefully, to demonstrating, to stirring revolt. In this growing affirmation of a multicultural France, a hopeless minority has resorted to violence and armed political struggle. And yet their claims have mostly remained the same: to be given equal opportunities; to be taught the history of slavery and colonization in school; to improve conditions of incarceration; to deracialize and decolonize the criminal justice system; and so on. It is also essential to note here that before turning jihadist, Amedy Coulibaly was a convicted felon. During one of his incarcerations, he codirected a powerful documentary shot clandestinely in order to denounce living conditions in French prisons.<sup>16</sup>

As a Black woman myself and a lover of hip-hop, I charted the radicalization of my peers: in discourse, in music, and in the streets. The escalation of violence that is at work today is the result of years of political neglect of the suburbs, of an absence (or rather a refusal) of public political reflection about racial issues, and of a cynical exploitation of anti-Semitism by several French governments.

The *Charlie Hebdo* and Hyper Casher attacks should and could have been prevented fifty, thirty, or even ten years ago. The non-White French youth's growing distrust of the French republican model and the subsequent sense of desperation experienced by these populations already erupted in spectacular fashion in 2005, in response to the deaths of two teenagers. Zyed Begum and Bouna Traoré were electrocuted inside an electrical substation where they had fled to escape a police patrol while they were playing outside. This event raised public awareness about police brutality and racial profiling against non-White kids. Following this tragedy, violent clashes between suburban youth and local police led to full-scale riots in several Parisian suburbs. The state of emergency lasted three weeks and constitutes another blatant illustration

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<sup>15</sup> Difficile de se sentir Français sans le syndrome de Stockholm  
 Parce que moi je suis Noir, musulman, banlieusard et fier de l'être  
 Quand tu m'vois tu mets un visage sur c'que l'autre France déteste  
 Ce sont les mêmes hypocrites qui nous parlent de diversité  
 Qui expriment le racisme sous couvert de laïcité  
 Rêvent d'un français unique, avec une seule identité  
 S'acharnent à discriminer, les mêmes minorités  
 Face aux mêmes électeurs, les mêmes peurs sont agitées  
 On oppose les communautés, pour cacher la précarité  
 Que personne ne s'étonne si demain ça finit par péter  
 Comment aimer un pays, qui refuse de nous respecter  
 Loin des artistes transparents, j'écris c'texte comme un miroir  
 Que la France s'y regarde si elle veut s'y voir  
 Elle verra s'envoler l'illusion qu'elle se fait d'elle-même  
 J'suis pas en manque d'affection  
 Comprends que j'n'attends plus qu'elle m'aime

Kery James, "Lettre à la République," on the album *92.2012*, EMI France, 2012.

<sup>16</sup> Emeline Cazi and Luc Bronner, "Quand Amedy Coulibaly dénonçait les conditions de détention à Fleury-Mérogis," *Le Monde*, January 12, 2015, [http://www.lemonde.fr/societe/article/2015/01/12/quand-amedy-coulibaly-denoncait-les-conditions-de-detention-a-fleury-merogis\\_4554689\\_3224.html#I8Em0jx4tRFSbrzF.99](http://www.lemonde.fr/societe/article/2015/01/12/quand-amedy-coulibaly-denoncait-les-conditions-de-detention-a-fleury-merogis_4554689_3224.html#I8Em0jx4tRFSbrzF.99) (accessed January 15, 2015).



of the institutional failure to acknowledge past and current crimes and discrimination against French Blacks and Arabs.

As we witness the French government's failure to effectively address both social and economic preventive measures against the angst, stigma, and sense of alienation leading up to such acts of violence, we are left with a series of questions that, while being publicly denied and thus refused any political traction, constitute self-evident starting points for any attempts at finding solutions. How can we address racism, denaturalize White privilege, and productively make use of ethnic statistics—let alone corrective affirmative-action policies—if we cannot even address or utter the word “race”? How can we work together as a nation if everybody's history is not treated equally as subjects of nationality and citizenship? How many more tragedies will it take for France to start confronting its reflection in the mirror and deal with its own monstrosity? What will it take for France to even consider starting a reconciliation program inspired by those conducted in Rwanda and South Africa? And perhaps more depressingly, who will protect those of us, Jews and/or Blacks and/or Muslims and/or Arabs, who don't have the will and/or the means to migrate, as Sarkozy so kindly invited us to do?

Due to my French nationality, money, and education and to the fact that I am not a Muslim, I belong to a privileged minority for whom the possibility of leaving the country, for many places of my choosing, is not foreclosed. I am stating this since a new type of anti-Muslim harassment has recently appeared: monitoring the destination of Muslim families trying to leave France. The most famous case to this day concerns the Msakni family:

[On] January 29 [2015,] social services removed the children from the custody of their parents without any social survey being conducted. The father, placed in police custody and then released, was falsely suspected of wanting to go to Syria. The file is empty, [and] therefore, the new circumstance invoked to justify the removal of children (including a 3-month-old infant still breastfed by his mother) is: “radical cultural environment.”<sup>17</sup>

Sending the police and social services to take away the children of Muslim parents who are planning their departure from France is yet another unexpected outcome of the events of January 2015. French Muslims are now starting to be entrapped in France, the very country that told them to “love it or leave it” in the first place. For the time being, such bold acts of removal and confinement are infrequent and seem to concern only poor families from the suburbs. Or so I am led to believe, in the absence of available data. This is where writing this article gets most frustrating: without ethnic statistics, it is very hard to do my job as a writer and an activist. I have to explore social networks and community media and rely on my guts and the stories coming from my acquaintances. I do not have access to official French data concerning the numbers of Blacks and/or Muslims and/or Arabs who have been leaving France in the past few years. Even if this information was available, data about race or religion would not be assessed as a cause for departure, since the law forbids such assessment. The only verified numbers I have access to

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<sup>17</sup> “Le 29 janvier, les services sociaux ont enlevé les enfants à leurs parents sans qu'aucune enquête sociale n'ait été effectuée au préalable. Le père, mis garde à vue, puis relâché, est soupçonné à tort d'avoir voulu partir en Syrie. Le dossier étant vide, le motif qui est désormais invoqué pour justifier l'enlèvement des enfants (dont un nourrisson de 3 mois allaité par sa maman) est: ‘environnement culturel radical.’” *L'Esprit d'Actu*, “La famille Msakni: ‘Rendez-nous nos enfants!’” YouTube video, posted by OummaTV.tv, February 7, 2015, <https://youtube/XQJfKqUO6jg> (accessed February 10, 2015).

concern Jewish emigration to Israel, thus suggesting that this community also experiences fears regarding its future in France:

Jewish emigration from France to Israel, which was higher than Jewish emigration from the United States in 2013, seems poised to become the highest in the world. During the first nine months of 2014, figures were clearly ahead of the Russian Aliyah, and even the Ukrainian Aliyah, which was boosted by the tensions following the dismissal of Viktor Ianoukovytch. According to statistics collected by the Israeli Ministry of Integration . . . , 4566 Jews left France for Israel between January 1st and August 31st.<sup>18</sup>

For years I have been discussing with my friends the perhaps not-so-paranoid possibility of a civil war on French soil. I am now hearing youngsters talking about the upcoming civil war. It is not only depressing but also getting scary. Hence, I have selfishly chosen to save myself before it's too late. According to the rare figures I have access to, and from hearing from a number of people around me who are leaving or planning to, I know that I'm not the only one who feels this way. Furthermore, I also know and can assert with certainty that I would not have written this article in French or for a French publication. And I would definitely not have expressed all the things I have written above if I weren't moving to Canada very shortly. I wrote only one piece in French that deals with the *Charlie Hebdo* massacre—an entry published on my blog on the evening of the attack. It was entitled “If I Were White” and mostly speculated about the reasons I was not surprised by the violence, yet wondered how the rest of the population could not and did not see it coming. I also wondered when would be the time to finally start considering that the only way to prevent these tragic incidents was to start working on our national issues—namely, racism, colonialism, secularism, and social exclusion. Once the number of arrests and convictions for “apology for terrorist acts” grew, I started to worry. Could I also be targeted by this law? Was it safe for me to write openly about these issues? I finally decided that I would not pursue the piece I had started to write for *Slate.fr*, in which I intended to explain how discursive shifts in French hip-hop prophesied the January events. It was too *risqué*. Like many other French people of color, I chose self-censorship when faced with these new antiterrorist policies and practices. We watch our mouths, choose our fights. For some of us, we learn when it's time to go.

When we were again in Montreal on February 2015 with our immigration lawyer and friend, who happens to be Jewish, we started discussing *Charlie Hebdo* and our concerns for the future of France. We agreed that the prospects were not good, but when we wondered if we were being too pessimistic, she left us with this famous joke from the Holocaust era: “How many types of Jews are there? Two: optimists and pessimists. All the pessimists are in exile; the optimists are in concentration camps.”<sup>19</sup> This joke has haunted me ever since. I am obviously a pessimist. But

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<sup>18</sup> “L’émigration juive de France vers Israël, qui avait dépassé en 2013 celle provenant des États-Unis, semble en passe de devenir la plus importante au monde. Elle devance nettement, sur les neuf premiers mois de 2014, l’aliyah de Russie et même celle d’Ukraine, pourtant dopée par les tensions qui ont suivi la destitution de Viktor Ianoukovitch. Selon les statistiques collectées par le ministère israélien de l’Intégration . . . , 4566 Juifs ont quitté l’Hexagone pour l’État hébreu entre le 1er janvier et le 31 août. Leur nombre devrait s’établir sûrement autour de 5500’ sur l’année, selon le directeur de l’Agence juive en France, Ariel Kandel, ce qui représente environ 1% de cette communauté.” Cyrille Louis, “La France premier pays d’émigration vers Israël en 2014,” *Le Figaro*, September 6, 2014, <http://www.lefigaro.fr/international/2014/09/06/01003-20140906ARTFIG00042-la-france-premier-pays-d-emigration-vers-israel-en-2014.php> (accessed February 1, 2015).

<sup>19</sup> Rudolph Herzog, *Dead Funny: Telling Jokes in Hitler’s Germany*, trans. J. Chase (Brooklyn, NY: Melville House, 2011), n.p. (Kindle edition).

for the sake of all the non-White and non-Catholic French who remain optimistic, I hope that the joke will not any time soon become yet another self-fulfilling French prophecy. A