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The African immigrant experience according to *La Haine*

La Haine depicts the fictional experiences of three immigrants to France, each with a different background, but a similar fate. The title, which translates to “hate” sets the tone for the movie, which is quick to explain its motives – depicting the life of a French migrant as a hopeless, fruitless one. Though religion is not the only concern, or even the primary concern, of the characters – as most are only members of their faith, by virtue of their heritage – much of the conflict in the movie can be boiled down their “non-French” identity. By reading the conflicts of the movie in reference to the deeply theoretical text *The Muslim Problem in Europe*, one could draw conclusions about the impacts of each of these views of secularism on the lives of the immigrant community in the secular nation of France, where *laïcité* (secularism) is viewed as one of the core tenets of the state. Held in nearly the same regard as the popular motto “*Liberté, Égalité, Fraternité*,” (liberty, equality, and fraternity) the phrase “*République indivisible, laïque, démocratique et sociale*” (indivisible, secular, democratic and social republic) lays out the values that the French hold dear, in the first amendment to the Constitution.

From the beginning of the movie, the viewer is exposed to the escalating violence in the *banlieue* (ghetto/project) where the three main characters live and hear the voice of a young boy quote a chilling joke. “Have you ever heard the one about a man falling from a skyscraper? As he passes each floor, he thinks, so far, so good; so far, so good. But it isn’t in how you fall, it’s how you land.” This moment of foreshadowing will be revisited later in the film, when the tenets of liberty, equality, and brotherhood are regularly trampled. The movie opens on scenes of violent protests in response to the police beating of a young Arab immigrant named Abdel.

The movie follows teenagers/young adults Hubert, an African immigrant, Said, an Arab immigrant, and Vinz, a Jewish immigrant, through the day following this protest. The situation of

immigrants in France is contentious, regardless of nation of origin, but in the case of North African immigrants, the decolonization process impacts relations even farther (Alba & Silverman). Moroccans, Tunisians, and Algerians make up the bulk of immigrants to France, but are the least welcome in the nation (Cosgrove).

Though the story takes place over only the course of one day, the message is clear: their lives have always been this way and they will always be this way. The clashes with law enforcement do little to better the situation, but much to hamper the dreams of Hubert, whose hard-earned gym was torched in the protest, by the very youth that utilized the space. They also serve as the backdrop to the boys' lives, as the viewer is familiar with them. Insofar as the audience is concerned, Muget project, where these boys live has always been a place torn by violence, unemployment, drug use, and crime. When images of the tenements are finally clear, it is easy to see the over-packed, tiny spaces as resembling animal cages or Chinese factory dormitories. The twenty or thirty story buildings extend for miles and appear to house thousands of people of various age, ethnic, religious, racial, and national groups.

The timestamps on the movie serve to further the feeling of the slow passage of time, to reiterate the idea that the boys have nothing to do with their time, save for drugs, discussing sex in graphic detail, and reclining on the roof of the gym building. In one day, the three boys go from ordinary teenagers, who live in squalid conditions to statistics about violence in the ghetto, which is remarked upon by the French art museum curator, who calls them "the malaise of the ghetto." Rather than addressing the system that has forced immigrants of all backgrounds into poverty-stricken corners of the city, he claims that the ghetto is the source of the problem (translation: those of other ethnic, racial, and religious backgrounds infringing on our space), rather than a symptom of the society's disregard for human life.

The boys' unlikely friendship is mirrored by their different desires for their lives. Vinz wants retribution for personal and communal wrongs against the immigrants. Hubert repeats several times that he simply wants to get out. "*Je déteste la banlieue*" (I hate the ghetto) he tells his mother, who recognizes the child-like hope and makes a joke about picking something up for her on the way out. Said's desires are more difficult to pin down. Originally, it seems that he wants to continue existing, but by the end, he

looks to be standing for justice. After watching his friends' deaths, his facial expression seems to say that he just wants to make it another day, which he seems to know he cannot take for granted in the projects. This sentiment is never said, but often modeled in conversation or actions.

Peter O'Brien opens the chapter with a quote from Thomas Banchoff that states that "a new religious pluralism is shaking Atlantic democracies" (144). He follows this statement about religion with a detailed discussion of secularism. His definition of secularism, much like his previous narratives, is more complicated than the binary system that is currently used to describe it. He suggests that through a prism of liberalism, nationalism, and postmodernism, the definition will become "more nuanced" (145). According to O'Brien, the typical viewpoints of secularism can be broken down based on their roots in one of these three systems; the liberal tradition states that fundamentalists should be kept from influencing politics; reference to and strong connection with the "Judeo-Christian heritage" of a national comes from the nationalist perspective; and postmodernism suggests that secularism is a type of faith in and of itself (145).

Liberal Neutrality, which is technically honored in each European government, protects all faiths and an individual's right to practice or not practice any religion. These rights have been interfered with in nearly all European nations in recent years, in regards to no group more than Muslim immigrants. Recent steps taken to correct these digressions, but the changes are difficult to implement and governmental counterbalances don't address isolated instances of abuse, but target systemic concerns (147). In order to address the concerns about Muslim immigration, governmental bodies created the fashionable term "Euro-Islam," which suggested a Europeanized version of Islam. This version expects that all members of the society, immigrant or otherwise, respect the "European beliefs" of "gender equality, secularism and separation of the temporal and spiritual," according to Nicholas Sarkozy – French president from May 2007 to 2012 (148). Despite these bold claims, many European nations still allow child marriage and other practices for which the Islamic world is demonized. This system is inherently flawed by its understanding that the Islam of sending countries around the world is not coherent with these beliefs (175). The seeming connections between church and state in many Muslim-majority or Islamic nations

are simply more honest than the western nations who preach outward secularism and retain religious ordinances, such as Britain's mandatory Christian prayers in schools. The Euro-Islam that is preached by progressives in Europe supports individualized Muslim practice, but seems to ignore the fact that an individual connection with God is a core belief of the faith. While imams and other religious officials exist, their role is not as arbiter, interpreter, clergy, or pardoner, as is common in many Judeo-Christian traditions (151).

O'Brien goes onto explain the types of secularism and Islam, as he sees them, some which will factor more heavily into the reading of the film than others. But for the sake of clearly defining each and having a greater command of the material, a brief summary of all are included. Communitarian Secularism respects the rights of people with a community connection to create their own chief values and standards. Supporters of this version of secularism acknowledge that Muslim congregations have reasons for organizing, much like Christian religious groups. These insiders are also usually able to provide support to those entering the setting, in ways that cultural or religious outsiders could not (152). Though not in regards to a homogenous religious community, the communitarian ideal could be applied in the projects from *La Haine*. Some of the police who know the characters even seem to prefer this, but given the riots and protests that were occurring at the opening of the movie, it is suggested that the time for this system has come and gone. The concept would however be transferable, as far as dictates that helped those in the projects get work, keep children off of the streets and away from drugs, and protect lives on both sides of the riot gates. Embassy Islam does not present itself at all in the film, but is described by many involved embassies as sending moderate Islam to receiving countries, in hopes of curbing extremism and avoiding total assimilation – any assimilation in some cases (155). NGO Islam works well with the concept of Embassy Islam, and posits that everyone has the right to practice his or her religion openly and supports non-governmental “Islams” which attracted many immigrants who wanted to separate themselves from the official religion of their home country. However, O'Brien restates his belief that these policies are messy, when he explains that there are state-imposed regulations against and state-sponsored benefits for remaining only partially integrated, despite discourse to suggest otherwise (161).

The more pessimistic viewpoint of Hobbesian postmodernism rejects the notion that the state can ever be neutral. In this rejection, the government aids and abets the “demonization and domination of Islam” (161). O’Brien mentions the influence that this perspective has had on the Islamist groups of Europe and elsewhere. By resisting the European way, many Islamists feel that they are reaching their Allah-given potential and perfecting their practice of the faith. By resisting secularism, Islamists believe that they are living a life pleasing to God. Despite this stance, O’Brien discusses the impact of Islamist rappers – whose influences have to be purely western – in reaching younger audiences. For example, Funda-Mental sings about being a soldier for God and warns those not aligned with him to “watch out” (168). While the dj in the film is not playing for religious freedom, he does spin music to the tune of “fuck the police” and French revolutionary war songs, to suggest that the ghettos are done being exploited and the people will no longer remain silent victims.

Christian favoritism, though in the case of the movie, I would suggest Judeo-Christian favoritism, is clear in the characters’ interactions with French nations. In one scene, Said is arrested during a nonviolent, but extremely aggressive confrontation with police. Though Vinz initiated the argument and Said barely participates, the police call Said the ring-leader and arrest him, on the grounds of his otherness. His religion being unclear; his racial identity is enough to make him a target in this situation. The white Jewish boy is regarded as less of a threat. It is later revealed that he had been holding a stolen police firearm during the confrontation and planned to “blow away a pig, if Abdel dies.” In another scene, Said acknowledges that the white man of the trio is the least likely to be shot for harassing people in a swanky Parisian apartment complex, saying: “Me or darkie will get shot.” Though religion is merely discussed in passing by the three boys, it is inherently attached to Said, because of his Arab persuasion. Had this movie come out post-9/11 the discussion would focus less on outward racial appearance and more on religious influences. Having been created in 1995, and responding the clearest tension of the time, the actors and directors spent more time focused on this aspect of the characters.

Islamophobic hyperbole is a current concern in Europe, according to O’Brien, who states that the issue is “more saturated” than any other (181). He discusses the tenets of fragilization that come into play

in this discussion; “truth is what passes for truth and what passes for truth is a shrewd manipulation of words, images, and symbols” (181). In the European context, this means that the lack of well-educated information and ease with which it can be shared, coupled with the fear that recent upticks in terror attacks, committed by the Islamic-only-in-name-terror-group, have inspired widespread Islamophobic reactions. Shutting down borders, vetting persons of Muslim religious background more extensively, and framing Islam as opposed to democracy are several of the techniques used. However, I raised the question that many seem to ignore. In his discussion, he notes the three famous Islamic tyrants that everyone uses as evidence against Islam. He doesn’t note that governments like Russia and North Korea, “whose teachings cannot be reconciled with the democracy” have no connection with religion, but remain less frightening than the Muslim threat.

Once again, in the context of the movie, the expressions of violence are not explicitly targeted at Muslims, but Arabs are regularly violated. Vinz notes that he is an Arab in solidarity with Abdel, who dies from wounds inflicted by police, despite his religious heritage as Jewish. The depiction of the other which in this film is any immigrant is aggressive, useless, stupid, and dangerous to French society as a whole. By playing up the images of violence and replaying the news cast that is part of the opening sequence, these images are played up as normative in the immigrant community. As well, the image of Abdel that is shown on the news is one of he and a friend throwing up gun and gangster hand symbols, which adds to the violence imagery that is being used to marginalize this community. These signs of the aggressive and overt masculinity of the other are countered when Vinz sees someone being shot and then has the opportunity to do so himself. While he spent the whole day talking about his willingness to end a life, he was unable to pull the trigger on anyone, including a skinhead who threatened his friends. In contrast to the French police are extremely physical and use their authority to dangerous affect. The opposing view, that all Europeans hates Muslims/Arabs, is present in this film from beginning to end. Europhobic hyperbole is often used to recruit to violent terror organizations by depicting the whole of European culture and all of its people as “superficial and hedonistic, power-hungry and oppressive, promiscuous and lascivious, greedy and sly, even rapacious and sadistic” (184). All images of the French

in the film suggest that the native Frenchmen are trying to harm the three boys or the lifestyle that they lead, to penalize them for being different and further distance them from the general population. From children to grown men, the dialogue is anti-French cop. Even the cop who chooses to help the boys because of a familial connection is demonized when Hubert asks: "And who will save us from you?" The man represents a middle ground, because of his common background and attempts to reconcile the groups, but is viewed as a traitor or worse than the rest. O'Brien calls this cycle auto-generating, meaning that the hatred will only serve to fuel more hatred (186). Given the current situation in Europe and elsewhere, this feels like a fair analysis of this issue.

Hospitable postmodernism allows for the creation of a third space that is hostile to neither party and opens the floor for combinations, but can only exist when both parties choose to forgo the idea of a moral high ground, which is never present in *La Haine*. The title even seems to suggest that hate is the only art form that either party wants to see in the current climate. Both are damaging to the marginalized and the majority population, but rather than attempt to correct the situation, the boys play into it and eventually fall victim to it.

"This means that racism cannot be pinpointed and discussed because of the ingenious argument that goes 'we are all equal, so there is no racism'" (Cosgrove). Some are friendlier to the immigrant boys and some depict a world that has given into fear and hidden behind the veil of racist nationalist agendas, illiberal liberal policies, or postmodern nihilism and pessimism. Hate tells the story of the immigrant experience in France through the eyes of three young adults and explains their position throughout the film. The best allegory he uses to solidify the "rat race" mentality of the immigrant life is the story told by the small, old Frenchmen in a Parisian wc. He explains the story of Grunwalski freezing to death and his role in this, though the boys only understand it as a tale from a strange old man. None see the similarities to the philosophical discussion they would have later, when they would reiterate, that it "isn't about how you fall, it is about how you land."

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