



Paris riots sparked by immigrants protesting police.

Paris: A Global City and Its Immigrants

Written by Lucy Lyford

If someone from any part of the world is asked to name the most important cities on the planet, New York, London, Paris, and Tokyo always top the list. These "global cities" achieve this feat through excelling in areas including aggregation of human capital, business activity, infrastructure and cultural experience. Additionally, a multicultural population can be an important element in determining whether or not a city should indeed be considered "global." Immigrants that make up a multicultural population contribute significantly to the economic and infrastructural operations of a city, for better and for worse. Furthermore, they bring different cultural norms to the surface in what can otherwise be culturally homogenous cities. Paris, for instance, has a significant immigrant population: according to the French National Institute of Statistics and Economics Studies (INSEE), 20% of Paris's population are immigrants and 41.3% of people under twenty have at least one immigrant parent. Despite these numbers, immigrant experiences are seldom comparable to those of the native population. One example of this disparity in life experiences can be seen in cultural productions such as rap music, which serve as

empowering acts of resistance for French immigrants. This article will explore the roles immigrants play in making Paris a global city, detail how the economic, cultural and infrastructural experiences of immigrants are so markedly disparate from those of native Parisians, and explain how acts of resistance can bind these two communities together.

The economic performance of immigrants is different from that of the businesses operating in La Défense, Paris's impressive business district, yet is equally important to Paris's role as a global economic power center. While the outward differences between the economic realities of a poor immigrant from West Africa and a native day trader working at Euronext Paris is immense, these two figures are crucially linked in the life of the great city. In *The Global City*, Saskia Sassen notes that "... a vast supply of low-wage jobs is required by high-income gentrification in both its residential and commercial settings. Furthermore, there is a continuing need for low-wage industrial services, even in such sectors as finance and specialized services" (Sassen, 1991). She also observes that immigrants are crucial to the success of those in highly developed service sectors, both in their professional and personal lives: "Immigration can be seen as providing labor for the low-wage service and manufacturing jobs that service both the expanding, highly specialized service sector and the high-income lifestyles of those employed in the specialized, expanding service sector" (Sassen, 1991). Yet while these two societal positions — the poor immigrant and the elite native — are inextricably linked, their working conditions are far from comparable.

In a story published in 2009 by France24 International News — one of France's most widely viewed news channels — illegal immigrants who work in the Paris metro were interviewed about their working conditions. The author of the article notes that images gathered while researching the article "... show the workers removing concrete slabs from the station platform, and then resurfacing the ground with boiling tarmac. Bare armed, gloveless, without masks, without helmets." Sekou, a 35 year old man from Mali, has been working in the metro since 2006. He states that "if there's an accident, it's the responsibility of the worker" (France24, 2009). As for how his immigration status affects his economic opportunities, he says that "[o]ur employers know that we're undocumented — they take advantage of it by paying us 70 or 80 euros a night" (France24, 2009). Because of the demand for this kind of labor, employers prize undocumented workers who can be paid off the books, saving money. Saskia Sassen writes about this practice in *The Global City*. She corroborates the testimony of the workers in the Paris metro: "There is also evidence pointing to an expansion of the underground economy. Of interest to the analysis here is one particular component of the underground economy, informal work. This encompasses work that is basically licit but takes place outside the regulatory apparatus covering zoning, taxes, health and safety, minimum wage laws, and other types of standards" (Sassen, 1991). These types of jobs can be dangerous for immigrants who have no representation, rights, or legal recourse for worker's compensation or from employers taking advantage of immigrants working in unregulated positions.

Although there are undoubtedly concerns for immigrants who are working in Paris, those who have found employment are the lucky ones: many others have no economic opportunities at all. City mayors estimated migrant unemployment in Paris at approximately 40% in 2007, 30% higher than the French national average. Reasons for this discrepancy vary from difficulties of cultural integration to a language barrier to lack of access to education. Importantly, the high rate of unemployment among immigrants is perhaps a factor that drives people into taking dangerous or degrading work. To have a job of any kind is to be moving toward success in Parisian immigrant communities.

Lastly, infrastructure is a significant component that makes Paris a global city. Access to public transportation is crucial to a major, global city, and Paris has excelled in this category for generations.

According to the Statistiques Syndicat des Transports d'Île-de-France, the Parisian municipal transportation agency, in 2005, Paris was the second busiest metro system in Europe after that in Moscow. The Paris system carries 4.5 million passengers a day and an annual total of 1.479 billion passengers. While the system is praised as one of the densest, most accessible, and most efficient in the world, very few of the metro lines run to the suburbs where most of Paris's immigrants live. Immigrants who rely on public transportation are generally bus passengers. The bus system in Paris proper is considered to be a proficient system with 214 bus lines currently operating in the *banlieues*, or immigrant neighborhoods surrounding the inner core of Paris (RATP). While these numbers look good on paper, RATP has garnered many complaints about the infrequency of the *banlieue* routes, long waiting times at stops, and, perhaps most crucially, the fact that the buses to and from the *banlieues* do not run at night. Many immigrants who work night jobs struggle to commute from work to home between the hours of approximately 7:00 pm and 7:00 am.

Public facilities in Paris - such as parks, libraries, and post offices - are located throughout the center of the city and are kept in good condition, but those in immigrant neighborhoods are either completely lacking or are not well-maintained. Football is popular among immigrant youth, just like among youth in Paris proper. However, in the *banlieues*, one will not find the well-manicured fields outfitted with equipment that non-immigrant Parisians enjoy. A public football field in the *banlieues*, for example, is frequently a simple dirt field often littered with trash or broken glass. Because of the low standards of facilities in these communities, immigrant youths' experiences are substandard not only in school and in work but also in leisure.

Housing is perhaps the most important aspect of infrastructure. In Paris generally, housing is expensive, difficult to obtain, and well-maintained due to the high expectations residents have of living in a global city. While there are certainly problems with every city's housing, Parisians generally can expect to have their homes meet building and fire codes, to have repairs conducted in a timely manner, and to live in a residence suitable for their family's needs in space and quality. For immigrants in the Parisian suburbs however, it is quite a different story. Many immigrants live in large public housing facilities that were erected in the 1970's; many of these structures have not been kept up to date since then, often lacking basics including emergency exits or smoke detectors. Much attention was drawn to the poor quality of housing during the *banlieue* riots of 2005 that drew worldwide attention to France as the government declared a state of emergency. In a report published by the group City Mayors, the United Nations Habitat division reported that:

Between April and September 2005, three fires ravaged residential buildings in Paris, killing forty-eight African immigrants, primarily from Senegal, Côte d'Ivoire and Mali. Most of the victims were children; many were undocumented. The immigrants lived in cheap hotels and apartment houses ill-equipped for emergencies, lacking smoke detectors, fire extinguishers, emergency exits, and, in one case, even running water with which to put out the blaze. Some of the families had been placed in the substandard accommodations by social service agencies while waiting for their residency papers to be processed. Others entered the tenements on their own, squatting in the only shelter they could find (United Nations Habitat, 56).

While the riots exposed extreme levels of destruction, the dereliction of immigrant housing is not uncommon. Both documented and undocumented immigrants are forced into areas far outside the "global city" of Paris because of high prices in Paris proper, a desire to live in a community that shares cultural practices of their country of origin, or, in the case of undocumented migrants, inability to formally rent a place to live.

Another immensely important aspect regarding the French immigrant experience is that of culture. Immigrant culture in Paris, while quite distinct from the mainstream Parisian culture, is gaining traction. One of the main themes of the culture of immigrants in Paris is a type of identity crisis. While these people live and work in Paris (some were even born in Paris), they believe they are not considered French by those outside their communities. In her 2011 book *European Others*, Fatima El-Fayeb describes this difficult feeling that many French immigrants have expressed:

To say that we are French means a lot of different things; it's almost like saying that we are Christian, almost, because most of the time, French people are Christian. Maybe on the outside we're French and on the inside we're Arab. But really, our problem is that our parents are immigrants, and when we go to

Algeria, we're still immigrant. So, we're somewhere in the middle (110).

Interestingly, rap music has become an intensely popular medium through which immigrants have expressed their frustrations with life in the margins of Paris. On the subject of the rise and inspirations of French immigrant rap, M.C. Hamé, an immigrant and rapper who has lived in Paris for nearly his entire life, recalls:

When we were teenagers, to see black American artists erupt in our world, like NWA, Run DMC, with their attitudes, with a certain pride, defying white racist America, reclaiming their history, their pride, it was earth shattering to us. For the first time, people who looked like us, speaking freely... it was like being branded with a red-hot iron. We still haven't gotten over it (143.)

Youssoupha Mabiki, better known as simply Youssoupha, is a French rapper of Congolese origin who has achieved popularity and success in France since his debut album in 2007. His most recent single "Histoires Vraies" — True Histories — details his life and experiences in the *banlieues*:

***Yeah, je raconte les épreuves accomplies
Les rêveurs incompris
Les misères, les hivers, les petits frères en son-pri
Les décès, les écoles, les excès des alcools
Les machines, les racines de Martin et Malcom... (Mabiki, 2011).***

English Translation (translated by author):

***I know it
Yeah, I tell of tests performed
The misunderstood dreamers
Miseries, winters, little brothers in prison
Deaths, schools, alcohol abuses,
Machines, the roots of Martin and Malcolm...***

In this excerpt from the song, Youssoupha shows an example of French rappers using this music genre to express not only their frustrations and realities but their hopes and experiences. He also points to two important figures in the American civil rights movement, which does not have an equivalent in France. Because there are few black faces in the public sphere in France, rappers make American figures their own, using them as examples of resistance and change for the French marginalized communities.

In *European Others*, El-Fayeb writes about French rapper Axiom First and his controversial 2005 single, "Monsieur Le President," which was written about the 2005 riots in the *banlieues* and the French government's reaction to them. She says that he succeeds by "placing the events in the context of the histories of colonization and labor migration, structural exclusion, economic inequality, and everyday racism in contemporary France, while emphatically claiming his status as part of French society. He does this not only by invoking the service of French colonial subjects in defending and rebuilding the nation, but also by stylistically referencing writers such as Victor Hugo, placing himself within a long tradition of French intellectuals' resistance against abuse of state power" (141). Axiom First's song may have been the inspiration for the 2012 single released by French-Haitian rapper Kery James. Released in the midst of the French presidential election, it seems that James did not seek to be very subtle with the meaning of his song "Lettre à la République." The song opens with the following verse:

***A tous ces racistes à la tolérance hypocrite
Qui ont bâti leur nation sur le sang
Maintenant s'érigent en donneurs de leçons
Pilleurs de richesses, tueurs d'africains
Colonisateurs, tortionnaires d'algériens
Ce passé colonial c'est le votre
C'est vous qui avez choisi de lier votre histoire à la notre... (James, 2012)***

James addresses the "builders of riches, killers of Africans, colonizers, and torturers of Algerians" and says that "the colonial past is yours; it is you who have chosen to link your history to ours." The obvious contrast between immigrant rap of this variety and traditional French cultural productions such as the Paris Ballet draws attention yet again to the sharp divide between the experiences of Paris's mainstream, traditional residents and immigrants who remain on the fringe. Yet French immigrant rap music has proven a viable form of resistance and empowerment for otherwise marginalized groups of society.

A global city is a product of its economic, cultural, and infrastructural qualities; cities that have high achievements in these areas consistently are ranked amongst the most important cities in the world. While these achievements are certainly monumental, it is crucially important to understand that not all the residents of these global cities experience the opportunities and have access to the facilities that grant these cities their exalted status. In Paris, specifically, immigrants work in low-wage service jobs that ease the operations of the entire city. Despite the importance of these jobs, the workers are often underpaid and overworked without access to benefits. The most famous cultural institutions of Paris, including museums and high fashion, are not accessible to immigrants.

While immigrant culture is gaining traction outside the margins of French society through the growing popularity of Muslim and/or African rap artists, the Parisian immigrants have a completely different cultural experience than their native counterparts. The infrastructure of Paris's *banlieues* is a stark contrast to that of Paris proper. While residents of the latter live in appropriate housing and among well-maintained public facilities, immigrants are often forced into housing that is unsafe, unsanitary, and unfit for human beings to live in. The immigrant population of Paris is significant and with all that the third-ranked global city in the world has to offer, this currently marginalized portion of the population could help Paris grow both economically and culturally if its vast and untapped potential could be accepted as a central part of being French, creating an even more stunning metropolis on the banks of the Seine.

Works Cited

El-Tayeb, Fatima. (2011). *European Others: Queering Ethnicity in Postnational Europe*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

France24 International News. Accessed on November 17, 2012.

French National Institute for Statistics and Economic Studies (INSEE). Accessed on November 25, 2012.

James, Kery. (2012). "Lettre à la République". 92.2012.

Mabiki, Youssoupha. (2012). "Histoires Vraies". *Noir désir*. McKenzie, A.D. "Migrant Women Trapped in Sex Trade". Inter Press Service News Agency. Accessed on November 19, 2012.

Site de RATP. Accessed on November 26, 2012.

Sassen, Saskia. (1991). *The Global City: New York, London, Tokyo*. New Jersey: Princeton University Press.

Site officiel de l'EPAD. Accessed on November 11, 2012.

Statistiques Syndicat des transports d'Île-de-France. Accessed on November 26, 2012.