

AN ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS OF

Tanna J. Wilson for the degree of Honors Baccalaureate of Arts in French presented on June 1, 2017.

Title: The Representation of Discrimination in French Society in the Film *La Haine*

Abstract approved: _____
Nabil Boudraa

The purpose of my thesis is to recognize the social injustice that existed in France 20 years ago and continues to result in social dysfunction today. I have used the film *La Haine* (dir. Mathieu Kassovitz, 1995) to examine past events in France's history and have compared them to more current events in France and the U.S. I have researched the history of immigration in France, the film's cultural impact, and present day French society. By this, I have determined that class-based injustice remains extremely relevant in modern French society. Anger and hatred still fuel criminal acts from terrorists, police, and even civilians.

Key words: France, *La Haine*, social injustice, police brutality, immigration

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The Representation of Discrimination in French Society
In the Film *La Haine*

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I understand that my project will become part of the permanent
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I. Introduction

Mathieu Kassovitz wrote and directed the cult nineties French drama *La Haine* (1995) in response to the unrest burning in the *banlieues* (the government subsidized housing projects on the outskirts of France's major cities). A visually and psychologically arresting film, *La Haine* powerfully portrays the violence and hatred that festered in the *banlieues* at the time. Unfortunately, today, the same brutality, anger, and tragedies fuel a new era of social dysfunction.

The objective of my thesis is to acknowledge that the difficulties and tragedies portrayed in *La Haine* are present today. On February 2nd 2017, a young man called Theo was a victim of disturbing police brutality resulting in riots and outrage. He is one among many cases of police brutality occurring recently. *La Haine* can be used to understand the continuance of violence against the socially excluded.

Firstly, it is essential to examine the history of immigration in France as well as the history of the *banlieues*. Secondly, in order to understand the modern day importance and appeal of *La Haine*, one should examine the fabrication of the film and its legacy. *La Haine* remains a creative reference today and is one of the most successful French films internationally. Its popularity abroad has contributed to its longevity. Finally, in consideration of the social, political, and historical factors in relation to *La Haine*, one can understand how the same disorder and injustice that wracked France 20 years ago has remained rooted in society today.

1. A Brief History of the Banlieues and the Riots

In order to understand the events and themes of *La Haine*, it is necessary to examine the history of immigration in France. The first major wave of immigration came to France during the 19th century (Vladescu 2). With the combined effects of the Franco-Prussian War and the burgeoning industrial revolution, the country found itself in need of workers (3). The first workers came from poorer European nations such as Spain, Portugal, Belgium, Italy, and Russia (3).

In the wake of both World War I and World War II, the importance of immigration stemmed from an urgent need to reconstruct the country (3). North and Sub-Saharan Africans came to France after World War II to help rebuild the country. The conflicts had drained France of its youth while leaving a path of economic destruction as well (3). Therefore, France made the children of foreign laborers citizens, due to being born on French soil, and used them to ensure the future of France's population and economy (3). Immigrants from North and Sub-Saharan Africa ushered Islam into France (4). Another contributor to the growth of the population was the Algerian Liberation War, which broke out in 1954 (4). One million *pied-noirs*¹ came to France in 1962 as a consequence of Algerian independence. They were uncomfortable with remaining in an independent and remade Algeria. Finally, a baby boom was also a contributing factor to the population growth (4).

¹ A *Pied-noir* was a person of French descent born and raised in Algeria. Albert Camus is one example.

Swelling populations left France with a housing problem (4). The *bidonvilles* (shantytowns) in large cities were pressed full (4). During *Les Trentes Glorieuses* (the Glorious Thirty) or the thirty years of economic growth in postwar France between 1945 and 1975, the *banlieues* were constructed as clean, sleek, and current alternatives to the cramped inner cities (4). These estates were built on the outskirts of the cities as a promising solution (4).



Clichy-Sous-Bois- one of the most isolated *banlieues* surrounding Paris.

In 1974, to encourage male workers to remain in France rather than return home to their birth countries, family reunification laws were set into place. The workers' wives, daughters, and sons were allowed to join them in their new home

once again ensuring a future for France's population.² This led to new generations of immigrants being introduced into French culture and society. Furthermore, it ensured further generations to contribute to the future population.

Economic downturn and the migration of wealthier workers to private estates ended the short-lived success of the *banlieues* (4-5). A failing economy resulted in a growing unemployment rate that had strong effect on the circumstances in the estates. In addition, workers that had done well for themselves and could afford it were seeking improved living conditions and departing from the deteriorating *banlieues*. The remaining residents found themselves in a bleak isolated environment, physically and mentally separated from their fellow citizens. One name that is attributed to these residents is the *exclus*, which connotes that they are excluded from mainstream society (1).

People began to recognize the problem brewing in the *banlieues*. In 1976, they were already seeking a solution to the failing situation in the once-optimistic estates (5). However, it was during the 1980s and the 1990s, that the situation became increasingly worse (1).

2. French and American Cinematic Inspiration

When *La Haine* was released in 1995, the French film industry was thriving in two distinct genres- French heritage films, which focused on the literary classics and history and the sleek thriller style of Luc Besson, known as *Cinéma du look*.

Three examples of French heritage cinema of that era are *Cyrano de Bergerac* (1990), *La Reine Margot* (1994), and *Ridicule* (1996) (Pidduck 281, 283). These

² See Yamina Benguigui's film *Inch'Allah Dimanche* (2001) for a historical understanding of the family reunification laws of 1974.

films portray French history and also represent the state-driven nationalistic cinema that was popular at the time (Pidduck 283). According to academic Ginette Vincendeau, the surge in French cinematic pride at the time was partially due to a resistance against Hollywood (Pidduck 283). While these films combatted the Hollywood blockbusters, they used big budgets and film stars to rival their fellow production studios across the Atlantic (Pidduck 284). Given the popularity of these films, *La Haine* was a 180-degree turnabout in the industry at the time. In fact, Kassovitz's style is more akin to New Wave maestro François Truffaut who rejected classic French novel-based films in his 1954 manifesto *A Certain Tendency of the French Cinema* (Pidduck 283). *La Haine* does share commonalities with New Wave cinema. Its black and white aesthetic is a clear throwback to the silver screens of the 1950s and 1960s. Kassovitz's choice of lesser known actors also reflects the works of his predecessors as well as his use of outdoor scenes, close ups, jump cuts, and portrayal of everyday life (Luzi). The works of Luc Besson also defined French cinema during the 1990s. His films are known for their sleek futuristic aesthetic and thrilling action.

In the United States, "hood" films were enjoying popularity thanks to successes such as *Boyz n the Hood* (dir. John Singleton, 1991), *Menace II Society* (dir. Allen Hughes, Albert Hughes, 1993), and *Do the Right Thing* (dir. Spike Lee, 1989). They portrayed the unrest occurring in areas heavily populated by African Americans, particularly in South Central Los Angeles. It is clear that *La Haine* also draws inspiration from these films- in particular, it has received comparison to *Boyz n the Hood*, directed by John Singleton and starring Cuba Gooding Jr, Morris

Chestnut, Lawrence Fishburne, Angela Bassett, and rap icon Ice Cube. Similar to *La Haine*, *Boyz n the Hood* focuses on the marginalized, the “Others” who are thrust away from mainstream society. The “Others” are often ostracized. *Boyz n the Hood* takes place in South Central Los Angeles where the three principal characters (akin to the three protagonists in *La Haine*) are also on the cusp of adulthood and considering their futures.

3. Summary of the Film

Before continuing, it is necessary to briefly summarize the plot and principal characters of *La Haine*. The three main characters, Vinz, Saïd, and Hubert, spend their days wandering in their *banlieue*, smoking weed, arguing with their families, and sitting around doing nothing. Before the film even begins, a school has been burned down during some riots and an acquaintance Abdel Ichaha lies in a critical hospitalized state caused by police brutality in response to the riots. Vinz discovers a police gun that has been left behind and vows to kill a policeman if Abdel dies. The three travel into Paris where Saïd seeks out a business partner with whom he deals in black market exchanges. The three stick out like sore thumbs among the Parisians as illustrated in a scene in an art gallery where they heckle the other visitors and are thrown out. Later, they receive the news that Abdel has died and Vinz fantasizes about killing a cop. They encounter a gang of skinheads and capture one (played by Kassovitz). Vinz wants to shoot him, but he is stopped by Hubert who convinces Vinz that he is not really a cold-blooded killer. Upon returning to the *banlieue*, Vinz hands the gun over to Hubert, having had a change of heart due to his experiences in Paris. As Hubert is walking away, he senses a disturbance and turns to find his

friends confronted by plainclothes policemen that they had encountered earlier. One of the police places his gun against Vinz's head and accidentally shoots and kills him. Hubert aims his gun at the policeman. As they stare at each other in a suspenseful standoff, the camera zooms in on Saïd's face. Saïd blinks and the screen goes black with the bang of an unidentified gun. "It's about a society on its way down, and as it falls it keeps telling itself, 'so far so good, so far so good, so far so good.' It's not how you fall that matters. It's how you land," Hubert states in a voiceover (*La Haine*).



The final scene- a tense standoff.

4. Political Accusations

Nationalistic pride is deeply rooted in French culture culminating with the recent rise of Marine Le Pen, daughter of Jean-Marie Le Pen, 2017 presidential candidate, and president of the National Front. Le Pen's family upholds French tradition to such a degree that one might call them xenophobic. Marine Le Pen disputes this, claiming that she wants to control immigration, not cease it all

together (Shorto). In *The New York Times Magazine* in 2011, Russell Shorto interviewed Le Pen on her policies and convictions. Le Pen stated, “...in the old days, immigrants entered France and blended in. They adopted the French language and tradition. Whereas now entire communities set themselves up within France, governed by their own codes and traditions” (Shorto). Assimilation, as opposed to integration, is key. Instead of welding their culture with French culture, the immigrant must completely adopt their new home and all its customs. Cultural diversity is not something to be celebrated.

Both Le Pen and Sarkozy are supporters of the idea that French citizens should be homogeneously French. Those who migrate to France with their own cultures and traditions must be prepared to leave them behind in favor of a new European lifestyle. Therefore, it is easy to see how second, third, and fourth generations of immigrants lose touch with their history and culture. Assimilation has been the expected norm in France for generations. There has been little to no change in regards to the expectations put on immigrants to forsake their own heritage in favor of westernization.

The words and actions of people like Le Pen have inflamed the wound. Le Pen is deeply loathed by many and political cartoons often portray her as a monster. Former president Nicolas Sarkozy has also caused much anger. In response to the riots in 2005, Sarkozy, the Minister of the Interior, declared the rioters “hooligans or scum” (Hansen). He callously remarked after the accidental shooting of 11-year-old Sidi Ahmed that the area would be cleansed with a pressure hose (Henley). His word choice caused disruption among the press and people (Henley). Initially popular

among the French and even supposedly more successful with French Muslims than any other politician at the time, Sarkozy's remarks drew criticism and calls for resignation (Hansen).

In 2005, nationalists placed the blame on an even more farfetched culprit: polygamy (Sciolino). The permanent secretary of the Académie Française, which serves to preserve the French language, Hélène Carrère d'Encausse, stated, "Everyone is astonished; why are African children in the streets and not at school?" (Sciolino). She blamed it on polygamy, suggesting that the reasons for the poverty and lack of education were the multiple wives and children (Sciolino). The then-interior minister Sarkozy believed that immigrant culture including polygamy made it difficult for them to integrate into French culture (Sciolino). These comments came under fire for being racist (Sciolino). Bigamy is illegal in France, but largely goes unpunished (Sciolino). However, according to Sciolino's article, the wives are encouraged to seek different housing (Sciolino). One City Hall spokeswoman summed up the feeling of French integration perfectly, "We tell them, 'It may be legal in Africa, but in France it's not'" (Sciolino). All these comments are strong indicators of, not only the sense of nationalism, but a resounding failure to recognize the true root of the problem.

II. Contextualizing the Film

1. The Making of *La Haine*

For *La Haine*, Kassovitz was specifically inspired by the accidental police custody shooting of a young man named Makomé M'Bowolé. M'Bowolé was accidentally shot while handcuffed in police custody, which resulted in a disruption in the 18th arrondissement among the youth. Kassovitz had had an idea to make a film that tackled social issues (a genre that was not very popular at the time in French cinema) for some time, but the event of M'Bowolé's death was the catalyst. Shortly afterwards, Kassovitz approached producers to present a general idea for the film. The film was intended to be political, not violent, and therefore be both entertaining and educating. Instead of portraying bloody shootouts, it depicts deeply rooted issues in society born from the gap between the privileged and the marginalized.



A still from the film

A film that focused on serious social issues and presented a relatively unknown cast was not expected to be an easy sell at the time (*Ten Years*). Kassovitz was not a huge blockbuster director either and was only 28. Multiple handicaps were presented, which included the challenge of finding a location in the *cités*. The process took about a year. Kassovitz had aesthetic criteria for the perfect location. It could not be too depressing and it had to lend itself well to film. In addition, only one *cit * out of fifteen or twenty offered itself as a filming location. In order to work smoothly and comfortably (for all parties concerned), Kassovitz decided to live in the *cit * Chanteloup with his crew for an extended period of time before filming. Chanteloup is located south of Paris in the department of Les Yvelines. It was essential to make the residents comfortable with the presence of a film crew and also to collect and channel the energy and attitude of the *banlieue* to film. In order for a film to convey as much realism and credibility as possible, a dedicated level of immersion is essential. At a time when there was a great deal of turmoil, it was also important to establish a good reputation with the residents and show them that they were not simply another nosy crew with manipulative or ulterior motives. The director and the main actors lived in the *banlieue* for around two months, separating themselves from Paris and embracing a rather different lifestyle. Although, Chanteloup was not a particularly difficult setting, there were occasional fights and even a riot, although neither setback the filming schedule. A group of young men who were charged with opposing violence in the *banlieue*, became “go-betweenes” for the film crew, and showed their support. In spite of all efforts and almost in an expected manner, the situation was not without some strain. Some residents

originally thought that the crew was from the military. On one occasion, their apartment was broken into, but with no consequences as there was nothing to steal (*Ten Years*).

Commitment was key to harmonious filmmaking in Chanteloup. Beyond living in the *banlieue*, the actors kept their own names for their respective characters. Hubert Koundé is Hubert, Saïd Taghmaoui is Saïd, and Vincent Cassel is Vinz. According to Koundé, this allowed the actors to get as close as possible to the subject matter and to show true commitment to the film (*Ten Years*).

Kassovitz approaches directing with the objective to tell a story in which each shot from the camera contributes to the film. He prefers long continuous shots that show a progression from start to end and has aversion to cuts. He is uninterested in filming scenes of no real importance and instead prefers complicated unique takes, where the matter is truly relevant. At times, this approach proved difficult especially for the cameramen in tight, uncomfortable settings. The aim of Kassovitz's shots is realism. Instead of the eye being drawn to focus on one singular point, it is given many directions to look. Kassovitz's work represents the specific look that he aims for in almost every scene. When the trio is in Paris, they have a heated argument in a public restroom. In this scene, mirrors reflect them back at themselves and they are viewed from all angles (see image on following page). His style is nonconforming while being thoroughly beautiful and artistic, not unlike Truffaut and Godard, the pioneers of the New Wave movement (*Ten Years*).



A still from the film

2. Reception

After the post-production of the film, the cast and crew were amazed by the finished product, but unsure if mainstream audiences and critics would accept it. They were quite anxious about the release of their unorthodox movie. Their screenings occurred in a theater where viewers of all walks of life attended. The general public, filmmakers, journalists and residents of the *banlieues* showed up. The theater would become overfull and people would be turned away, much to their chagrin (*Ten Years*).

The Cannes Film Festival presented its own limelight. Kassovitz affirmed that their platform at the festival was not a manifesto, but was simply to show a film that they had made on a serious topic that might stand in contrast to the glittering

atmosphere. The platform that Cannes offered would shoot *La Haine* into international fame. It was an incredible catalyst for everyone involved (*Ten Years*).

The publicity of the film exploded at an extreme pace. The film landed on multiple magazine covers right away and the crew found themselves swarmed with journalists while at Cannes so much so that whole ordeal was irritating and demeaning. Journalists would turn up with preconceived ideas about the project. Kassovitz was confronted by one journalist who was convinced that Hubert killed the policeman at the end of the film, despite Kassovitz's explanation that the conclusion is purposefully left open. They also presumed that the film was anti-police. In fact, the police turned their backs during the film's screening at Cannes. Kassovitz explained that the film was against the system that had corrupted the police and had set up the warped twisted hierarchy that made it difficult for the law enforcement to properly work. Furthermore, the crew experienced open racism at an interview with France 2. Mathieu Kassovitz and Vincent Cassel were allowed in without a problem, but Hubert Koundé, Saïd Tahgmaoui, and the publicist François Hassan Guérrar were stopped and forced to open their bags. The publicity that the film was receiving forced them to defend and reiterate their ideas to the press over and over again. In addition, it revealed the preconceived notions that the press had already formed about the *banlieues* (*Ten Years*).

La Haine went on to the Césars as well. At this point, the question was whether or not a film like *La Haine* truly belonged at the Césars. The Césars, like the Oscars, recognize and award the debatably greatest works in film each year, but like Cannes, they are attended by the famous, glamorous, and wealthy, which stands in

contrast to *La Haine* and its subject matter. Hubert Koundé attended, as he believed that *La Haine* was a film, not a political movement in itself. On the basis of *La Haine* being a beautifully crafted film, it would make sense for them to receive the honors that come along with hard work and dedication. In the end, he and the producer Christophe Rossignon accepted the Césars on behalf of the others who did not wish to attend (*Ten Years*).

Perhaps one aspect of *La Haine's* fame that Kassovitz did not anticipate was its reputation of being “cool.” In an interview from 1995 with *Télérama*, Kassovitz acknowledged that, “I thought I would shock people more, but unfortunately not. There was a fashion phenomenon” (Vincendeau, *Designs* 317). Its standout cinematic quality has earned it admirers from alternative youths to highbrow film lovers who according to Kassovitz would, “...tell me the film was “fantastically truthful”” (Vincendeau *Designs* 316). The film is beautifully shot in black and white, a real throwback to his predecessors from Truffaut to Martin Scorsese (Vincendeau *Designs* 316). In a time when color film was so readily available, black and white made a statement, however it was a challenge to sell a black and white political film to distributors (*Ten Years*). However, the result has been a highly artistic aesthetic that gave the film an edge over its contemporaries. This cinematography is another nod to popular cinema, reminiscent of the New Wave movement as well as the works of Scorsese and Luc Besson (Vincendeau, *Designs* 318). Kassovitz does often pay tribute to the brand of masculine violent film that Scorsese specializes in (Vincendeau, *Designs*, 316). In one iconic scene, Vinz does an impression of Travis Bickle (played by Robert De Niro) in Martin Scorsese’s *Taxi Driver* (1976) (*La*

Haine). He challenges his own reflection, glancing around at invisible friends to establish his masculinity (*La Haine*). Kassovitz's tributes to other directors have contributed to the strength of his film.

Music, artistry, and references to other directing legends are among many factors that have cemented *La Haine* into cult status. The film finds itself in the curious position of being a cult favorite and also carrying a political message. Did Kassovitz have any idea that his offbeat gamble of a project would carry a message that would be pertinent 20 years later? As a brilliant piece of entertainment with memorable characters, dialogue, and plot, *La Haine* holds the interest of the next generation. Inevitably, a new era of viewers will recognize similarities between current events and those documented by Kassovitz.

3. The Music of *La Haine*

Kassovitz's choice of music also helps to make *La Haine* "cool" as well as enhances the themes of the film (Vincendeau, *Designs* 314). In one scene, a young DJ mixes rap and Edith Piaf's *Non, Je ne regrette rien* (*La Haine*). This juxtaposition of urban hip-hop declaring a hatred of the police and a classic that is deeply associated with French culture gives an edge to the film. In fact, hip-hop is unarguably tied to *La Haine*. It does take place in the nineties, following the incredible popularity of N.W.A. who brought the "bad boy" *Straight Outta Compton* scene to the public light. Hip-hop invited youth to be rebellious and Vinz especially is seen to have embraced this philosophy. By using hip-hop music, Kassovitz ordained *La Haine* as a youthful current film.

The crossover of Piaf and rap also emphasizes the cultural gap between the *banlieue* and Paris. Piaf represents the Parisian taste, traditional, refined, and conventional while rap summons the grimy rebellion in the *habitation à loyer modéré* (HLM).³ Despite this, the two songs mix well together in a surprisingly harmonious way, which suggests that there is middle ground between cultures. Vinz, Saïd, and Hubert encounter the gap when they travel from the *banlieue* to Paris. In one scene, they visit an art gallery, which is hosting an elegant party. The same theme of cultural differences is portrayed here. The boys are bewildered by the art and behave crudely to the extent that a man who disregards them as troubled youth turns them out of the gallery. Another example of the cultural gap is when they arrive at a high scale apartment where they find themselves completely out of place amongst palatial décor.

It is no coincidence that rap and hip-hop play a role in *La Haine* when those genres of music have always been associated with the “hood.” *La Haine* has drawn comparisons to hood films over the years, particularly John Singleton’s *Boyz n the Hood*. One of film’s stars, Ice Cube, had already shot to superstardom as a member of the rap group N.W.A. who acknowledged origins with hits such as *Straight Outta Compton* and *Fuck Tha Police* (Hiatt). *La Haine* features a rap song by the French group Assassin called *Nique la Police*, which translates to *Fuck the Police*. Rap and hip-hop are integral parts of the cultures that can deliver tough messages. However, they are also often blamed for the turmoil that takes place in the *banlieues* and the hood.

³ Another term for the *banlieue*.

In the aftermath of the 2005 riots in France, rap artists came under fire for their supposed “provoking” of violence and rebellion (Poggioli). Rap artists are known for their provocative subject matter. N.W.A. was known for their aggressive address of the situation in South Central Los Angeles (Hiatt). However, in France, members of Parliament had asked for legal action against certain rap artists who allegedly contributed to the uproar (Poggioli). This was met with contempt from the rap industry that compared the accusations to “shooting the messenger” (Poggioli). The owner of the record label Street Skillz, Matteo Ferran pointed out that rappers had been forewarning their audience of the unrest in the *banlieues* (Poggioli). Whether or not it is fair to accuse music of incurring street violence, one can say that it does play role in how people feel and even think. Rap and hip-hop, especially in America, has a huge youth following and inspires fans to dress, behave, and talk like their favorite artists. In a way, rap has glamorized the rough lifestyle in the hood and in the *banlieue*. The artists who perform about “staying true to their roots” and “being straight outta Compton” might cause some listeners to mistakenly believe that this upbringing was all “sex, drugs, and rock n’ roll.” These listeners are most likely similar to Vinz who glorify rebellion and antiauthoritarianism. The potentially dangerous and often unintentional consequence of music with a political or social message is that it can result in people putting the message into rebellious action. It is unfair to pin the blame on the rap industry when society is the one with blood on its hands, but by playing the role of the messenger, a rap artist involves himself in the ramifications of social injustice.

Bob Marley's song *Burnin' and Lootin'* accompanies the start of the film, which features real footage of riots. It also helps to emphasize the long term discontent in the *banlieues*. "We've been suffering these long, long-a years," Marley sings (Line 24). He describes the "...the faces standing over me...were all dressed in uniforms of brutality" (Lines 3-4) alluding to police and police brutality, another common theme in *La Haine*. Finally, Marley's song implies the solidarity in the *banlieues* among the excluded and marginalized.

III. Political Context

1. Police Brutality and Corruption in the System

Police brutality is a major theme in *La Haine*. The film was inspired by and touches upon this theme with the beating and subsequent death of Abdel Ichaha in reflection of the death of Makomé M'Bowolé.

Some police officers do engage in violence against civilians. However, as Kassovitz points out the true culprit is a corrupted system. There are rotten apples in every bushel and the law enforcement has had its fair share. Kassovitz emphasizes that *La Haine* is not anti-police. It is against the system that breeds such corruption and violence. A police officer can still be a good person within a terrible system. It is a hierarchy of fear, ignorance, and hate that breeds in turn fear, ignorance, and hate. For instance, there is a scene in the film where two policemen abuse Hubert and Saïd in order to provide an example for a younger officer. The younger officer seems ashamed and almost disgusted by the act. However, despite any good intentions that he might have had, the film suggests that he will learn and adopt his colleagues' behavior. Hubert's philosophy, "*la Haine attire la Haine*" (Hate breeds hate) is as relevant now as it was 20 years ago. The sick rotting tree continues to produce the same fruit year after year, decade after decade.



Saïd and Hubert are abused by the police.

However, it is not surprising that minorities are often the victims of police brutality and receive the harshest sentences and treatment in court. What examples in history have ever suggested that people of color receive equal treatment to those with European ancestry? Westernized legal systems and governments have been slow to adopt just proceedings towards people of color.

2. Stereotypes in the Hood/*Banlieue*

In *Boyz n the Hood*, Furious Styles (played by Lawrence Fishburne) draws attention to the dangerous trap that accompanies living in South Central Los Angeles. The inhabitants of South Central Los Angeles are expected to be rough, to smoke, to drink, and engage in criminal activity. This relates back to how society molds a demographic. In a time when it is much simpler to cast labels on minorities, society tends to see the worst in certain demographics. The governments fool themselves into believing that the criminal activity present in certain regions are self-created, born out of a sweaty urban scene of drugs, drink, and violence.

Politicians such as Sarkozy are aware of the turmoil in the *banlieues* and yet, are unable to look back in time to realize that years of colonization, war, racism, and even massacre are at the heart of the anger that fuels the spark of revolt. Are children not reflections of their parents? If so, the hatred that breeds among the rioters is the doing of their neglectful mother France.

3. Facing the Past

Many scholars have argued that the root of discontent in France lies in history itself. In Richard L. Derderian's essay *Confronting the Past*, he refers specifically to Algerian history in France. In 2001, at the first soccer match between France and Algeria, young Franco-Algerians booed the national anthem, the *Marseillaise*, and threw things onto the field (Derderian 247). Derderian quotes a reporter from *Le Monde*, Philippe Bernard who believed that the actions came from a feeling of estrangement (247). He indicated that many Franco-Algerians struggled to feel part of French history, because great lengths of Franco-Algerian history had been edited out of the national chronicles (248). Derderian states that in order to successfully integrate immigrants into France, it is first necessary to incorporate their history, their stories, and their perspectives into French culture (248). Director Yamina Benguigui concurs with this sentiment. She sees the sharing of Franco-Algerian history as therapeutic and dignifying (249). Regarding *La Haine*, Vinz, Hubert, and Saïd reveal little interest in their own cultural backgrounds, but these histories do hold some significance for their elders. Vinz's grandmother berates him for not attending synagogue as a menorah sits in the background. Hubert's apartment features traditional African wall art. Hubert and Saïd are most likely part

of the second or third generation wave. Their parents probably immigrated to France in the sixties or the seventies as children themselves. Due to these generational degrees of separation, the tie to their countries of origins are not as strong as their parents' or their grandparents'. In Derderian's essay, Benguigui comments that the shock for the first generation immigrants is the new country and culture with its poor living circumstances, but the problem for the second generation is the lack of belonging and the sense of being pushed off to the margins of society (249). This is certainly reflected in *La Haine*. If the boys had more knowledge of their history and culture perhaps they would be able to identify themselves and their place in France in the therapeutic and dignifying manner described by Benguigui.

4. Turning a Blind Eye

The difficulty lies in the fact that countries tend to ignore the darker side of their histories. In his essay *The Return of the Repressed*, David Prochaska refers to the phenomenon as an "Algerian syndrome" or a "Vichy syndrome" (Prochaska 257). According to him, it is a combination of voluntary forgetfulness, denial, and blindness (257). Derderian also discusses this trend and partially blames it for the current problems underlying France's situation with immigration and its second and third generations (Derderian 248). More often than not, history is written and told by the repressors who are given the privilege of deciding their legacy. The French were on the side of the victorious during World War II and therefore can conveniently forget their collaboration and their shipment of Jews to concentration camps. The French were not by definition victorious in the Algerian War, but they

did not acknowledge the conflict as a war until 1999 (Prochaska 261). Furthermore, similar to other formerly colonizing nations, France has maintained a tie to Algeria in which one of them clearly has the upper hand. Prochaska cites historian Benjamin Stora who published *La gangrène et l'oubli* in 1991 (261). This translates to the festering wound and the forgetting, wherein which Algeria was the festering wound, unattended to and emitting the stench of brutality and cruelty (261). France's history became more comprehensive as matters of the Algerian War, which includes torture, came to light (261). Prochaska shares the details that have risen concerning controversial torture, a practice that was approved by high ranking officers of the French military (261). Given these new influxes of information, the history surrounding the war becomes more complete and complex. The rise of memories to the surface and into the history books shows promise for the therapeutic and dignified integration that Benguigui suggests (249). Time and time again, acceptance and understanding have grown from the acknowledgement of all the facets of history. There does appear to be hope for the future as long as society does not turn the blind eye as it so often has done previously.

5. Où est Papa? (Where is Dad?)

An intriguing analogy is to compare France to an adoptive-turned neglecting parent. France beckoned the immigrants into their country, gave them citizenship, and gave them a new identity. Then they placed the immigrants in corners and ignored them, only occasionally turning to deliver discipline when outbursts occurred. Now as the "child" grows bigger and bigger and starts to think more critically of its "parent," France finds itself faced with greater consequences than it

could have foreseen. George Packer's article for *The New Yorker* quotes journalist Widad Ketfi, "If you have children you don't take care of, a day will come when you tell them, 'Do this,' and they'll say, 'I don't give a damn. You're not my father'" (Packer).

A lack of parental guidance, particularly paternal guidance, is noticeable in *La Haine*. Hubert's father is not seen and his mother has at least three sons and a daughter plus another on the way (*La Haine*). Hubert himself takes on the role as the man of the family by earning money, helping his sister with homework, and generally assisting his mother (*La Haine*). When he voices his discontent to his mother about living in the *banlieue*, her response is sarcastic and dismissive (*La Haine*). Vinz's parents are also noticeably uninvolved (*La Haine*). "You my dad?" argues his sister to which he responds, "What, you my mother now?" (*La Haine*). This scene strongly suggesting that both parents are absent from the domestic scene (*La Haine*). Saïd's parents are absent as well (*La Haine*). His brother is responsible for him, but is suggested to treat him brutally (*La Haine*). Hence, it is clear that the boys receive little advice and even less compassion from those who would be expected to fill a parental role. This does reflect the relationship between the residents in the *banlieue* and French society.

Euronews investigated the situation in the *banlieue*, notably in Clichy-sous-Bois, a site of previous riots (*Euronews*). One resident of Clichy-sous-Bois compares France to a father who ignores the *banlieue* as if it was an illegitimate child (*Euronews*). He acknowledges that his culture is French, yet he does not feel French (*Euronews*). In George Packer's article, a young Muslim also acknowledges the

skewed relationship between France and its marginalized citizens (Packer). He states, "France is our mother...your mother is still your mother. And whatever happens, you'll love her your whole life. Even if she didn't cherish you" (Packer). The Muslims have come to feel unwanted and uncared for by their "mother" France (Packer). This lack of attention strongly reflects the parental situation in *La Haine*.

6. An Issue of Class, Not Race

In American "hood" films, the subjects of race and racism are often discussed, much more so than in *La Haine*. However, this is of little surprise. It takes a mere glance at American culture to recognize the prevalence of race. Firstly, it is not uncommon to be surveyed about one's ethnicity. As a result, racial statistics are everywhere and separate blacks, whites, Asians, Native Americans, Latinos, etc. into groups. In France, it is against the law to take census of citizens' race or religion (Packer). American culture also encourages ethnic pride (whether America values diversity intrinsically or instrumentally is debatable). Particularly in the age of social media, more and more Americans take to the Internet to proclaim their heritage as part of their identity. On the other hand, French citizenship connotes leaving one's ethnic heritage behind in favor of being French and only French. Thus, race is a more prominent theme in American films as it is a more prominent part of American culture. In France, the banlieues are made up of a heavily diverse community, but without the strong emphasis on ethnicity, it is far less prevalent. In *La Haine*, Hubert, Saïd, and Vinz rarely address the matter. Despite Hubert being black, Saïd being a *beur* (of North African descent), and Vinz being white and Jewish,

they find themselves in the same boat. In *La Haine*, Kassovitz indicates that it is one's socioeconomic status that matters more than one's ethnic heritage.

In the art gallery scene, the three principal characters stick out like sore thumbs among the elegantly dressed gallery visitors and attempt to flirt with two young women. One of the women is black. When the encounter turns ugly and (presumably) the gallery's owner turns the boys out of his exhibition, he dismissively refers to them as troubled youth. In France, they are sometimes referred to as *le malaise des banlieues* or the sickness of the *banlieues*. None of the visitors in the gallery are as disturbed by the young black woman's presence as they were by Vinz, Saïd, and Hubert's as she moves comfortably in the same socio-economic circles than they do and is therefore easily accepted. This scene is important because it supports the reality that socio-economic status in France is a greater determinant of one's perceived image than skin color. Vinz, Saïd, and Hubert are white, Arab, and black respectively, but in the eyes of society, they are all *le malaise des banlieues*.

IV. Conclusion

“La haine attire la haine,” states Hubert in an attempt to cool his friends’ passions. Hate breeds hate. Is France caught in a catch-22 situation where anger and discrimination are passed down from generation to generation as easily as a family heirloom? If recent events are anything to go by, then yes, France has caught itself in a bitter brutal cycle that is decades old.

In recent years, France has seen its share of terrorist attacks including the massacre at the offices of *Charlie Hebdo* and the recent murder of the policeman on the Champs-Élysées. The Islamic State has claimed responsibility. The attacks and subsequent counter-attacks in the form of new policies restraining the freedom of French Muslims, are the catalysts in this cycle of hate. The far right point fingers at *le malaise des banlieues* and in turn, the youth protest and, in the eyes of the ancient nationalist regime, prove that they are indeed little more than criminals and vandals.

The Theo affair has incited a fresh round of anger and riots including multiple acts of arson (“Frenchman Describes). Over 20 people were arrested. For Theo, it was simply a matter of being in the wrong place at the wrong time. The police were performing identity checks and attempting to single out drug dealers when Theo found himself caught in the mix (“Frenchman Describes). He was brutally assaulted by four police officers, one of which used a truncheon to rape him, resulting in a hospital stay and an emergency surgery. The lawyer of the officer who faced the charges stated that it was an accident and that the officer had meant no actual harm (“Frenchman Describes).

There are two decades between the killing of Makomé M'Bowolé and the rape of Theo. However, within the justice system, it would seem that very little to no progress has occurred. The socially alienated still live in fear of a government-sanctioned and tax-funded organization that lacks the motivation to put a stop to the humiliating actions that continue to degrade and demean citizens⁴

Overall, my study of *La Haine* and its context in French society has shown me that the similarities between the events portrayed in *La Haine* and those of today are strong indicators that social injustice still remains in France. It is a problem that goes back centuries. There are those who argue that injustice and discrimination are on their way out, citing recent major events towards tolerance and equality. However, for each step towards progress, two more steps bring it all sliding back. If this is indeed a cycle, then how do we break the wheel? That is the billion-dollar question.

⁴ Black Lives Matter is a recent movement in the United States in response to acts of violence against African Americans, particularly involving the police. Police brutality is an issue that transcends both time and borders.

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