Amis du Progrès:  
Race and Islam in Colonial Algeria and  
Contemporary France

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A great fact dominates the entire question of naturalization of Muslim indigènes: it is the Muslim fact. -- Governor General Lutaud

Even the Muslims who are not practicing have received Islam at least as a cultural heritage. The Muslim is raised with Islam and grows up with this frame of reference. -- Nicolas Sarkozy

In the last 20 years, the notion that we are finally “post-racial” has been invoked by various positions along the political spectrum. Indeed, both liberals and conservatives shy away from directly tackling questions of racial discrimination. Framing political debates in terms of race is often viewed as an unnecessary excavation of a painful past that dwells on past injustices rather than present realities. In France, this tendency has been expressed in relation to the Republican tradition of laïcité, which purports to see each citizen as an abstract individual who is viewed with no regard for color or creed.

Recently, there has been a vociferous debate over the French notion of laïcité and its relationship with the estimated five million Muslims who reside in France. The French Republic is avowedly secular even as the doctrine of laïcisme calls for the institutionalization of religion rather than an explicit separation between church and state. Religion may circulate publicly as long as it conforms to certain official channels, which are often closely linked to the state. Accordingly, Talal Asad reminds us that “laïcité is a modern form of political rule that seeks to define a particular kind of secular subject” who is able to “demonstrate his or her loyalty to the state” (Asad, “Trying to Understand French Secularism” 525).

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Many of the debates on *laïcité* and secularism consider Islam to be a major obstacle to realizing the proper role for religion in society. Islam, more than other religions, seems to pose a particular threat to secular ideologies. Oliver Roy asks: “What is specific to Islam, and what is applicable to any religion, at least the major Western monotheistic religions” (Roy 37)? The relationship between Islam and secularism is viewed as a self-referencing, theological excavation of the “Islamic tradition.” Instead of an assumed realm of the “Islamic,” which is able to speak to political issues through an internal conversation, I hope to show that questions of *laïcité* cannot be extrapolated from the assimilationist doctrine that was pursued by the French in colonial Algeria. In so doing I will argue that the elision inherent in the “post-racial” also applies to religious categories and has deeply colonial roots.

As Asad emphasizes, Muslim subjectivity is fashioned through forms of power. Religion, like race, is not a self-evident domain but rather emerges through various interpellations that allow for the “recognition of oneself as a particular kind of self” (Asad, “Trying to Understand French Secularism” 500). Here, I seek to historicize this process and show how the philosophical underpinnings of colonial assimilation and naturalization have important continuities with Sarkozy’s implementation of an “active” *laïcité*. It also attempts to place Algeria and France in a unified historical framework, following recent injunctions to “treat metropole and colony in a single analytic field” (Stoler and Cooper 4). After a brief historical overview, four underlying practices will be discussed: 1. using Islam as a privileged marker of identity 2. constructing an essential, unassimilable, “interiorness” on the basis of Islam 3. proclaiming the exceptional nature of the Muslim, and 4. enacting a pervasive double-ness whereby the Muslim is made to be publicly visible but politically ineffectual. These characteristics are found in the colonial as well as postcolonial projects, both of which foreclose the possibility of meaningful political participation through the construction of a particular kind of Muslim subject. Embedded in humanist and positivist ideals, a primary goal of the French state has been to maintain a racially pure sovereignty. This principle has functioned as a sacred injunction that must be actively protected from the threat of colonial (or postcolonial) subjects.

**Historical Overview**

Placing Algeria and France in a singular analytic frame is necessary since, as Etienne Balibar notes, “contemporary France has been formed through and by colonization” (qtd. in Silverman 34). The colonization of Algeria, which began in 1830, was never conceived as an external project separate from the dynamics and power struggles that marked mainland France. Napoleonism,
while dead in the metropole, could be applied elsewhere, so that the conquest of Algeria was, in large measure, a way to prop up the faltering prestige of the French state. According to Benjamin Stora, “the search for a brilliant victory abroad, but also the suppression of internal opposition in order to reestablish the absolute monarchy that was Charles X’s dream, were the deep-rooted causes of the confrontation” (Stora 4).

The policies pursued in Algeria were formative for France itself. The Constitution of 1848 stated that Algeria was an integral part of France and would be subject to the same laws as the metropole. Additionally, Algeria explicitly served as a laboratory for France; it was viewed as a territory in which to experiment with policies and methods of control that could potentially be used in the metropole itself. For example, the Saint Simonians were the prime espousers of enlightened positivism and also formed the core of the bureaux arabes, which acted as the main policy makers in Algeria (Ageron 41).

While there was no singular French policy in Algeria, assimilation proclaimed the governing logic of the mission civilisatrice and was born out of “belief in the power of reason and belief in the concept of universal man” (Betts 14). It posited that once assimilation had been achieved, the natives would be civilized enough to enjoy naturalization since, in the words of one colonial policy-maker, it was dangerous to “make [the Algerians] electors before making them into civilized beings” (Confer 98). Yet assimilation was an ideal that could never be reached. Following Homi Bhabha, we can see how colonialism created an “authorized version of otherness” that could never escape from its “native” status. Ultimately, the foreclosure of political rights gave rise to the Algerian nationalist movement; the évolués used the universalizing rhetoric of the French empire to demand the political rights that they had consistently been denied. Attempts at reform ended in 1962 when, after an extremely violent war, Algeria proclaimed its independence.

Algerian immigration to France began under the colonial system as individuals who had been empovrished by the colonial system left to find work in the metropole. Today it is estimated that forty three percent of the French population of Muslim origin is Algerian (Caeiro 73). In the 1990s this demographic fact, coupled with social problems associated with these immigrants, prompted an attempt to “institutionalize, monitor, and domesticate Islam” (Silverman 102). New forms of communitariansim, class issues, and global fears of radical, transnational forms of Islam (especially in light of the Algerian civil war) have led to state attempts to produce “acceptable” forms of the religion (Caeiro 71).
While it has become more difficult for immigrants to become naturalized, Sarkozy has prioritized the need to formulate an “Islam de France” (Islam of France) as opposed to an “Islam en France” (Islam in France). Explaining his attempt to create a “good Islam” he writes:

I add that, if our compatriots show themselves to be capable of inventing an Islam of France, an Islam that is integrated with European culture, that lives in harmony with a large group of people, an Islam that abandons certain practices or anachronisms while preserving its fundamental identity, this Islam will constitute a precious example for the entire Muslim world. (Sarkozy 114)

The notion that various anachronisms must be erased from Islam in order for Muslims to successfully engage with modernity is reminiscent of the colonial valorization of assimilationist policy.

In 2003, Sarkozy formed the French Council of the Muslim Faith (Conseil Français du Culte Musulman – CFCM), which was an institutional channel that would link Islam to the state. Yet the conditions of this interlocutor status were contingent on the acceptance of certain principles. Most notably, members of the council were required to sign a document “recalling the principles of laïcité” (Mas 11). Sarkozy’s project aimed to identify and purge Islam from “backwards” characteristics so that modernity could be upheld and understood. The “Islamic fact,” which was first constructed in colonial Algeria, has now become a pressing issue in France itself.

The “Shakhsiyya Islamiyya”: Islam as a Privileged Marker of Identity

James McDougall, a historian of Algeria, argues that the colonial system created a “shaksiyya islamiyya,” or “Islamic personality,” which reduced “the multiplicity of Algerian and cultural realities” into a “single sign of ‘authentic’ selfhood” (93-94). This is not to imply that Algerians did not consider themselves to be Muslims, or that their faith did not play a decisive role in their personal and collective identities. Rather, it indicates that specific practices fashioned a notion of the “Islamic” that treated it as a totalizing category of identity. In light of the fact that “there are no identities, only identifications” (Balibar, Culture and Identity 187), we can trace the ways in which France has interpellated its colonial subjects and contemporary residents as Muslim above all else. From colonial times to the present, the “practicing” Muslim has been made to circulate as a signifier for the absolute otherness of the North African.
The Algerian native was judicially defined as Muslim beginning with the *Senatus-Consulte* of 18\(^{th}\) July 1865 which excluded Algerians from French citizenship on the basis of Islamic practices. The law offered the possibility of becoming a French citizen on the condition that Islamic civil law, which governed such things as marriage, divorce, and inheritance, was renounced. Unsurprisingly, between 1865 and 1915, there were only 2,215 requests for naturalization. This act not only relegated the Algerians to a subject population who were denied a say in their own governance, it also “defined that inferiority as the product of Islam” (Brett 3). Traditional Islamic practices became the primary obstacle to citizenship, which articulated a subjectivity that could not become French because it was defined by religious beliefs.

Additionally, any opposition to colonial rule was immediately cast as fanatical Islamism. Time and time again, religion was understood as the main motivation for anti-colonial revolts (Ruedy 107). One colonial administrator predicted that, after the French had pacified the resistance, “Islam [would] be no more than a particular religious form, [and] the Qur’an the expression of a metaphysical dogma,” since the goal was to strip the religion of its “social and political character” (Christelow 131). Islam, the domain that separated the Algerians from the French, was understood to constitute the most fundamental aspect of Algerian political as well as juridical identity.

Similarly, Sarkozy casts enemies of the French state as fanatical while making the practice of Islam a major concern. For Sarzoky, “a clandestine Islam that seeks to undermine our principles of government and fundamental values” poses a grave threat (Sarkozy 65). And yet, the CFCM structurally and ideologically privileges those Muslims who regularly attend mosque and consider themselves to be practicing. Despite the fact that only a fraction of Algerians attend prayers, the electoral system for the CFCM is based on the surface area of mosques, which also results in an overrepresentation of the suburban population. As the prime interlocutor between the state and the Muslim community, the CFCM is thus explicitly limited to “believing” Muslims.

Sarkozy claims that the CFCM “concerns the Muslim faith [*le culte musulman*] and not Muslim culture [*la culture musulmane*]…and [is] even less the representation of the French Muslim community [*la communauté musulmane*]” (Fernando 8). Thus, in defining a community in terms of its theological beliefs and assigning interlocutors on this basis, it is not surprising that “Muslim” has largely replaced “Arab,” “Maghrebi,” or “immigrant” as the name given to North Africans in France. That the CFCM is “at odds with the
plurality of Islamic networks and the fluidity of Muslim religiosities in France” is only a part of the equation (Fernando 8). Another consequence of propagating Islam as a singular subjectivity is the category of “practicing Muslim” that overwrites the more complex layers of identification that might otherwise emerge.

**Islam as Interiority**

Étienne Balibar writes that there was an “equivocal interiority-exteriority” configuration “which had, since the period of colonial conquest, formed one of the structuring dimensions of racism” (*Race and Nationalism* 43). Not only is Islam made to be the primary marker of identity, it is also constructed as an interior realm that is considered to be more essential than the culture or community in which it circulates. The primary goal of the mission civilisatrice was not to reform the outward behavior of the natives, but to alter the more fundamental structures of religion and psychology. The moral conquest sought to adapt colonial laws to the inner domain of the Algerian subjects; the law was to be a remedy for the inner recesses of the Muslim, which were inherently resistant to the civilizing influences of French culture.

For example, the *Code de l’indigénat* (1881), which was the foundation for a discriminatory justice system, listed offenses that were punishable only for Muslims. This included “such offenses as not moving when called upon to fight a forest fire or a plague of grasshoppers, attending unauthorized meetings, delay in the payment of taxes, and acts against reforestation” (Confer 61). It too was predicated on a certain understanding of the psychology of the Algerians (Confer 24). Interestingly, the penalties for various infractions were relatively light, which draws attention to the productive rather than restrictive intent of the law. The demarcation of Muslims through legal channels exemplifies the “tension between the mandatory conformity to a colonial future and the impossibility of attaining a non-marked status” which “insinuated itself…into the psyches of the colonized” (Schaeffer 139).

We see this partitioning of the Muslim subject in Sarkozy’s statement, quoted earlier, where he posits a distinction between the Muslim faith and the Muslim culture or Muslim community. Talal Asad also underscores this relationship between internal and external signs. He claims that the Stasi commission, which was responsible for making a decision on the controversy surrounding the headscarf [*foulard*], “was a device to constitute meanings by drawing on internal (or psychological) or external (social) signs, and it allowed certain desires and sentiments to be encouraged at the expense of
others” (Asad, “Trying to Understand French Secularism” 504). This attempt to discover the real desires of Muslims, which concern their religious beliefs, is enabled through the construction an inner metaphysical domain deemed singularly Islamic.

One of the prime functions of the CFCM is the training of imams, who are to be thoroughly steeped in French language and history in order to sever their linguistic and cultural ties to their country of origin. Sarkozy has framed this project in terms of combating the “Islam of the cellars and garages that has fed extremism” (Fogarty 191). Assimilating the imams is expected to cultivate an Islam that is open, tolerant, and most importantly, French. Yet we can also read a belief that these underground, hidden loci of Islam will never be completely defeated. The murky interiority of the Islamic can never be fully purified. It is through the French speaking imam that the Arabic speaker becomes marked as fundamentalist; the emergence of a cadre of safe Muslims allows for the others to be seen as dangerous.

Islam Under a “Régime d’exception”

As the interior life of the Muslim is a domain that harbors the resentment of religious conviction which can never fully be brought to light, Islam is also articulated as fundamentally different from other monotheisms. The Muslim is seen as an exceptional figure who must be dealt with through a logic of difference. For example, Asad notes that “other faiths may interpret scriptures how they please, but Muslims are forced to be guided by the Qur’an” (Formations 11). Not only is the Muslim interior defined by its hidden desires and fanatical will, it is also viewed as ontologically different from that of other religiosities or minority groups.

Numerous colonial laws refused to apply supposedly universal or rational principles to the Muslim population. Despite the French rhetoric regarding the fundamental equality of humanity, it was never implemented in regards to its colonial subjects. In legal terms, this was viewed as a régime d’exception (Dunwoodie 68). The Code de l’indigénat, which was mentioned earlier, is only one example. The Crémieux decree of 24th October 1870 granted most Algerian born Jews full citizenship, something that continued to be denied to the Muslim population. Haddour writes, “the clause stipulating that the Muslims, unlike the Jews, had to renounce their religious laws to obtain legal citizenship must be interpreted as a stratagem working in effect to prevent their naturalization which was viewed as a political threat to colonization and its political economy” (5). Moreover, 1889 witnessed the automatic naturalization law for Europeans who were living in Algeria. Algerians were
not offered citizenship until 1919, and even then, numerous stipulations meant that most remained ineligible.

Colonial officials claimed that legal norms suitable for the metropole were unfit for application among the Muslims in the colony. The law of 1905, for example, is often hailed as the beginning of modern secularism in France, because it separated church from state. Despite the universalizing rhetoric of the Enlightenment, this law was never applied in Algeria, where the French kept a salaried clergy that was paid by the state (Ageron 71). The Kantian notion of moral laïque, which claimed humanity had “outgrown” theological stages, was not suitable for Algeria (Stock-Morton 92-3). Jules Ferry was a champion of secular and universal education in France, but the application of the Ferry laws in Algeria (1881-1882) went “hand in hand with the disappearance of the Franco-Arabic schools and with the institution of a system that distinguished European schools – where syllabuses took no account of Arabic – from indigenous schools” (Messaoudi 304-5).

Algerians, not fully eligible for naturalization, enlightened education, or religious autonomy, under colonialism, encounter similar dynamics in contemporary France. For example, institutions that represent other religious groups (such as the Catholic Council of Bishops or the Jewish Central Consistory and Great Rabbinate), are not handpicked by the state but governed by the traditional channels of hierarchy within their religion. The Muslim interlocutors, on the other hand, are often co-opted by the state (Fernando 7). Alexandre Caiero remarks that the members of the CFCM stand “in contrast to the state’s privileged interlocutors of the other main religions, which represent more homogenous constituencies” (80).

It is not only religious interlocutors who are subject to a different logic. The rights enjoyed by French nationals, European immigrants, and the North African population also expose the exceptional status of the Algerian subject. Tony Jugé notes that “this current nationality code resembles very much the 1870 décret Crémieux…which…made native Algerians inferior by giving Jews French citizenship despite the fact that Algerian Muslims outnumbered any other groups in Algeria at this time” (Jugé 22). Over the last fifty years, policy changes have welcomed immigrants from Europe, thanks in part to agreements with the European Union. Immigrants from North Africa, however, who have a historical link with France, have gone “from being a relative foreigner to being an absolute foreigner, causing economic problems for France” (Jugé 14). As Islam is held up as the most important foreigner signified, read from a myriad of signs such as “immigrant” or “Arabic speaker,” and conceptualized as a resistant
interiority, it is also held to be categorically exceptional in relation to other monotheisms and minorities.

**Compulsory Visibility and Political Inefficacy**

Muslim subjectivity is asked to partake in certain kind of “performativity” that “draws on and covers over the constitutive conventions by which it is mobilized” (Butler 227). Thus, the Muslim must be publicly visible (in order to be identified) but politically ineffective (in order to be managed, or marginalized). Even as Muslims must be discernable, identifiable, and defininable, at the same time their political will must be erased. In this process, it is unavoidable that “cadis would be converted into bureaucrats,” as culture and identity are instrumentalized and systematically deprived of any efficacy (Brett 5). This does not mean that attempts at control are ever completely successful – there are always traces of protest and strategies of negotiations on both sides. Rather, looking at this process underscores the continuity in how colonial and post-colonial regimes have approached the creation of a Muslim subjectivity.

One component of this compulsory public visibility is the creation of representative bodies that have remarkably limited functions. This began as early as the 1854 *Conseil de jurisprudence Musulmane*, which was later replaced by the *Conseil Supérieur de droit Musulman*. According to Allan Christelow, this organization aimed at reforming Islam from within. It had the added function of “moralizing” law and opposed certain ideas found in customary law. Moreover, he notes that:

> The conseillers were to be chosen from among those muftis, qadis, and ‘ulama ‘most distinguished for their science,’ or, in the jargon of the day, ‘amis du progrès’….The reason for election from these categories is fairly simple: …[they] were well salaried. In being chosen for salaried posts, they had already been carefully screened…and salaries of course created a material bond between the fonctionnaire and the government. (111-112)

Paul Bourde, a French colonial policy-maker, thought the notion of a High Council would ensure a “serious and sufficient” link between Muslims and the French, and serve to facilitate certain reforms (Confer 56). One can imagine that when Charles Jonnart proposed the formation of a cadre of Algerians to represent the natives in Paris, he too was interested in forming an élite that would speak on matters for which Islam gave an unsatisfactory response.
The Jonnart law, passed on 4th February 1919, became the cornerstone of the colonial law regarding citizenship for 25 years. The act institutionalized the dichotomy between visibility and efficacy that marked the debates surrounding naturalization. It enfranchised an increased number of Muslims, but under more austere guidelines, and on the condition that they were grouped in a second college. Although the law claimed to be in the spirit of enfranchisement, in actuality the requirements became much stricter than they had been previously.

Richard Fogarty describes some of these regulations; an applicant would have “to be aged twenty-five or older, to be monogamous or single, to have no convictions for serious crimes, and to have two years of fixed residence” (186). The sum result of this bureaucratic complexity was evidenced in the statistics regarding the number of applications: between 1919 and 1923 there were only 317 requests for citizenship, 115 of which were denied (188). Jonnart himself described this as an “intermediary status” since the Muslims were not yet integrated into French political system. Instead, a cadre of “Moslem politicians and candidates” came into being as the act “created a vast number of Muslim voters and at the same time made sure that they would be impotent” (Confer 119).

The Jonnart law and the colonial councils did not necessarily follow the motto that Algerians should be seen and not heard. Instead, the Algerians would only be heard if they were speaking in French and could only be seen if their demands were sufficiently civilized. The CFCM follows this tradition. It is responsible for the public functions of Islam in French society, and the council has been asked to speak on such issues as the Israel-Palestine conflict, Islamic terrorism, inner city violence, and the wearing of the foulard (Fernando 8). Dalil Boubakeur, perhaps the most visible figure of the CMCF, has been active in the Fraternity of Abraham. He has also participated in the celebrations of the 50th anniversary of the founding of Israel (Schaffer 67).

The CMCF is only concerned with the Muslims who regularly attend mosque, even while they constitute a minority of the Muslims residing in France. Only those who identify as practicing are interpellated into the public sphere. Even then, Muslims are recognized within the confines of the French language and in response to certain questions. The Algerian population is forced to occupy – as Muslims – a place in the public life of the state. This ensures that they can be identified and their claims mediated, not unlike the colonial stipulation that a Muslim representative body “must not only allow the Moslems to be heard but also must permit France to express her will as to their legitimate claims” (Confer 108).
Meanwhile, in France the nationality code has gotten increasingly strict and the economic position of North African immigrants has become even more precarious. In 1993, new legislation restricted the rights of *jus soli*, and citizenship for individuals born in France to foreign parents became more difficult. This discrepancy, whereby the North African population finds a harsher socio-economic reality while some individuals achieve public visibility as official spokesmen for Islam, has led Boubekeur Amel to claim that the CFCM “is less about the problem of *laïcité* than that of autonomization [*autonomisation*]” (Amel 7). By defining the scope of permissible demands, the French state is able to reveal an Islam that is not of the caves and garages, and which competes for public recognition rather than a more equitable social order.

**Subjectivity in the Service of Race: Protecting the Racial Sovereignty of the French State**

These philosophical underpinnings, shared by the colonial and contemporary periods, are not merely a question of enduring colonial stereotypes or epistemologies. The ontological nature of the Muslim subject was created in order to protect the racialized sovereignty of the state, which operates as a theological injunction. It overrides the link between military service and citizenship and trumps abstract principles such as the equality of man or the notion of assimilation.

The French revolution, along with the Enlightenment, laid the conceptual framework for a discussion of foreigners, race and nationality. Merging notions of citizenship and military service (Fogarty 173), the events of 1789 also depicted the foreigner as a seditious figure who was responsible for “plotting against the nation” (Jugé 24). The Enlightenment is often portrayed as a historical moment in which universalism triumphed over difference, but recent scholarship has shown how it enabled the post-revolutionary period to operate on the basis of racially defined hierarchies (Jugé 6). Ultimately, these racial anxieties proved more fundamental to the political life of the nation than the value of military service, something that became especially clear after World War I.

Despite the fact that 172,000 Algerians fought for France, and a third of all indigenous troops and two-thirds of North Africans, they were offered no serious opportunity to become naturalized (Fogarty 178). The adoption of French culture and compulsory military service were not sufficient evidence that colonial subjects were ready to become French citizens. Étienne Flandin argued for a policy of association since it was more prudent to allow “the
indigène to evolve not in our civilization, but in his own” (qtd. in Fogarty 177). Yet underneath this civilizational ideology lurked the threat of political power. The question was not merely that of evolution, but more profoundly one of shared sovereignty. Violette, co-author of the much famed Blum-Violette plan was perhaps more frank than Flandin when he argued that “one would like in the colonies…the fewest possible French citizens” since “with subjects the administration can deal with them on its own terms” but “with citizens that would become more delicate” (qtd. in Fogarty 183-4).

Ultimately, the logic of racial difference trumped that of conscription and naturalization. The racialized sovereignty of the French nation was regarded as a sacred goal to which other principles had to be sacrificed, even while assimilation and secularism preached a universal reason. Secularism, the forbearer of laïcité, emerged with the notion of moral laïque in the Third Republic and claimed that morality could be taught without reference to Christian dogma. This ideology cannot be divorced from notions of civilization, and therefore, race. As one French educator noted: “thanks be to God, morality in our French society, after so many centuries of civilization, has no need to be defined” (Stock-Morton 100).

Reason and progress were inextricably linked. As David Theo Goldberg reminds us,

the spirit of modernity is to be found most centrally in its commitment to continuous progress: to material, moral, physical and political improvement and to the promotion and development of civilization, the general standards for which the West took to be its own values universalized. (156)

The matrix of modernity, secularism and race were closely related and converged in fashioning of colonial subjects through the civilizing mission.

Civilization was something that the French would bring to the backward regions that they colonized, and it also served as a pretext for the exceptionalism of their policies towards the natives. Therefore, the universal discourses of assimilation and laïcité are not unrelated to the racist policies inscribed within them. Azzedine Haddour writes:

The nation must lose its particularities to become universal: and ideal entity. As [Balibar] notes, universalism cannot effectively oppose racism, because these two categories overlap and occupy the same ideological site. Language functions within this site to cement the symbolic universe of the nation as an ideal entity. (156)
Racially-based French policies (in assigning housing, for example) are not contradictory to the imagined purity of the French nation. Rather, these practices identify foreign elements in order to ensure against possible miscegenation. The Muslim has been instrumentalized as a marker that preserves the integrity, both actualized and imagined, of France. By historicizing the institutions that enforced assimilation and laïcité, the “disciplining of Muslims and Islam” becomes a key site for the highly racialized character of the French state (Mas 592).
Works Cited


