SPITTING FIRE EN FRANÇAIS:
THE RACIALIZATION OF FRENCH HIP-HOP ARTISTS IN THE MEDIA AND
THEIR RESPONSES AFTER THE CHARLIE HEBDO ATTACK

By Adam K. Schoenbachler

A thesis presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the completion
Of the Bachelor of Arts degree in International Studies
Croft Institute for International Studies
Sally McDonnell Barksdale Honors College
The University of Mississippi

University, Mississippi
May 2017

Approved:

______________________________
Advisor: Dr. Amy McDowell

______________________________
Reader: Dr. William Schenck

______________________________
Reader: Dr. Mary Thurlkill
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would first like to thank the Croft Institute for International Studies and the Sally McDonnell Barksdale Honors College for guiding my academic development over the past four years. I could not imagine writing a thesis without the resources and aid these institutions have provided me.

I am incredibly grateful to my mentor Dr. Amy McDowell for introducing me to the process of writing and thinking like a sociologist. Without the vast amounts of time and support she provided, I would have been lost in this endeavor. I would like to thank my second and third readers, Dr. William Schenck and Dr. Mary Thurlkill, for their excellent insight, comments, and aid through this process. Without the help of my fantastic committee, this thesis would not have been possible.

I am thankful for my mother Dana Schoenbachler for her emotional support and to my father Matthew Schoenbachler for his help with revision and his excellent capacity as sounding board for ideas. Finally, I would like to thank my siblings Sarah and Ben Schoenbachler, my girlfriend Rachel Anderson, and my exceptional group of friends who always challenge me to work harder, sustain me through difficult times, and inspire me through their accomplishments.
ABSTRACT

ADAM KAELIN SCHOENBACHLER: Spiting Fire en Français: The Racialization of French Hip-Hop Artists in the Media and their Responses after the Charlie Hebdo Attack (Under the direction of Amy McDowell)

This paper explores the racialization of French Muslim hip-hop community in the context of the Charlie Hebdo massacre, and the extent to which French rap artists were limited in their ability to criticize the French government and secularist France in the months following the massacre. This was accomplished by performing content analyses of the remarks of popular French Muslim rap artists on the Charlie Hebdo Massacre and articles from popular, accessible online French news publications covering the remarks of both French Muslim and non-Muslim rap artists. After a careful analysis of the rappers’ remarks and the media coverage of those remarks, I determined that there was in fact an active racialization of Muslim members of the hip-hop community in the media, and that the rap artists in question felt constrained in their freedom of expression and their ability to criticize popular French culture following the massacre.

NOTE ON TRANSLATION

All translations in French were conducted by the author unless otherwise noted. Translations are denoted by brackets just after the original French.
TABLE OF CONTENTS

- Abstract ........................................................................................................... iv
- Note on Translation .......................................................................................... iv
- Table of Contents ............................................................................................. v
- Introduction ....................................................................................................... 1
  - Research Question ............................................................................................ 3
  - Pre-research Observations ............................................................................... 4
  - Racialization and Islamophobia ...................................................................... 5
  - Media Coverage of Muslims ........................................................................... 7
  - Music as a Source of Solidarity in the Face of Anti-Muslim Racism ............. 9
  - Methods ........................................................................................................... 11
- Hip-hop and Secularism ..................................................................................... 15
  - Islam Versus Laïcité in France ....................................................................... 15
  - Rap Music in France ....................................................................................... 17
- Findings and Analysis ......................................................................................... 22
  - Hip-hop’s relationship with Charlie Hebdo before the attack ....................... 28
  - Reframing condolences and refuting anger ................................................... 33
  - Focus on rappers’ religious affiliations ............................................................ 34
  - Shaming rappers .............................................................................................. 36
  - Fear of retaliation, conflations, and “la polmique” ......................................... 38
  - Freedom of expression ..................................................................................... 41
- Conclusion ......................................................................................................... 43
- References .......................................................................................................... 46
  - English-Language Sources ............................................................................. 46
  - French-Language Sources .............................................................................. 49
  - Articles Analyzed ............................................................................................. 50
INTRODUCTION

"The values of the French Republic — freedom, equality, and fraternity — those are also values that you can find in Islam. The problem isn't values. The problem is communication."

- Abd al Malik

To many here in the United States, the phrase “Islam in France” conjures images of terrorist attacks and cultural conflict. Some French political figures, notably secularist political figures, have even claimed French Muslims as an example of some irreconcilable clash of civilizations. However, the issue is more complex than that, and it requires the words and actions of those with a public voice to combat this gross oversimplification. French rappers have used their voices to open that dialogue, pushing the boundaries of their freedom of expression and working to claim a space in France for the Muslim community. The quotation above by French rapper Abd al Malik, a Sufi Muslim and human rights activist, speaks to my research agenda, addressing the “problem” concerning French Muslims. The problem surrounding French Muslims has far more to do with false perceptions, misunderstandings, and poor representations of Muslim culture. Furthermore, both the French rap community and French secularists are avid supporters of their independent freedom of expression, but that message is lost in the heat of passionate controversy. In essence, the problem is communication. Rap music is hugely popular in France, which is the number two creator and consumer of rap music in the world (Aidi 2015). However, despite its roots as a means of expression for black and
brown, Muslim and immigrant communities, rap music is consumed by both white French people and French Muslims.

“Je réclame un autodafé contre ces chiens de Charlie Hebdo [I demand a bonfire for those Charlie Hebdo dogs]!” raps Nekfeu, an up and coming white Parisian rap artist. His lyrics were part of a posse cut—a rap song with more than four contributors—written for the critically acclaimed 2013 film *Le Marche*, a documentary on the Beur’s March on Paris. While controversial, his words echo the growing agitation of the French rap community who, like Nekfeu, recognize a pervasive anti-Muslim sentiment in French society led most publicly by media sources like Charlie Hebdo (Gemie 2010; Scott 2007).

Months later Akhenaton, another rapper from the *Le Marche* posse cut, shouts “La France est Islamophobe [France is an islamophobe]!” on his November 2014 album, *Je suis en vie*, which went on to win Rap Album of the Year at France’s national music awards ceremony (*Le figaro* 2015).

In January 2015, French Muslim rapper Médine released his single, *Don’t Laïk*, on which he lambasts the French government and French society at large for its secularist, islamophobic rhetoric. He refers to both the French government and the secular French as one singular group: “les laicards,” a term that is widely used by those in the Muslim hip-hop community and others opposing secularist France as a slur to negatively describe secularists in France. It is a combination of the words Laïque, roughly translating to “secularism,” and connard, a rough obscenity that translates to “mother fucker.” On the track, he calls for listeners to “crucifions les laicards [crucify the secularists]” and “met un fatwa sur les cons [make a hit on the idiots.]” About a week after the release of Médine’s protest song, two men forced their way into the Charlie
Hebdo offices where fifteen writers, caricaturists, and editors are having a weekly editorial meeting. Over the course of fifteen minutes, the two men killed twelve, including the director of publication. As they departed the building, they allegedly shouted, “We have avenged the Prophet Muhammad. Allahu Akbar!” (BBC 2015). Al Qaeda’s branch in Yemen claims responsibility within the week (Tourancheau 2015).

This thesis investigates how the Charlie Hebdo attack influenced media portrayals of the rap community and explores how members of the French hip-hop community have engaged in a dialogue with the media. By exploring this complex exchange between the French hip-hop community and the media, this research sheds light on the greater issues of Islamophobia and inequality in France.

Research Question

My research focuses on three main questions: How has the media portrayed French rap artists and the larger hip-hop community in the aftermath of the 2015 Charlie Hebdo attack? In what ways have rap artists responded to this media? And finally, to what extent did media reactions and public sentiment after the Charlie Hebdo attack stifle the rappers’ ability to freely express the viewpoints and concerns of French Muslims?

The goal of these questions is to better understand how Islamophobia shapes media perceptions and the responses of the hip-hop community in France as a part of a national response to the Charlie Hebdo attack.
Pre-research observations

In July 2015, I spent a month living in Angers, France, studying French at L’Université Catholique de l’Ouest. One weekend that month, I took a trip to nearby Paris to sightsee. I arrived in Paris early on a Friday and, with a French friend I had made in my hostel, went for a walk along the Seine river. Along the river in front of l’Hôtel de Ville, a large municipal building in the heart of the city, a free, rather large music festival was taking place. We stopped at the edge of the crowd just in time to see Nekfeu (the same white French hip-hop artist who called to “burn the Charlie Hebdo dogs” in 2013) come on stage. As he began to rap, my friend yelled over the din of the crowd and the loud speakers, “he’s pretty good for a pale guy, no?” His comment left me thinking about stereotypes about rap communities, stereotypes that transcend national borders. Also, I began to see that there exists a certain expectation that rap music is something innately black or brown, and that white people are not expected to excel in making rap music (Forman 2000; Gladney 1995). Those that do excel are considered exceptional, such as Eminem in the United States or Nekfeu in France. I realized that Nekfeu, as a white Frenchman in a historically black and brown culture, does not fit the script of a rapper in France. He is a white man acknowledged for his skill as a rap artist. He can walk in both the world of white France and black and brown France, privileged and even made exceptional by his race. His race is, in part, what makes him special and famous, further extending his white privilege.

On January 7th, 2016—the one-year anniversary of the Charlie Hebdo attack—I stepped off the RER B metro line in Paris with my large suitcase and backpack. Travelling through the capital, I could see that Paris was in mourning. As a United States
citizen, I grew up in the shadow of the 9/11 terrorist attacks, and I sympathized with the pain felt by the French. As a budding francophone, I had even changed my profile picture on Facebook to a “Je suis Charlie” banner in solidarity with the French publication. A month later, after settling into my apartment and making friends with some local conservatory students, I attended a party where I was one of only two foreigners in attendance. Walking in, I could hear angry shouting. “Fuck Charlie Hebdo! Fascistes!” rang the voice of an inebriated Frenchman from a smoke-filled room in the back of the apartment. I was taken aback, but later a friend of mine informed me that Charlie Hebdo was a far more contentious subject than many of us in the United States understood. Charlie Hebdo, a weekly publication known for its political caricatures, is a source of controversy because of its depictions of the prophet Mohammad and its generally insensitive characterization of religious and ethnic minorities (Taibi 2015). Throughout the semester, I learned increasingly more about the local hip-hop community and gained a different, more critical perspective on Charlie Hebdo.

When I returned to Mississippi for my final year of instruction, I knew that I wanted to investigate the intersection of religion, hip-hop, and French culture. The opportunity of a senior thesis through the Croft Institute gave me the chance to make that investigation.

Racialization and Islamophobia

Racialization describes the means by which certain groups are formed and divided from larger society through the identification of particular physical or cultural identifiers. Farhad Dalal explains that it is a process by which people are “raced” in a societal
construction, not as the recognition of an innate quality inherent in the DNA of an individual (2002:11). Racialization, it is important to note, is based upon a given society’s interpretation of an individual’s physical and cultural characteristics, and likewise is affected by the visibility of those cultural and physical characteristics (Dalal 2002:12). Omi and Wynant define racialization as “the extension of racial meaning to a previously racially unclassified relationship, social practice, or group” (1986:14).

However, as Garner and Selod (2015) illustrate, this definition is inadequate as it implies that racialization occurs only among predetermined groups. They forward that racialization can be applied to preexisting groups because it does not construct identities. Rather, they state that racialization reconstructs the popular perception of a marginalized group (Garner and Selod 2012). By opening the definition in this way, we may acknowledge the racialization of religious minorities like Jews, Sikhs, and Muslims.

The term racialization and the overarching idea of racism is rarely applied strictly to religious groups. However, religious groups face a constant racialized form of discrimination. For example, during the second World War, the German Nazi party capitalized on rampant European anti-Semitism, a form of racialization in which Jews were falsely attributed different and inferior physical and cultural characteristics than white Christian Europeans (Blumenfeld 2012). As is well documented, the consequences of Jewish racialization were horrendous. Accordingly, Garner and Selod argue that it is very possible to “race a religion” and to speak about racism in terms of Islamophobia (2015). In the past, other minority groups have been racialized based upon their religious background. The collective gaze of the dominant culture constitutes the power behind the
racialization of minority groups. In the case of Muslims, Islamophobia is the glimpse of the results of the process of racialization (Garner and Selod 2015).

Joan Wallach Scott (2007) suggests that islamophobic sentiment in France—as well as many other European countries—reveals itself through constructing and identifying “problematic” elements of Islam such as “radical Islamist” sentiment, “communitarian” tendencies, or “anti-secular” identity. By constructing these problems, islamophobic detractors blur the line between race and religion and contrast their white, Catholic culture against black and brown Muslim culture (Garner and Selod 2015). As well, in a certain light, religion implies a willfully-chosen set of cultural and ethical values that can be criticized. However, by reconstructing an identity for French Muslims, Scott (2015) forwards that the French society extends dehumanizing yet clearly Western-fabricated and racist characteristics to Muslims. They defend their position as a reaction to willfully-chosen religion, as opposed to race, which is not willfully chosen. Therefore, according to Scott, detractors of Islam in France are engaging in a pseudo-racist discourse that is simultaneously safe for detractors and harmful to the French Muslim community.

Media Coverage of Muslims

Racist and racially charged attitudes about Muslims by non-muslims, especially in the wake of terrorist attacks, are shaped by news media interpretations and portrayals of Muslims. According to Media Tenor, a research organization dedicated to studying public perception of the media, the day after the Charlie Hebdo attacks, “global media tonality when talking about Muslims and Islam dropped to an unprecedented -80% surplus of negative news” (Media Tenor 2015). As well, they reported that in the months
after January (contrary to expection, negative reporting about Muslims went down overall in January), “openness for the dialogue between cultures has suffered from the increasingly hostile reporting about migrants. Refugees are regularly framed as a threat and burden and only very infrequently as a boon to the host societies” (Media Tenor 2015). After the November 2015 Paris shootings, Media Tenor released this statement about their findings in 2015 in relation to the Charlie Hebdo attacks:

“Voices that refuse to equate Islam and violence are taken up more and more rarely in the media,” explains Dr. Christian Kolmer, director of policy analysis at Media Tenor. “While overall criticism of Islam and Muslims decreased slightly in January 2015 after the terrorist attack on Charlie Hebdo, there was no similar reaction after the Parisian terrorist attacks of November.” In more than two thirds of all reports about Muslim actors and organizations terrorism and violence are the main aspects. “The media strategy of Islamic State with its shocking acts of violence has so far been successful, leading to increasing anti-Muslim sentiment all over the world – which in turn drives support for IS among alienated and intimidated Muslims.” (2016)

As well, Ahmed and Matthes conducted a meta-analysis of 345 published studies to analyze media representation of Muslims from 2000 to 2015. Through their research, they determined that Muslims tend to be framed negatively, and Islam is portrayed as a violent religion (2016). They also concluded that there was “an evident lack of comparative research, a neglect of visuals, and a dearth of research on online media”
Their findings indicate that other research on the portrayals of Muslims in popular media lacks comparative studies, restricts analysis mostly to spoken and written publication, and neglects online media as a platform of analysis. For example, many of the studies they reviewed tended to be analyses of physical print medias and the textual excerpts of media broadcasts.

*Music as a Source of Solidarity in the Face of Anti-Muslim Racism*

Music communities can often become a source of solidarity for minority groups. In *Hip-hop Desis: South Asian Americans, Blackness, and a Global Race Consciousness*, Nitasha Tamar Sharma illustrates the manner in which racial and ethnic minorities in a community will use hip-hop music to capitalize on the minority-specific qualities given to them by their communities. Specifically, she shows how hip-hop artists use their “immigrant sensibilities, a sense of otherness, an articulation of racial pride, and a counter-hegemonic discourse” to formulate a formidable political front for their minority status (2010). She focuses on individual artists of South Asian descent. These artists, called desis, subscribe to a black global race consciousness, utilizing their independent music styles to connect with blackness and distance themselves from whiteness. The black global race consciousness entails the construction of a global identity, shared by ethnic and racial groups deemed as deviant by colonial and imperial white interests. When faced with the unfair, disparaging condition of being labeled as a deviant race, some minority youth reclaim a black identity as an antithetical identity to the white labels.
There exists a global Muslim music culture in which young, disaffected Muslims construct identity and race consciousness through defiant music scenes. Hishaam Aidi explores this theme and others in his book *Rebel Music: Race, Empire, and the New Muslim Youth Culture* (2014). He explains the connection between Muslim youth, political activism, and music, explaining how black music styles such as jazz, hip-hop, and reggae have become tools for building community and organizing political protest among Muslim youth. Furthermore, Aidi explores how the conversation about European Muslims has shifted from a dialogue about race to a dialogue about religion. This dialogue paints European Muslims as barbaric Islamists in a clean, secular Europe, yet in reality this is a thinly-veiled mode for white Europeans to racialize the Muslim minorities (2014). In response, Muslim music communities band together to express their solidarity and discontent through music. From jazz to hip-hop and trance music, these Muslim music communities utilize a variety of styles to represent their unity.

Research also suggests that a body of panethnic, American youth have utilized Taqwacore punk rock—a specifically Muslim genre of hardcore punk music—as a means of finding solidarity and resisting anti-Muslim racism (McDowell 2016). Specifically, Taqwacore punks use their music to underscore their identity as “brown kids” and to keep whiteness—which they see as a problem—out of their punk music. To Taqwacore punks, whiteness—and by extension, white punk—stands for “racially dominant groups and ideas as well as Western imperialism, Christian supremacy, and everyday practices of racial and religious exclusion” (McDowell 2016:5).
Methods

The bulk of my research relies upon online news media portrayals of French rappers and the hip-hop community before and after the Charlie Hebdo attack. I chose to center my analysis on conscious rap artists and rappers that may not identify as conscious rappers, but draw on elements of conscious rap in their work. Conscious rap is politically charged rap in France that often critiques the French state. It functions as a more direct voice for immigrant voices, and defends their interests, but as a result of this, most all of the conscious rappers are underground and relatively unpopular. The bulk of my analysis concerns the most famous artists, who are not necessarily considered solely conscious rappers but received an abundance of press coverage for their activism (which would be considered an element of conscious rap).

The Charlie Hebdo attack represents a particularly useful point in time for analysis because of the particularly controversial position the publication held and its rocky rapport with rap artists before the attack. Furthermore, studies show that the public perception of and discourse about Muslims after terrorist attacks carried out by Muslims is particularly negative (Media Tenor 2015). I consulted news articles, dating from January 7, 2016 until June 7, 2016, that covered the remarks of various French rappers for the victims, families, and communities affected by the Charlie Hebdo shootings. These reports came from news sources from all across the range of political spectrum, but more importantly, they were news sources easily accessible to any French person, representing the most commonly read online sources of daily and weekly news.

Referencing the CIA Open Source Center’s guide to French Media, I was able to determine the political skew of my sources and to obtain a reference for the most read
publications of the day (Open Source Center 2008). This allowed me to analyze a wide range of political skews and to get a feeling for the exposure a typical French person would have to news medias, representing as many viewpoints as this medium of research allows. Specifically, the sources were Le Figaro, Le Parisien, Le Monde, Mouv’, L’Obs Magazine, Le Point, Gala Magazine, 20 Minutes, La Dépêche, Libération, Téléstar, and Ouest France (N=12).

To understand the media’s portrayal of Muslim hip-hop artists, I started by searching each of my 12 publications for specific phrases and words like “Charlie Hebdo” and rappeur”. From this initial search, I collected 20 articles for analysis. In addition to these, I obtained social media publications, videos, and transcripts of the rap artists’ remarks after the Charlie Hebdo attacks. These sources of the rappers’ remarks against news reports. This allowed me to see how reporters selectively reported on the actual words of the rappers. Conversely, I used sources of rappers’ remarks in the six-month timeframe after the Charlie Hebdo attack—taken from news articles, videos, and social media posts by rappers—also allows me to examined how Muslim hip-hop artists respond to the media’s coverage of the hip-hop community. To accomplish this, I examined the content of these rappers’ remarks for repeated words, phrases, and ideas that perhaps constitute an organized front among the responses of French rappers.

As my search progressed, I began to find links and references to hip-hop news sites, which I found to have the most empathetic and accurate reporting of the rap community. In their compassionate viewpoints, these sources became a foil for racially biased publications. The hip-hop news sites were less likely to take the remarks of rappers out of context than other mainstream publications. I felt it imperative to include
them in my analysis because, as writers for niche publications, the authors of these articles are more intimately associated with the hip-hop community and therefore offered a grassroots, insider view of what it is like to be part of hip-hop after the Charlie Hebdo attacks.

Originally, I had intended to look for news publications one month from the Charlie Hebdo attacks, but instead I chose to look for sources six months out from the Charlie Hebdo attacks because as some rappers released albums over the following months, they would also release comments about the Charlie Hebdo massacres and react to media portrayals of Muslim communities and rap communities. For example, when French rapper Booba released his album D.U.C. on April 13, 2015, over four months after the Charlie Hebdo attack, he made the comment, “quand on joue avec le feu, on se brûle” [when you play with fire, you get burned.] As well, I used the direct transcriptions of post-Charlie Hebdo statements of six famous French rappers: Disiz, Nekfeu, Medine, Diam’s, Booba, and Kery James. Disiz’s comments were taken from his Facebook post. Nekfeu’s comments were pulled from a report by Ici.fr. Medine’s comments were pulled from his Facebook page and direct reports from Lefigaro.com. Diam’s remarks were taken directly from her Facebook page. Booba’s remarks were taken from his Twitter account, and a combination of 13dorduhiphop.com and Leparisien.com’s direct reports. Kery James’s comments were taken from a direct report from Negronews.fr.

Coding of the data proceeded in two phases: open and closed coding. To create open codes, I closely read news reports and direct sources of rappers’ apologies, highlighting and formulating all present concepts and themes and those suggested by the material, regardless of their evidence for or against my research (Emerson, Fretz, and
Shaw 1995). Next, I formed closed codes by connecting the ideas present in the open
codes, creating broader, overarching themes and discussing them. In this way, I analyzed
the data in two parts: one about the manner in which the media racializes hip-hop artists,
and one about how those hip-hop communities respond to racialization. For example, as a
reaction to racialization, I created the code “fear of retaliation” and included instances
where hip-hop artists made reference to fears of the retaliation from the media,
government, etc…
FRENCH HIP-HOP AND SECULARISM

Islam Versus Laïcité in France

As a result of centuries of imperializing other peoples, France is home to a highly diverse population. The Arab population in France, totaling nearly 5 million people and comprising roughly 7.5 percent of the population (Hackett 2016), is particularly large, a result of France’s colonization of large areas of Africa and the Middle East. The majority of these people are culturally Muslim or practicing Muslims (Hackett 2016). Yet these Muslims have not been warmly welcomed by the secular, white population in France. There exists a definitive view of what it means to be French, and culturally Muslims do not fit that mold (Mamou 2016). Traditionally, the French ascribe national values to the French devise [motto]: Liberté, Egalité, Fraternité [Liberty, Equality, Fraternity], but also they adhere to a firm division of church and state, a national secularism called laïcité. The most un-French characteristic of the Arabic immigrants is their religion, Islam. According to a 2010 Eurobarometer poll, only 27 percent of the French population believes in a god, making the country one of the most secular places in the world (Eurobarometer 2010). Roughly translating to “secular-ness,” laïcité is written into Article 1 of the French Constitution, which states that “France shall be an indivisible, secular, democratic and social Republic. It shall ensure the equality of all citizens before the law, without distinction of origin, race or religion. It shall respect all beliefs” (Constitution 1997). As well, this idea of laïcité is reified by the 1905 Law on the Separation of Churches and State. However, the context of this law is important in understanding the origins of the laïcité tradition. Prior to 1905, France was required to
impose the moral truth of the Catholic pope and the Vatican onto its subjects via the 1864 Syllabus and the 1870 Papal Infallibility Decree (Decherf 2001). By passing the 1905 law, France expanded freedom of religion by presenting a clear separation of church and state. Today, some scholars forward that laïcité has ironically come to mean something far different from its original, tolerant purpose; it has become an invasive mandate against the public expression of religion, but more specifically, Islam (Zaretsky 2016).

French legislation against publicly expressed religion often targets practicing Muslims. On March 15, 2004, the French Parlement passed legislation banning religious symbols in public schools, and, more specifically, “the wearing of signs or clothing which conspicuously manifest students’ religious affiliations” such as “a large cross, a veil, or a skullcap” (Scott 2007:1). Despite the ban’s inclusive language, it was designed to target the Muslim hijab, burqa, and niqab—symbols interpreted by the French lawmakers as being antithetical to the French ideal of equality (Scott 2007). These head and body coverings, referred to by law makers and the general French media as “la voile” [the veil], are interpreted as a physical representation of resistance to the separation of church and state, an insistence upon differences in an indivisible nation, and a symbol of women’s subordination (Scott 2007). French lawmakers interpret these symbols without input from the Muslim communities they attempt to define. In the terminology of Edward Said, French lawmakers are engaging in an orientalist discourse, furthering an islamophobic, ethnocentric, and nationalist narrative about Muslim symbols and culture by creating a racialized Other—a distinctly French caricature of Muslim culture—without the consent of the Other (Said 1978). French lawmakers are exercising their hegemonic
authority over the French Muslim underclass by redefining the symbols of their culture in a way that only truly exists in the minds of the lawmakers.

Muslims in France have become a prime target for discrimination. Studies have shown that “a Muslim candidate is 2.5 times less likely to receive a job interview callback than is his or her Christian counterpart [...] and that second-generation Muslim households in France have lower income compared with matched Christian households” (Adida 2010). This religious disparity is indicative of the national feeling that to be a Muslim is to fall short of being truly French. As well, journalist Leighton Walter Kille and John Wihbey, a journalism professor at Northwestern University, highlight that “research from INSEE, France’s national statistical agency, indicates that in 2013, the unemployment rate for all immigrants was approximately 17.3%, nearly 80% higher than the non-immigrant rate of 9.7%, and descendants of immigrants from Africa have a significantly more difficult time finding work” (2013: npg). Clearly, French Muslims constitute an underclass in French society.

Rap Music in France

Born in the Bronx in the mid-1970s, hip-hop culture and rap music was originally the product of disenfranchised, poor, and urban minority voices of the 1970s (Hahn 2014; Forman 2000; Morgan and Bennet 2011). Early rap artists made passionate music detailing the hardships of American ghettos and the institutionalized racial oppression of the day. The burgeoning popularity of hip-hop brought to light the conditions of inner cities of New York, Chicago, and Los Angeles; places defined by their blackness and wracked by social strife (Forman 2000). Hip-hop is commonly divided into four or five
artistic mediums by those who study or practice the art. (1) deejaying and turntablism, (2) the construction and delivery of rap music, (3) break dancing and other forms of hip-hop dance, (4) graffiti art, and (5) a united system of knowledge about rap music (Morgan and Bennett 2011). In the United States, rap music became innately political and powerful in a nation still reeling from the Civil Rights Era, and became enormously popular in the 1980s and 1990s (Gladney 1995). Hip-hop has become a global force, becoming a global form of resistance to white hegemony (Sharma 2010). Along with a variety of other music forms, many non-white communities utilize a variety of black music forms—like jazz and reggae in addition to rap music—as a means of self-expression and to create distinctively non-white spaces through protest (Aidi 2014).

French leaders embraced hip-hop in the 1980s, believing that France’s emergent, troubled, and increasingly immigrant youth could be empowered by expressing the various frustrations of a struggling underclass in society (Prévos 1996). In a post-colonial context, hip-hop became a means of resisting racial oppression because of its strong ability to formulate non-white identities and facilitate the growth of those identities (Auzanneau 2001). Jack Lang, the French Minister of Culture (1981 to 1986 and 1988 to 1992), invited American hip-hop artists like Afrika Bambaataa and the Zulu Nation to come to France and share their music through workshops and performances (Prevos 2002). By the 1990s, French hip-hop had become a source of French pride. Lang famously said that hip-hop was "intellectually, morally and artistically" a movement, and that “even if in the beginning [hip-hop] drew inspiration from America, I believe it has found its originality here in France” (Meghelli 2013). Hip-hop appealed to France’s enormous population of disaffected, second and third-generation Muslims who related to
African-American struggles across the Atlantic (Prevos 2002), and French rappers redefined hip-hop as a unique, distinctly French form of expression. For young, non-white Francophones, rap music became central to the creation of their identities, allowing a cultural space for the creation of an urban, underdog identity (Auzanneau 2001). Furthermore, rap music became an outlet for the anxieties, fears, and hopes of non-white, subordinated groups in francophone society (Auzanneau 2001).

Today, France is the world’s second largest consumer and producer of rap music (NPR staff 2015). The French government endorses and funds the production of hip-hop culture, particularly rap music. Recently, French tax monies paid for the construction of “La Place” in Paris, a massive public center that funds and encourages underground art forms and hip-hop artists.\(^1\) It is designed to be the centerpiece of the new “Canopée des Halles,” a billion-euro urban redevelopment project to redefine one of Paris’ least attractive and most dangerous underground stations in the middle of the city (Crossman 2016). In addition to paying tribute to Paris as a world center of hip-hop culture, “La Place” provides large spaces for performances and modern studios for the production of rap music. It should be noted however that the studio space is neither free nor cheap to rent, ironically creating considerable barriers to the production of an art form historically created by the underprivileged. However, there is a dearth of research on the impact of French public funding on the arts and more specifically spaces like La Place. Essentially, there is a lot about this that we do not know.

The French government’s investment in “La Place” seems to contradict some of its previous actions toward the hip-hop community. For example, French rapper Black M

\(^1\) [http://laplace.paris/](http://laplace.paris/)
had his invitation to play at a ceremony for the 100-year anniversary of the Battle of Verdun revoked. Critics accused him of being “Anti-France” because of criticisms of France in his lyrics. Marine Le Pen’s coalition in French parliament stated, “Black M must not appear in Verdun. During this butchery that bled Europe dry, 163,000 French soldiers perished and 216,000 others were wounded. All these soldiers were ‘Kuffars’², of the ancient people of France. At best, Black M scorns them; at worst, he hates them” (Le Monde 2015). The lyrics referred to com from Black M’s song, Désolé, where he calls France “un pays de kuffars [a country of non-Muslim miscreants].” His detractors, such as Marine Le Pen of the ultra-nationalist National Front party, insisted that his participation in the ceremony would amount to “spitting on a war memorial.” This, despite the fact that Black M’s great-grandfather had participated in the Battle of Verdun as a member of African regiment and that he had declared himself “a proud citizen of the republic” (Cross 2016). After the invitation to perform was revoked, the National Front party and several other far right and white nationalist movements rejoiced, lauding the government’s stance against hip-hop cultures.

In their search for place and meaning, many French Muslims have created a specific cultural identity based around and rooted in their cultural Otherness, and it shows in their music. Muslim French rappers empathized with African Americans and began to emulate their styles as early as the 1980s. Prévos (1996) remarks:

In songs and albums recorded by French rappers in the late 1980s, several reproduce themes encountered in recordings of popular American and

---
² This is an Arabic word indicating a non-Muslim miscreant.
African-American artists of the period. French rappers likewise express opposition to the social order and to political and economic systems which have led to what they call the "oppression" of minorities (Arab immigrants in particular). French rappers tell about the hardships of everyday life in the poorer suburbs which they often characterize as le ghetto.

In this way, rap music became both a popular function of Muslim youth identity and a way to speak out about the inequalities that plague Islamic communities. The raps are often incredibly controversial, calling out public officials as “legal crooks” and using violent and crude language to pose attacks against French government, army, public servants and even France itself (Prévos 1996). Even today, twenty years after the publication of Prévos’ article, French rappers like Sexion d’Assaut, Nekfeu, and Abd Al Malik are making aggressive political stands about subjects like Islamophobia, police brutality, and government corruption in their music. A group of politically-active rappers has collectively formed to create a sub-genre called conscious rap (Sar 2017).
FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS

In the wake of the attacks on Charlie Hebdo, the French media focused much of its reporting on the reactions of French rap artists to the attacks. This was understandable given the turbulent relationship between hip-hop artists and the caricaturists at Charlie Hebdo. In 2013—before the Charlie Hebdo attack, but after the 2011 firebombing of the Charlie Hebdo offices—rapper Nekfeu called for “un autodafé contre ces chiens de Charlie Hebdo [a bonfire for these Charlie Hebdo dogs]” in a song he co-wrote for the film Le Marche (20 Minutes, Les Rappeurs Nekfeu et Disiz). As well, rapper Médine released a song just days before the attacks entitled “Don’t Laïk,” condemning France for using its secularist policies to discriminate against Muslims. In this song, Médine calls us to “crucifions les laicards [crucify the secularists]” and declares a “fatwa sur les cons³ [hit on the idiots].” However, the French media stereotyped the rappers and condescended the rappers’ remarks after the event, contorting and redefining the sentiment of their words.

Shortly after the Charlie Hebdo attacks, there was an outpouring of remarks from the hip-hop community. Rappers who had previously raged against the islamophobic caricatures of Charlie Hebdo came out with apologies for their contrarian remarks and lyrics. However, the remarks of these rappers were often far more than just apologies. Some, like Nekfeu and Medine, balanced their apology with a defense of their freedom to speak freely about the position of the French Muslim minority. This was coupled with

³ “Fatwa” is an Arabic word which literally describes an authoritative opinion on an aspect of Islamic law. However, in the context of French hip-hop, it describes a public call for death or a “hit” on someone.
their acknowledgement of the satirical nature of rap music. In a videotaped interview with Le Parisien (2015), Nekfeu said the following:

Après les événements horribles qui se sont passés, je me prends un vent de gens qui me reprochent ce qu'il s'est passé. Je me suis senti dans un premier temps coupable. Et ensuite je me suis senti con. Aujourd'hui je regrette d'avoir employé des termes qu'on peut me reprocher. Et d'avoir desservi ce que je voulais dire qui est un message de paix et d'amour entre les gens. […] Je n'avais pas écrit ça au moment des caricatures mais après une énième Une de Charlie Hebdo, que je ne lisais pas mais que je considérais fait par des gens du même camp que moi, humaniste. Et je les trouvais irrespectueux et limite indignes de ce qu'ils portaient comme message […] Sémantiquement parlant, je me suis permis de pousser la provoc plus loin que j'aurais du […] J'en ai dit plein des conneries. Mais je n'ai jamais eu l'habitude d'être relayé en tant que porte parole. [After the passing of these horrible events, I was tested by the people who accuse me of that which is in the past. For the first time, I felt guilty. And then I felt like an ass. Today I am sorry to have used words that can reproach me. And to have harmed that which I would like to say, which is a message of peace and love among people. […] I had not written it at the time of the caricatures but after the umpteenth one of Charlie Hebdo, that I wasn't reading but I thought made by people from the same camp that me, humanist. And I thought they were disrespectful and had a disgraceful
limit to that which they wore as their message [...] semantically speaking, I permit myself to push the provocation further than I would have [...] I have said plenty of bullshit. But I have never had the intention of being relayed as spokesperson.]

Here, Nekfeu, as a white Frenchman in hip-hop, is apologizing for having been mistaken as a spokesperson for the Muslim community in France. In acknowledging how harmful his remarks were, he also acknowledges his position as a privileged individual. His apology distances himself from the stigma and the burden of being considered a member of the Muslim hip-hop community. He is also calling out Charlie Hebdo for their caricatures and defending his own position by claiming to push the boundaries of what should or should not be said. In effect, he is defending his freedom to critique Charlie Hebdo by premising his remarks with an apology. Medine (2015) wrote the following on his Facebook page in the days after the attacks:

Suite à l’extrême violence qui s’est abattue aujourd’hui à Paris, je tiens à témoigner tout mon soutien aux familles des victimes. Je condamne évidemment profondément ce type d’actes et ce depuis 10 ans à travers ma démarche artistique. […] Par ailleurs, si la satire est omniprésente dans mes albums et notamment dans mes derniers morceaux, à l’encontre des différentes formes d’extrémisme (religieux, politique et philosophique), ça n’est que pour rendre le débat serein et équilibré. La provocation n’a d’utilité que pour identifier certains phénomènes pervers, que sont tous les types de fondamentalisme, et dans le but de mieux s’en prémunir. Mes
morceaux appartiennent à cette tradition d’œuvre caricaturiste qui exagère volontairement les représentations pour en extraire son contenu parfois absurde et contradictoire. [Following the extreme violence that occurred in Paris today, I would like to testify all my support to the families of the victims. I condemn obviously and deeply this type of act in these past 10 years through my artistic approach. […] In addition, if satire is omnipresent in my albums and in particular my latest songs, against the different forms of extremism (religious, political and philosophical), it is only to make the debate calm and balanced. The provocation is only used to identify some perverse phenomena, that are all types of fundamentalism, and in the aim to better protect against fundamentalism. My songs belong to this tradition of work which cartoonist voluntarily exaggerates the representations to extract the content (of extremism) which is sometimes absurd and contradictory.

Here, Medine is justifying his work by claiming the same caricaturist’s card as Charlie Hebdo. As well, he is defending his position by claiming that he is against all extremism, not just secularism However, Medine’s apology is far more cautious than Nekfeu’s. It conveys self-preservation through a clarification of his work, whereas Nekfeu, a white artist, was able to comment on his past remarks with more defiance. Others like rappers Kery James, a French Muslim rapper born to Haitian parents, and Disiz, another French Muslim rapper, released lengthy statements detailing the
experience of being a Muslim in France and their fears arising from the attacks. On Facebook, rapper Diam’s (2015) said:

Je suis Française, je suis musulmane et je suis affligée. Je m'indigne de toutes les barbaries perpétrées ici et là au nom de l'Islam. Je crains qu'une porte ne se soit ouverte de haine mutuelle, de violence… Des fous agissent, du sang coule et c'est bien plus de gens qu'on ne pense qui sont touchés. L'islam interdit le terrorisme et appelle à la paix et non à la terreur. L'islam n'enseigne pas la vengeance ni le meurtre mais appelle à propager la lumière du bien et de l'excellence dans le comportement. [I am French, I am Muslim, and I am afflicted. I am indignant of the perpetrated barbarism here and there in the name of Islam. I fear that a door is open to mutual hate, to violence… From this crazy act, blood flows and far more people than one would think are affected. Islam forbids terrorism and calls to peace and not to terror. Islam does not teach vengeance or killing but calls to spread the good light and excellence through behavior.]

Diam’s is using her Facebook as an informative tool, attempting to show other people how her religion, Islam, does not condone these acts. She speaks for the Muslim community, hinting at the fear of the Muslim community and stating that “far more people than one would think are affected.” As well, rapper Kery James released a statement to a number of major news sources in the days after the attacks, stating the following:
La grande majorité des musulmans dont je fais partie est également victime et otage des extrêmes de tout bord. Et c’est à elle à qu’on ordonne constamment de donner des gages de citoyenneté et de patriotism qui ne semblent jamais suffisants. C’est d’elle qu’on exige sur un ton presque menaçant qu’elle descende dans les rues pour prouver son attachement à la France. Comme si finalement c’était elle qui avait financé et armé les terroristes. Les temps qui vont venir vont être difficiles pour nous et notre patience va être mise à rude épreuve. [The vast majority of Muslims of which I am a part is also a victim and hostage to the extremes of either side. And it is that majority that is directed constantly to provide proof of citizenship and patriotism which never seem sufficient. (Muslims) are required in an almost threatening tone to drop into the streets to demonstrate their commitment to France. Finally, it is as if it was Islam who had financed and armed terrorists. The time which will come will be difficult for us and our patience will be put to the test.]

Kery James, like Diam’s, is attempting to speak for the Muslim community at large, communicating the disadvantaged position of Muslims in French society. He speaks to the authoritarian control exacted by the dominant group, white French people, on French Muslims, who are never able to shed the stigma of their religion. In explaining that the majority of Muslims are caught in between the secularist French and extremist Muslim camps, Kery James elucidates how compromising the position of Muslims can be.
Hip-hop’s Relationship with Charlie Hebdo Before the Attack

Charlie Hebdo has been known for its controversial cartoons for a while, and has been criticized for its depictions of Mohammad since 2006 when the magazine featured a weeping Mohammad saying “C’est dur d’être aimé par des cons” [It’s hard being loved by jerks] on the cover (see Figure 1) (Taibi 2015). Shortly after the publication of this edition, Charlie Hebdo was sued by the Grand Mosque of Paris, the Muslim World League, and the Union of French Islamic Organizations for inciting racial hatred and defamation. Charlie Hebdo won the case (Communauté 2007). Later in 2011, Charlie Hebdo released an edition entitled “Charia Hebdo,” a reference to sharia law, in which Mohammad is depicted saying, “100 coups de fouet, si vous n’êtes pas morts de rire! [100 lashes, if you do not die of laughter!]” (Taibi 2015). The representation of Mohammad on this cover is particularly disturbing as it features a long nose, unkempt facial hair, and a deranged smile. These traits are classic tropes of dehumanization, and in particular applied to Muslims in Western society (Arjana 2015). The Charlie Hebdo offices were firebombed later that same year. Aside from its lewd portrayal of Mohammad, the publication has also received backlash for its lewd portrayals of Jewish stereotypes and Catholic stereotypes (see figures 3 and 4). Charlie Hebdo’s usual depiction of Jewish people as infirm is particularly disturbing as it calls back to Nazi propaganda’s usage of disease imagery to caricature Jewish citizens (Al-Shaikh-Ali 2015). Yet the official stance of the publication is anti-racist. They claim:

“Nous n'avons pas peur d'avouer que nous sommes des militants antiracistes de toujours. Sans nécessairement avoir une carte, nous avons
choisi dans ce domaine notre camp, et n'en changerons évidemment jamais. Si par extraordinaire – mais cela n'arrivera pas – un mot ou un dessin racistes venaient à être publiés dans notre hebdomadaire, nous le quitterions à l'instant, et avec fracas.” [we are not afraid to confess that we have always been militant anti-racists. Without necessarily having a membership card, we have chosen our position in this camp, and we aren’t ever changing direction. If by extraordinary circumstance— but this will never happen—a racist word or drawing were published in our weekly publication, we would remove it immediately and resoundingingly.]

(Charbonnier and Nicolino 2013).

The dissonance between Charlie Hebdo’s comments here and the virulently islamophobic and racist caricatures appearing regularly on the cover of Charlie Hebdo’s publication suggest that the Charlie Hebdo does not consider its position racist, but rather secularly seated in dark humor. However, many others do not see the editorial in the same light.
“Mohammad overwhelmed by Fundamentalists” and a caricature of Mohammad saying, “It’s hard to be loved by jerks.”
“Charia Hebdo Special Edition” and a caricature of Mohammad saying, “100 lashes if you don’t die of laughter.”

Figure 3

“The ‘gay lobby’ in conclave. Then, the smoke, it comes?”

Figure 4
“Untouchables 2” depicting a Sikh and a Jewish man saying “[you] should not laugh!”

![Charlie Hebdo's cover after the “Egyptian killings.”](image)

*Figure 5*

Charlie Hebdo’s cover after the “Egyptian killings.” “The Qu’ran is shit. It doesn’t stop bullets.”

The hip-hop community in France has long taken issue with Charlie Hebdo’s portrayals of Muslims and Black French, and accordingly, they have positioned themselves against the publication and its hyper-secular stance (Aidi 2015). Recalling to the introduction of this thesis, in 2013, a group of elite French rappers recorded a posse cut (a single rap track with more than four contributors) entitled “March” for a film commemorating the 1983 March for Equality and Against Racism. On the track, a relative newcomer named Nekfeu, a white rapper in his 20s, called for “un autodafe contre ces chiens de Charlie Hebdo” [a public burning of these Charlie Hebdo dogs]
(Chapon 2015). Just after the attack, the same rapper defended his remarks from 2013, calling them a defense of freedom of expression in the same caricaturist’s tone as Charlie Hebdo. However, he immediately followed these remarks saying, “I've considered Charlie Hebdo's recent editorial line to be opportunistic and degrading towards the Muslim community” (Aidi 2015).

Reframing Condolences and Refuting Anger

There are many cases in which the French media attempted to reframe the remarks of French rappers as solely apologies, either by omitting everything but an apology from their statements or by only emphasizing the apology sections of their statements. For example, the conservative French publication, Le Parisien, a publication with a large readership comparable to Fox News in the United States, published a short article on the condolences of rapper Nekfeu entitled “Le mea culpa d’un rappeur,” [the mea culpa of a rapper] insinuating that Nekfeu was making a grand apology in his remarks about the attacks. While he did apologize for his lyrics against Charlie Hebdo, Nekfeu’s comments were far more than just an apology. He also defended his own position by defending his freedom of expression and accused Charlie Hebdo of furthering Islamophobia and hate in France. However, Le Parisien chose to make their article instead about his apology, insisting upon the rapper’s “mea culpa.” Furthermore, the article quotes his grievance with Charlie Hebdo, “Je considérais la ligne de Charlie Hebdo comme opportuniste et dégradante envers la communauté musulmane dans un contexte d'islamophobie” [I consider Charlie Hebdo’s publications to be opportunistic and degrading toward the Muslim community in an islamophobic context,] yet goes on to
note that Nekfeu himself does not belong to any religious community himself, as if to delegitimize his claim to speak out in opposition to anti-Muslim racism. Then the article finishes saying, “la formule en question résonne dans ma cœur avec regret” [the lyrics in question resound in my heart with regret,] guiding his words back to this idea of regret and apology. This is not the only article that uses the idea of Nekfeu’s “mea culpa” as a central theme. By reframing his remarks as an apology, Le Parisien is implying that the hip-hop community and Muslims should apologize for the Charlie Hebdo. However, by emphasizing that Nekfeu is not a Muslim, Le Parisien is using Nekfeu as an example of what should be done, but not as a representative of the Muslim community. This is even more interesting because his pre-attack remarks and lyrics were by far the most incendiary—the line calling for “un autodafe contre ces chiens de Charlie Hebdo” [a public burning of these Charlie Hebdo dogs] was mentioned in the majority of articles and in every article that mentioned Nekfeu. He is being used as an example of a good, secular and repentant member of the hip-hop community.

Focus on Rappers’ Religious Affiliations

Rappers expressed a variety of concerns in their reactions to the Charlie Hebdo attack, speaking sometimes on behalf of Muslim communities, sometimes out of concern for their own safety, even sometimes expressing shame and regret for their past words. In several publications, there were strict attention to the religious affiliation of the rappers featured in each piece. Along with the name of a rapper, his or her religious affiliation is tacked on, sometimes followed by a statement of when the specific rapper converted to Islam or became disaffected with religion. Some articles even established the religious
beliefs of rappers in the title. For example, an article in Libération was entitled “Médine: Le Vengeur Mosquée” [Médine: The Mosqued Avenger].” By identifying the religious affiliation of each rapper, the author guides the identification of the rapper with Islam, therefore inviting whatever prejudice or judgement comes along with that identification. Furthermore, it serves to disenfranchise rappers by disqualifying their remarks as members of the Muslim community or as non-members of the Muslim community. The magazine L’Obs reported in an article the religious statuses of two subjects within the first few paragraphs. The journalist reported, “Diam's, convertie à l'Islam en 2008, a appelé à ne pas se laisser "prendre au jeu diabolique de l'escalade des haines" ou Youssoupha, musulman également, a apporté son soutien aux familles des victimes. [Diam’s converted to Islam in 2008, called to not let ourselves “take to the evil game of escalating hate” or Youssoupha, also a Muslim, offered his help to the families of victims].” By attracting attention to the religious affiliations of each rapper, the author tints the words of those he or she is reporting about. It is almost always irrelevant information to the story, but it does serve to paint the apologetic rappers as “exemplary” members of a group racialized as degenerate. It seems to be a particular obsession with the religion of the rappers’ religion. This is also seen in various reports about rapper Nekfeu, but to an opposite effect. The highlighting of his lack of religious affiliation obviously disaffiliates him from the Muslim community he is attempting to defend and represent through his remarks and music. Through disaffiliation, Nekfeu no longer has a representational ground to stand on, and his remarks are seemingly disqualified.

---

4 This is a play on words. Instead of the “masked avenger,” the author refers to Médine as the “mosqued avenger.”
Shaming Rappers

Some journalists spoke about the silence of the rap community following the Charlie Hebdo attack, calling the lack of apologies to Charlie Hebdo on behalf of the hip-hop community an embarrassment. In an article entitled “Les rappeurs gênés par d’anciens propos sur ‘Charlie Hebdo’ [The rappers embarrassed by previous remarks on ‘Charlie Hebdo’],” journalist Oliver Cachin said, “pour la plupart des artistes de hip-hop, il y a une grande gêne" car ils avaient pour la plupart "au mieux de l'indifférence pour Charlie [for the majority of hip-hop artists, this is a great embarrassment because for the most part they are indifferent about Charlie Hebdo]." Later, in an article from Le Point, he says this is because, hip-hop being a Muslim art form where the majority of rappers are Muslims, the hip-hop community had an obligation to respond on behalf of the Islamic community (Le Point 2015). In another article from Le Monde, the author states that rappers have an obligation to apologize or react to the attacks because they speak on behalf of the Muslim community.

Much of the journalism surrounding rappers Booba and Médine was wildly racist. Particularly, the media has attacked the song “Don’t Laïk” by Médine. The song is incredibly graphic, featuring a heavy, gritty beat and lyrics such as “Marianne est une femen tatouée "Fuck God" sur les mamelles [Marianne is a Femen with "Fuck God" tattooed on the breasts.] The chorus of the song encapsulates the overarching meaning of his position. He raps:

Ta barbe, rebeu, dans ce pays c'est Don't Laïk

Ton voile, ma sœur, dans ce pays c'est Don't Laïk
One article mused that perhaps Médine is an enemy of the republic for his song “Don’t Laïk” (La Redaction 2015). Other articles castigated Médine for his damning language on “Don’t Laïk,” heavily criticizing his position as a defender of French Muslims (Cespedes 2015). For rapper Booba, much of the reporting on his remark after the Charlie Hebdo attack (“When we play with fire, we burn”) takes place in a racist and islamophobic manner. In one article, a journalist made the insinuation that Booba is too stupid for his own good (Le Parisien 2015). Likewise, many articles use the words of radio personality Patrick Pelloux to juxtapose the remarks of Booba. Yet Patrick Pelloux makes no argument of his own other than to talk down to Booba, saying, “[il] ferait mieux de
chercher l'intelligence plutôt que de chercher à justifier les terroristes [He would do well to search for intelligence rather than search to justify terrorists]” (Delacroix 2015).

*Fear of Retaliation, Conflations, and “La Polémique”*

Many of the rappers from the conscious rap scene expressed fear in some way or another following the Charlie Hebdo attack. In a lengthy Facebook post, rapper Disiz stated that he feared for his children and country in the aftermath of the attack. Having grown up in a post-9/11 world, he fears the same experience for his children in a post-Charlie Hebdo France, constantly having to justify their religion, repent for a crime they did not commit, and fear the establishment under which they live. Disiz stated his fears plainly, giving a long and fearless statement about racism, French Muslim identity, and the sad state of France in the wake of terrorism and xenophobia. As well, Rapper Kery James wrote an open letter that was published in a variety of online media outlets. In his letter, he expressed his experience of being a French Muslim and the variety of fears that come along with that life. In his letter, published by the Negro News Network, he said:

Après ce 7 janvier 2015, une fois encore, j’ai la sensation que les choses évoluent trop vite et que ma vie et mes choix m’échappent. Je crois que ce sentiment est partagé par l’immense majorité des musulmans et des gens conscients des enjeux auxquels nous devons faire face [After this January 7th 2015 [the date of the Charlie Hebdo attack], once again, I had the sensation that things were evolving too quickly and that my life and my choices escaped my reality. I believe that this sentiment is shared by the
immense majority of Muslims and those who are conscious of that which we must cope with] (Negronews 2015).

His letter and his attempt at sharing his experiences publicly indicate the kinds of pressures and fears French Muslims are forced to live with in the wake of terrorism. In particular, the fear of losing control and a sense of French Muslim solidarity is expressed throughout his remarks, ultimately ending in a warning against stereotyping others.

However, after the Charlie Hebdo attack there exists a general sense that rappers were distinctly afraid of being drawn into the fight between secularism and Islam, and therefore chose to stay quiet. Over time, the articles revealed a theme of fear among rappers. The two phrases used most often to describe the fear of rap artists were “craintes de l’amalgame [fears of the conflation]” and “un peur de s’impliquer dans la polemique [a fear of becoming involved in the controversy]” or some variation of these. These fears describe firstly a fear of being conflated with terrorists, and secondly, a fear of being dragged into the conflict between Islam (and by extension, the hip-hop community) and secularist France. This fear is exacerbated by hip-hop journalists, celebrities, and reporters who publicly slander artists who come out opposing secularism such as Booba, Nekfeu, and Medine.

The first phrase, “craintes de l’amalgame [fears of the conflation],” generally describes rappers fears of being lumped in with terrorists or Political Islam by the media or the public. However, the word “amalgame” does not translate well into English, and neither does the sentiment that it attempts to portray. Roughly, it describes misrepresentation, but as an established misrepresentation of Muslim rappers and regular,
non-violent Muslims as being terrorists. Nearly always, the word l’amalgame describes the specific instance of misrepresentation. Rapper Akhenaton’s remarks to the newspaper *Le Figaro* clarify the meaning of “les amalgames.” He said, “Mahomet avec les doigts crochus sur une Europe couverte de tombes chrétiennes, c'est de l'amalgame. On nous dit maintenant ‘ne faites pas d'amalgames’, mais les amalgames sont faits! [Mohammad with his fingers hooked around a Europe covered in the graves of Christians, this is the conflation (l’amalgame). We all are told, ‘don’t make conflations, but the conflations are made!’]” (Le Figaro 2015). Another facet of this fear of conflation comes to light in rapper Médine’s response to a request from the journal *Le Monde* for an interview. He replied, "Je doute que le contexte permette d’avoir un quelconque dialogue serein autour de cette question [I doubt that the context permits us having any calm dialogue about this question]" (Mouv’ 2015). The fear of conflation is not only a fear of misrepresentation, but it is also an acknowledgement of the inevitability of being twisted by the media and public.

The second phrase, “un peur de s’impliquer dans la polemique [a fear of becoming involved in the controversy],” seems to embody nearly the same meaning as “craintes de l’amalgame [fears of the conflation],” but it implies that there is an existing conflict between the rap community and the media. Often when rappers express this fear, they speak of “la polemique [the controversy]” as a misunderstanding of the media and the public about the nature of rap music. Rapper Nekfeu’s response to the Charlie Hebdo attack expresses this feeling on behalf of rappers. He said, “je suis juste un rappeur sincère issu du monde des clash : une discipline où les figures de style violentes ne sont jamais à prendre au pied de la lettre [I’m just a sincere rapper from the world of clash: a
discipline where the violent stylistic figures are never to be taken literally]” (Mouv’ 2015). In the hip-hop community, violent lyrics are often understood to be a part of the rap tradition where rappers are often appraised on their ability to use hyperbole as a figure of their expression (Calvert et al. 2014). By pointing out the violent structure of hip-hop, Nekfeu highlights how his lyrics were never meant to be taken literally. He uses this point as a defense of his expression.

*Freedom of Expression*

It would seem that the remarks made against the rap community combined with the fear they expressed through their remarks would keep the rap community from freely expressing their discontent. Many of the rappers expressed a fear that their freedom of speech would be compromised in the aftermath of the attack. However, it seems that the reality is actually the opposite. It seems that members of the “conscious rap” community have been emboldened by the mandate. Particularly, rap group La Rumeur, rapper Abd Al Malik, and rapper Médine have been very outspoken in the months after the attack.

In the Summer of 2015, Médine released his ninth album *Démineur*, which included his controversial track “Don’t Laïk” unedited, despite outrage at its release. As well, he continued to speak powerfully about the plight of French Muslims with renewed vigor in the month following the attack (Rabaté 2015). After releasing a statement on the Charlie Hebdo massacres, conscious rapper group La Rumeur went on to begin production of a film entitled *Les Derniers Parisiens* about the difficulty of life as a Muslim in Paris (Binet 2015). Later in 2015, rapper Abd Al Malik released his most thought-provoking album to date, *Scarifications*, detailing his experience as a Muslim and
spreading awareness to the situation of French Muslims. It does not seem to be the case that the rappers were stifled in their expression, despite their concerns.
CONCLUSION

When I began this paper, I sought to answer three questions: How has the media portrayed French rap artists and the larger hip-hop community in the wake of the attacks on Charlie Hebdo? In what ways have rap artists reacted to this media? And to what extent did this mainstream media stifle the rappers’ freedom of expression?

Through a content analysis of a variety of accessible online French news publications and the remarks of several rappers in response to the Charlie Hebdo attack, I saw a variety of islamophobic remarks and attitudes in the most popular French journalism on the hip-hop community. I found that there was a clear intent to whitewash the sentiment of rappers’ remarks. The anger of rap artists was either edited out from their remarks or reported and played down. By suppressing the anger of the rap artists, the media publications I studied effectively stigmatized Muslim voices and perspectives in France. It is worth noting that the most vocal and reported rapper I studied was Nekfeu, a white, secular Frenchman. This attests to his ability to transcend culture barriers via his white privilege. Other rappers were given far more one-dimensional roles, portrayed with less kindness and given fewer chances of redemption than Nekfeu. The journalists tended to focus on the religion (or non-religion) of rappers, loading their statements by designating the rappers’ religious identities as news-worthy. Journalists in particular profiled Muslim rappers by their religion. Furthermore, journalists tended to make broad generalizations about rap being made solely by and for Muslims. I found that there was a tendency to report about rappers using condescending language and reference sources that outright shamed or insulted the intelligence of rappers. However, there did not seem to be significant evidence to suggest that political skew affected the degree of
racialization by the publications; meaning that racialization is not a political issue, but is perhaps a broader facet of French society.

The attack made it hard for most members of the French hip-hop community, save for the most famous and privileged rappers, to speak out against abusive French secularism, nationalist politics, and French Islamophobia. When the more privileged and famous rappers, like Nekfeu and Abd Al Malik, ventured to speak out against the attacks, they coupled these remarks with condemnations of French secularism and in doing so made claims on French values, democracy, and freedom of expression. Other less privileged hip-hop artists posted on social media platforms like Twitter and Facebook, writing messages against Islamophobia and censorship. Many Muslim rappers, like Kery James and Disiz, were emboldened by the moment to share their personal experiences as Muslims in the face of Islamophobia. Yet some of the rappers opted to keep quiet about the attack because they feared that mainstream media would use their words against them. But this silence proved damning. Members of the media shamed the hip-hop community for its silence. Hip-hop journalists like Olivier Cachin decried the hip-hop community for its timidity. Many national French news publications reconfigured the various remarks of rappers as apologies rather than defenses their work and freedom to criticize what they see as unjust. Journalists censored the anger of the rappers, controlling the sentiment of their remarks after the Charlie Hebdo attack. In censoring the actions and words of the rappers, the journalists played the islamophobic role that the rappers were often critiquing.

This research fits into the larger picture of research on Islamophobia and racialization, expanding a growing body of literature on the subject. However,
sociologists of music and popular culture have largely overlooked French popular culture. By examining popular culture in France, my research offers a lens into how mainstream media coverage and condemnation of conscious rap music may have a hand in shaping islamophobic and anti-immigration attitudes among the wider French public. As well, this thesis supports a growing body of research on media attention toward Muslims in music communities. This scholarship shows that the French hip-hop community—and by extension the French Islamic community—face a variety of islamophobic and racist challenges from the French media and society in the wake of the Charlie Hebdo attack, putting into perspective the remarks, lyrics, and actions of these French hip-hop artists around that time. Hopefully, this further highlights the convoluted and intractable situation which French Muslims and hip-hop artists are forced to navigate.

It would be interesting to conduct interviews with the rappers themselves, directly providing insight into the perceptions and experiences of rap artists rather than attempting to interpret existing material. As well, it would be interesting to pursue interviews with French rap audiences to see how hip-hop is being interpreted by actual French people with secular viewpoints.
REFERENCES

*English-Language Sources*


French-Language Sources


Articles Analyzed


*Figures Courtesy of*

Figure 1: http://www.liberation.fr/societe/2015/01/07/charlie-en-douze-dates_1175352

Figure 2: https://storify.com/newstalkradio/charlie-hebdo-covers

Figure 3: http://leforum.culturepsg.com/lofiversion/index.php/t58-81300.html

Figure 4: http://www.liberation.fr/societe/2015/01/07/charlie-en-douze-dates_1175352

Figure 5: http://www.liberation.fr/societe/2015/01/07/charlie-en-douze-dates_1175352

---

1 I use the words “Political Islam” because “Fundamentalist Islam” incorrectly carries the connotation that terrorism and violence are fundaments of Islamic belief (Kumar, 2012.)