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## **But Madame, We Are French Also**

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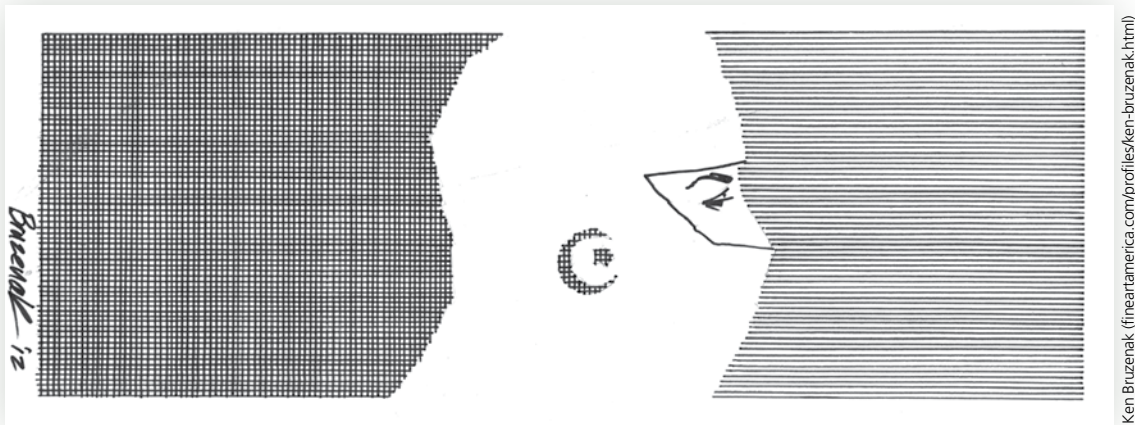
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but madame, we are french also  
by jean beaman

On a February morning sitting in a café near the Palais Garnier opera house, Safia, a petite, professionally dressed 32-year-old with dual Tunisian and French citizenship, described her recent difficulties finding an apartment for her family. “Our application file was never taken seriously by landlords, even though my husband works in finance and I work also,” she explained. “We make enough money. I remember they were asking for someone with a salary of three times the rent, and even with only my salary we had enough money.

So we had a lot of money, and the landlords didn’t want us. They kept telling us, ‘We just rented it to another couple, it happened quickly,’ it was always this, or ‘We changed our mind, we have to do some repairs, so we are not going to rent it.’ It was always something.”

She sighed, “Once, an older woman told me very clearly when we checked out an apartment, she said to us, ‘Yes, why not?’ And when we called her again to schedule another viewing of the apartment, she said ‘No, you understand, there was a French couple who came, so we rented it to them, it’s just easier.’” Safia vividly remembers her feelings of disgust. She told the landlord, “‘But Madame, we are French also.’ But they were white French, you see what I’m saying?” Her husband, she said, wanted to leave France. Even though they both have jobs, they were able to find an apartment only through a friend. “We’ll never be recognized as ‘regular French people,’ he said.”

Even though Safia is well-educated and a successful journalist, she still feels she is “French in the second degree”—not accepted as a French person by others. Growing up near the Musée du Louvre, Safia witnessed the humiliation her parents endured because of their immigrant status. When she was in

high school, a classmate told her she had “matte” skin. “It was such a revelation for me,” she recalled. “Before that, I thought I was French.” But at that moment, she realized she “would never be completely considered as a French person.” Now living in an apartment in Cergy-Pontoise, a western *banlieue*, or suburb, with her family (which includes two young children, and an

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Algerian-born husband, who works as a banker) she finds there is much that makes her proud to be French, such as the values exemplified in the motto of “liberté, égalité, fraternité.”

But Safia resents that her “Frenchness” is still frequently questioned by others. “Today, when I’m with my children, people still ask me ‘What are your children’s origins?’ or ‘Where do you come from?’” she explained. “That drives me crazy, because my children were born in France to French parents. I was born here, my children were born here and they still ask me that. It is so annoying to have to continually justify myself based on the color of my skin or the color of my children’s skin.”

## upward mobility

In 2005, images of working-class and immigrant-origin *banlieue* youth in France rebelling against police harassment, discrimination, unemployment, and underemployment circulated throughout the world. To many Americans, these uprisings, which began when two immigrant-origin youth died as they tried to flee the police, and spread throughout France's *banlieues* for about three weeks that fall, revealed the limitations of France's Republican model, which downplays differences among its citizens. More recently, earlier this year, a French Muslim man shot seven people in at a Jewish school in Toulouse. Again, images of a radical immigrant population in France spread.



Ken Bruzenak (fineartamerica.com/profiles/ken-bruzenak.html)

This is not the complete picture. It leaves out a segment of the second generation immigrant-origin population: individuals like Safia, who are middle class and upwardly mobile compared to their immigrant parents. French political scientist Catherine de Wenden calls this group the *beuregoisie*, a play on the slang term for children of North African immigrants, *beur*.

## More than 40 years after the end of colonial empire in North Africa, children of immigrants face challenges integrating into French society.

About 26 percent of second generation immigrants in France are of Maghrébin origin. Their parents, who have low levels of educational attainment, immigrated to France largely for economic reasons, seeking better employment opportunities in sectors such as manufacturing and construction.

Some children of North African immigrants manage to be upwardly mobile, including author and former minister for Equal Opportunities Azouz Begag, and activist and Inspector General for Social Affairs Fadela Amara. A 2003 study conducted by the Institut National de la Statistique et des Etudes Economiques (INSEE) found that about 15 percent of second generation North African immigrant men and about 23 percent of second generation North African immigrant women hold

professional and executive-level jobs—perhaps more than one might expect. Yet over 40 years after the end of France's colonial empire in North Africa, these children of immigrants face challenges integrating into French society.

I recently interviewed 45 college-educated second generation North African, or Maghrébin, adults in the Paris metropolitan area. I found that even those who are successful in terms of educational attainment and professional status are frequently denied full inclusion in French society. By traditional measures they could be considered assimilated: their native tongue is French, they were educated at French schools and universities, and they are French citizens. Their

middle class status might suggest a triumph of France's Republican ideology. But this population's continued experiences of marginalization belie this straightforward conclusion.

For the children of North African immigrants in France, only partial assimilation is possible. When Safia says she feels "French in the second degree" she is referring to being denied *cultural citizenship*. Cultural citizenship signifies a claim to belonging that is accepted by others, that would enable her and other children of North African immigrants to traverse the cultural-symbolic boundaries of French identity and be seen as truly "French."

## navigating multiple worlds

Middle class children of North African immigrants navigate the different worlds of home, on the one hand, and work and school, on the other. In the latter contexts, their ethnic origins are rarely, if ever, acknowledged or appreciated. Sabri, a 30-year-old of Tunisian origin who was born in northern France and currently lives in a *banlieue* in the Saint-Seine Denis *département* north of Paris, remembers learning this at an early age.

"I realized when I was around 8 or 9 or 10 years old, that we were different from other people," he explained to me. "The other children recognized that, meaning that they would tell us, 'You're Arab,' 'Return to where you came from, you're

not from here,' things like that, other insults. There were not many immigrants [in Amiens, the town in northern France where he grew up], maybe three or four families, everyone else was white. We quickly understood the image that they had of us...we were different from others. We felt different and not completely French, and that remains today."

Sabri told his parents (his father is a construction worker and his mother is a homemaker) about these experiences, but they were powerless to do anything; they confront the same discrimination as he does. The fact that he is a practicing Muslim in a country that purports to be *laïque*, or secular, exacerbates his sense of marginality.

For Sabri and others, educational and professional success intensifies these feelings. He holds a master's degree and works as a civil servant in the administration for a southern *banlieue*. "It is France that is holding us back. We want to be integrated into French society," he says. He feels that others see him as different, yet still sees himself as French. "But being Tunisian is also a big part of my identity, it is what my parents transmitted to me—culture, language, religion, and many other things outside of French society," he explained. "That is where the clash comes in, meaning the meeting of the two, how to find an equilibrium between Western society and Maghrébin culture, trying to synthesize it all." Some people are able to do it, he says; others are not. "As for me, I do not say that I've completely figured it out; I am always trying to find a compromise, it is a continual negotiation."

Ahmed, a 29-year-old practicing Muslim of Algerian origin, says he finds it difficult to claim a French identity because of how he is treated by others. A technical director who lives in the western *banlieue* of Nanterre, he explains, "Even though I am a manager at my company, and I drive an expensive car. I can try to go to a club or something and cannot get in, and then I return to reality." He feels neither 100 percent French nor 100 percent Algerian. Instead, he sees himself as "sitting between two chairs."



Sebastián Cevallos Ferrin (ccf-illu.com)

"Maybe I am asking for too much, wanting to be both 100 percent Algerian and 100 percent French," he says. "But I can't choose between them. I want to combine the best parts of both into something great, but I don't know—I still feel different." This feeling began when he was younger. Ahmed says he had two educations—one at home and one at school—that were vastly different from one another. Today, after earning both undergraduate and graduate degrees and working as an engineer, he understands the codes, or set of behaviors, necessary for success in the French workplace, yet that does not shield him from enduring the same forms of discrimination his

immigrant parents faced.

Ahmed's father was a construction worker and his mother was a homemaker; they went no further than elementary school. Still, Ahmed feels similarly marginalized. "If I'm walking in a bourgeois Parisian neighborhood and an old French lady sees me, she'll cross the street to walk on the other side," he explained. "I think it's going to take several more generations for people to not see differences like this, for someone to see a black person or an Arab walk by on the street and not even

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notice it or act differently."

Similarly, Djamila, a 49-year-old divorcée of Algerian origin who has spent her entire life in Paris, feels her place in French society is continually questioned by others. When she was growing up as one of nine children, she remembers hearing people say "return to your country" and other derogatory remarks. Djamila thought it would get better as she grew older. Yet, today she thinks people notice differences more and more. Now working as a manager for a social service agency dealing with youth employment, she hates that people often ask her about her origins. Even though she responds that she is Parisian or French, that doesn't stop the questioning.



MEDEF/Wikimedia Commons

French politician Fedela Amara, born to Algerian Kabyle parents, advocated on behalf of women in the impoverished *banlieues* but supported the 2003 ban on Muslim headscarves in schools.

"I see it clearly every day that there are small marks or indications [of differences]. I believe it is because France has not addressed certain problems in its past. It has not always acknowledged its past," she explained.

### a partial assimilation

Even though it promotes a colorblind ideology that downplays racial and ethnic differences, France actually has a narrow definition of what it means to be French. Certain individuals, even those who are legal citizens, are marked as *not French* and thereby denied *cultural* citizenship. The North African sec-

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ond generation in France, particularly those who are middle class and upwardly mobile, are acutely aware of these contradictions. While Safia, Sabri, Ahmed, and other members of the second generation believe in France, and its Republican ideology, they are continually reminded that others see them as outsiders. Theirs is a partial assimilation. Even when they pursue normative paths to upward mobility—ones that would presumably facilitate their integration into mainstream society—they are still not accepted as full members of society.

Writing in *Contexts* in 2003, sociologist Michèle Lamont described the differences between racism in the United States and in France in relation to moral boundaries. While the United



Marie-Lan Nguyen/Wikimedia Commons

Azouz Begag, the French Minister for Equal Opportunities from 2005 through 2007, said he was often called the government's "token Arab."

States is characterized by racism based upon skin color (the "one-drop" rule), Lamont argued that France is characterized by a "cultural racism." In that system, the difference between those viewed as French and those who are not part of French culture—namely, immigrants and their children—is salient. In other words, difference is framed in terms of culture, not race.

Being denied cultural citizenship, those marked as different are denied full inclusion into French society. In France, the North African second generation are seen as "too different" in terms of religion and other markers to ever fully be able to assimilate. France's history of immigration and colonialism strengthens the cultural-symbolic boundaries around French identity. Given that the North African second generation is both French and immigrant-origin, they complicate simple distinctions of "us" versus "them."

That Safia, Sabri, and other children of North African immigrants feel excluded reveals how significant race and ethnicity are in French society—contrary to what the French Republican model imagines. As historians such as Sue Peabody and Tyler Stovall have shown, "culture" has been code for "race" throughout much of French history. The ways French national identity is framed minimizes the contributions of immigrant-origin and foreign-born populations, constructing what French political scientist Sophie Body-Gendrot terms a "fictitious ethnicity." In other words, French identity is racialized and framed implicitly as white.

This creates a dilemma for children of North African immigrants who support France and its Republican model but are equally loyal to their immigrant origins. As Safia explains, "I

do not want to erase my origins. I do not want to forget that my parents immigrated here from Tunisia, that I have a Muslim sensibility, that I have family that lives in Tunisia." Yet, she adds, "to be French I have to eat pork and drink alcohol—then I would be considered French."

Diane, a 24-year-old doctoral student of Algerian origin, who is studying human resources and communications, does not like people to speak of children of immigrants having to "integrate" into French society. It is a more relevant term for [first-generation] immigrants, she says, "because they have to learn a new culture or something." But for the second generation, it's different. "We were born here so this is the only society we've ever known. So we should be as French as anyone else," she explained. To become French would require them to hide or overcome their differences, something the North African second generation cannot and does not wish to do.

Clearly, middle-class minorities are not immune from marginalization and exclusion. Their status does not insulate them from having to navigate multiple worlds, worlds that are frequently opposed to one another. This is true, too, in the United States, which is shaped by an identity-based politics based on multiculturalism. Middle class African Americans bridge different cultural worlds through code-switching and behavior-switching. As sociologist Mary Waters has shown in her study of children of West Indian immigrants, second generation populations must continually navigate between multiple cultural worlds. Even in the United States, where individuals have more options for how they self-identify, scholars (such as Min Zhou and Jody Vallejo) have argued that if middle class, second generation Latinos and Asians do not identify as American, it is because others do not see them as American.

In the United States, as in France, second generation immigrants often find they are denied cultural citizenship. Even

educational and professional success does not protect them from having others challenge their identity, and they face the same question that Safia and others confront: "Where do you come from?"

### recommended resources

Heath, Anthony F., Catherine Rethon, and Elina Kilpi. "The Second Generation in Western Europe: Education, Unemployment, and Occupational Attainment," *Annual Review of Sociology* (2008), 34:211-35. Provides an overview of children of immigrants in 10 Western European countries, with a focus on ethnic inequalities and socioeconomic integration in education and the labor market.

Lamont, Michèle. *The Dignity of Working Men: Morality and the Boundaries of Race, Class, and Immigration* (Harvard University Press, 2002). Compares the boundary work of native French workers and North African immigrant workers, and that of working-class white workers and African-American workers.

Simon, Patrick. "France and the Unknown Second Generation," *International Migration Review* (2003), 37:1091-1119. Addresses social mobility among children of Turkish, Moroccan, and Portuguese immigrants and the different paths they follow: reproducing the social positions of their immigrant parents, upward mobility through education, or downward mobility.

Zhou, Min and Jennifer Lee. "Becoming Ethnic or Becoming American? Reflecting on the Divergent Pathways to Social Mobility and Assimilation among the New Second Generation," *Du Bois Review: Social Science Research on Race* (2007), 4:189-205. Focuses on the "new second generation" in the United States and their social mobility and intergenerational progress in terms of success and assimilation. It also discusses the myriad of identity choices second-generation Vietnamese, Chinese, and Mexicans in Los Angeles adopt, including pan-ethnic, American and ethnic.

**Jean Beaman** recently earned her PhD in sociology at Northwestern University. This fall, she will be a Max Weber fellow at the European University Institute in Florence, Italy. She studies race, ethnicity, and immigration in France.

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