To start this discussion of colonial/post-colonial urban history in France, let's begin with a short trip from the wealth and power of central Paris to the disenfranchised suburbs of the north. The journey is found in a curious political advertisement that appeared on YouTube in April, 2012. In the video a black screen lights up with the words “LE CHANGEMENT C'EST MAINTENANT” in white followed by “#2H12CREW” and the apparent title “48H AVEC FH” with each H highlighted in red. As the music starts the names of several Parisian suburbs flash across the scene in rapid succession: “CREIL … LES ULIS … AUBERVILLIERS … AULNAY SUR BOIS.” The first shot is a fish-eye image of a pale and bespectacled François Hollande holding a carte électorale, immediately followed by a woman in a Muslim headscarf in the same pose. The video then shows the Socialist Party's presidential candidate in a RER station, surrounded by an adoring crowd of young Maghrebi and Sub-Saharan commuters. Hollande seems to enjoy the scrum and even poses for a few selfies, marking this as a historically specific moment for scholars in future generations. On the train, a black woman with long braided hair and a cell phone excitedly tells someone that the candidate is on the train and headed to the suburbs. At an enthusiastic rally, where a woman of West African descent waves the tri-color as she chants “François Président … Inch'Allah!,” black and brown faces dominate the crowd scenes and the only whites seem to be part of the campaign team. While Hollande is in urban France, it is the land of the Other. The video then tries to articulate the relationship of this community of the Other to the nation-state. After a montage of political meetings that look more
like post-election celebrations, a break for a proper déjeuner complete with red wine, and sound bites from supporters with a variety of accents, the candidate gives a speech that concludes “…with universal suffrage one force opposes another. And if it is certain that they are wealthier than you, you are more numerous than them!” In case any viewer misses the point that this in an appeal to the multi-ethnic hip-hop generation of the banlieue, the soundtrack is an intense beat backing a rap duet by the global but clearly American superstars Jay-Z and Kanye West. If the song’s lyrics, which celebrate materialism and misogyny, seem out of touch with socialist ideology, its title, “Niggas in Paris,” raised confused and concerned eyebrows amongst many American viewers.¹

This campaign video should not be dismissed with a bemused slap on the head as typical culture-doesn’t-always-travel-well or written off as shameless political pandering to get the ethnic vote. On the contrary, “48H AVEC FH” is an important historical artifact that raises several provocative points about urban history in post-colonial France. With this video as evidence of a culturally diverse yet spatially segregated urban France, the question is how the nation-state got to this stage. While political scientists and sociologists might parse the specific moment of a member of the white political elite leaving central Paris to make a public pilgrimage to suburban enclaves of non-white France, the task of historians is to situate the 2012 event in its historical context. And this is a journey that began in the colonies. Gary Wilder’s concept of inter-war France as an imperial-nation state in which an unresolved tension between race, culture, and citizenship is a “feature, not a failure, of the national-imperial state” is an instructive starting point for coming to terms with this video as politico-cultural milestone.² Holland’s RER ride from centre ville to banlieu signals a shift from the colonial to the post-colonial in French urban history.

The past decade has seen a radical shift in the research on and teaching of the French colonial empire. Once marginalized or the domain of military historians, the “colonial turn” in the field

has refocused the research of major scholars from metropolitan to colonial subjects. With rare exceptions, French history courses uniformly include the colonial encounter, and frequently not as a marginalized “colonies week” (like the unhappy ghettoization of women’s history and gender history in syllabi from days gone by) but as part of a major course theme that builds a narrative of an imperial France. With colonial history now enjoying its proper place as a part of French history proper, we should give special importance to the role of colonial cities as crucial sites of inquiry.

Colonial cities played a fundamental role both in the history of the empire and in creating an alternate modernity that ultimately would feed into France’s contemporary postmodern and post-colonial urban experience. In the age of empire, urban space ensured that the rules of the colonial order were shockingly apparent and clear (even if they ultimately failed to be quite as uncompromising as intended). Racially defined quarter systems, apartheid like economies of labor, authoritarian state systems working in league with international capital, and radical disparities between the colonizer and colonized in material conditions and all forms of power defined the colonial urban experience. In the 1980s and 1990s, the first generation of critical studies of colonial urbanism focused on the colonization of existing urban space or the creation of entire new imperial urban space that was to be firmly under French control. David Prochaska and Janet Abu-Lughod’s analysis of urban segregation in French North Africa and Gwendolyn Wright’s Foucauldian comparative history of urbanism in Indochine, Madagascar, and Morocco are some of the most noteworthy studies from the era. In 2007, Brian Newsome

3 For example, contrast Edward Berenson’s classic work on early 20th century culture and politics with his recent study of white men in Victorian Africa Edward Berenson, The Trial of Madame Caillaux (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993) and Heroes of Empire: Five Charismatic Men and the Conquest of Africa (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2010).


and Tyler Stovall edited a special volume of *Historical Reflections/Réflexions Historiques* dedicated to French colonial urbanism that characterized colonial cities as systems of conquest, control, surveillance, and ordering. Interestingly, when Hollande tells the suburban crowd that they are more numerous than their richer enemies, he is rearticulating the colonizer’s ultimate nightmare: sheer numbers overwhelming the military advantages of industrial capitalism.

The establishment of imperial systems of control in the overseas colonies is, in and of itself, worthy of serious discussion, but the empire also struck back. Decolonization resulted in a reversed flow of traffic including a demographic movement as well as systemic transfers of the colonial order of things from the tropical world of the global south to the “West.” The colonial dual city, composed of cultural pluralism and socio-racial segregation, now characterizes metropolitan urban space. As Anthony D. King wrote “the culture, society and space of early twentieth century Calcutta or Singapore pre-figured the future in a much more accurate way than did that of London or New York. ‘Modernity’ was not born in Paris but rather in Rio.” Thus, the contemporary French city has its roots in the empire’s urban history. As Paul Rabinow pioneered the critique of the interventionist state using the colonies as a laboratory before deploying these methods of rule in the metropole and Clifford Rosenberg detailed the creation of state system of surveillance of colonial subjects in Paris, today’s urban history needs to consider the ways in which the post-colonial subaltern played a role in this process.

As seen in the Hollande video, contemporary greater Paris replicates colonial racial separation with its sharp contrast between white city center and non-white suburbs. The task for French urban history is to integrate the colonial to post-colonial transition

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into the story of French cities. Jennifer Boittin and Herman Lebovics offer two models for reintegrating the empire into the history French cities.\textsuperscript{10} Elsewhere, Tyler Stovall’s trajectory from his first monograph on working class Parisian suburbs to his study of race in greater Paris embodies the shift from “red belt to black belt.”\textsuperscript{11} Inter-disciplinary perspectives should inform the building of a post-colonial urban France with insights from the study of hip-hop and literature in the transnational culture of the francophone city, just as Mathieu Kassovitz’s 1995 film \textit{La Haine} highlights the contrast between the desperation of the non-white suburb and the wealth of the white city-center.\textsuperscript{12} The prolific political scientist Alec Hargreaves offers essential information for urban historians.\textsuperscript{13} As the call to prayer is increasingly loud in France, historians of the city must now analyze Islam as part of the urban experience.\textsuperscript{14} Such an inter-disciplinary sampling can provide us with the models and tools used by ethnologists who write a “history of the present.”\textsuperscript{15}

Faced with the manifestation of multiple forms of globalization in French cities, urban historians would do well to

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\textsuperscript{13} Alec Hargreaves, the second edition of \textit{Multi-Ethnic France: Immigration, Politics, Culture, and Society} (New York: Routledge, 2007).


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consider the approach of world historians. While the field of French history has proved itself resistant to world history, such a perspective would begin by rejecting the nation-state as the essential unit of analysis in favor of an intertwined model of historical development. Worlding French urban history would allow us to consider how history happened in multiple places and trace the interactions of multiple identities across both place and time. Carl Nightingale’s World History Association award winning *Segregation: A Global History of Divided Cities* offers an excellent model for a world perspective on race in urban space.

Thus, the discussion of colonial cities is relevant for both understanding the specific historical moment of empire proper but also for understanding the imperial foundations of the postcolonial present and future. While we might view “24H AVEC FH” and see Paris in a colonial relationship with its suburbs, the French capital should be seen as a post-colonial but also imperial city. Elements of Paris’ imperial nature lie in its control of global capital and its military capabilities, which include repeated interventions in Africa, as well as the socio-economic marginalization of Parisians of color. If this city has exercised such power for several centuries, the presence of the non-white Other within the greater Parisian urban system is something new and unsettling. With postcolonial studies’ ahistorical (at times even anti-historical) bent, it is crucial for historians to locate these phenomena and to place them in their specific role in the process of change over time.

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