

2013

“Nous Sommes Touristes!”



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As we boarded the plane from Hartsfield Jackson International Airport in Atlanta, Georgia I could already notice the cultural diversity that made up Paris. It seemed as if every ethnicity, religion, and range of economic statuses was represented and that was just on the plane! What a beautiful site to see. I was prepared to return an enlightened woman with new insights of the clash of culture and assimilation. Paris is also known as the City of Lights, but shadows exist that attempt to hide strong tensions between immigrant groups and the state. As one of our guides frankly put it, the French like to refrain from acknowledging or discussing problems about immigration because that would force them to acknowledge that an actual problem exists. This seems to be a common and very “French, French” way of thinking. Another example of not acknowledging dark spots within French history or culture is that slavery is not part of the curriculum in schools- *Quoi?*

From cuisine, to sense of style, and taste in music, France cannot deny the influence of its former colonies. These influences definitely spice up the country a bit. While in Paris we visited three very different and colorful districts with large amounts of immigrants from a specific a region: the African Quarter, Chinatown, and an area that is called little India. In Toulouse we visited two immigrant neighborhoods, each with rather depressing reputations but were hardly as cold and frightening as they were described. These visits had a

different impact on me and in a surprising way delayed the deep infatuation that most people generally have for Paris when they first come and visit. That's not to say that I was disappointed or underwhelmed, pas du tout. It was just a much more realistic view than the idealistic one that is often portrayed on travel shows or classic French films. For this I am very grateful. We were lucky to be exposed to the many sides of these major cities, so in the end the knowledge and understanding we have is far greater than those who may have lived in those cities for far longer. Many people never get to see with their own eyes what the "ghettos" or "bad areas" of town are actually like. They only hear stories. For example, my friend Roy who was studying abroad in Paris while we were there had never been to the Chinatown area before. When she met us at the metro station in the area she admitted to being "sketched out" and she only knew the area because a girl she knew "came there to buy marijuana". If only she had spent the day with us I'm sure her perception would have changed.

Through gorging myself with ethnic foods, getting lost in the subterranean world of the metro, trying to dress Parisian, and discovering a subculture of music, I could better understand the experience of a new immigrant to the country would be like. It seems like you have two options: assimilate or be seen as outsider. In one of the articles we read in our class by Amin Maalouf titled *Les Identites Meurtrieres*, he describes a more realistic way that we should look at our personal and national identities in relation to the country we live in and also the world. He states that "identity is not

compartmentalized, it is not broken or in halves or thirds. I do not have several identities; I have one made of all the elements that have shaped in a particular "mix" which is never the same from one person to another". Why is that we are all focused on labeling each other as an outsider? This was very prevalent in France. Labeling and dividing the French from the immigrants. Everyone wants to be authentic as possible, but no one wants to give others the chance to fit seamlessly.

I have been anticipating my food journey through France from years of watching the travel channel. I am a devout meat eater and France was an absolute paradise to my taste buds! The picture of the hanging pork was hanging in a market area in part of the African Quarter. While others were squealing at the site of raw meat, my mouth was literally watering imagining the types cheeses and wines that would complement the savory taste in my mouth. My palate grew so much over the two weeks we were there. You can really learn a lot about a culture just by eating that is custom to the land. By just looking at our itinerary, you can tell that meals, especially dinner is a very important part of the day, and one that is not valued as much in American households. Based on our meals we traveled to nine different countries: France, Senegal, China, Japan, India, Algeria, Turkey, Italy, and Mexico. What a true cultural mosaic of tastes.

Beginning with the host country of France, I never really knew what made up a traditional French meal or diet in day to day life, other than croissants and baguette sandwiches and lots of coffee, wine, and cigarette smoking of course.

Breakfast is usually very light. A croissant with coffee and fruit or yogurt usually sufficed. Other options that were very common were a baguette with cheese, jam, ham or nutella, a light cake or even some cereal. Lunchtime we would eat or often see other people eat a baguette sandwich. Common ingredients on sandwiches included prosciutto, tuna or salmon, mozzarella cheese, and tomatoes. Then for the grand finale: a three course hour and a half or more long dinner. Don't forget the glasses of wine while you're waiting for each course to come out, the baskets of bread throughout the meal, and the coffee or tea at the very end to help ease the digestion.

At the Senegalese restaurant we ate traditional meal which consisted of rice, chicken or fish, vegetables, and cassava. The food was cooked in such wonderful flavor. At first when they brought out the meal I was wondering why it wasn't spicy since I am familiar to West African food. The French apparently don't like spicy food, which is a terrible shame. Shortly thereafter a small jar of pepper sauce was being passed around. I was extremely grateful. Both the Japanese and Indian restaurants put a little spin on their food by having a cheese option. As a friend of mine frankly put it when she read there was a garlic Naan with cheese option on the menu, "there's no cheese in India!" This is very true. But there is a lot of cheese in France. Just one of the many examples of some cultural assimilation. Two of my favorite food experiences were at the mosque in Paris and at the Algerian restaurant in Toulouse. I am still trying to perfect my

tea with thyme and honey combination. The environment and spirit of the La Kasbah was beautiful and it made the food that much more enjoyable to eat.

The Paris metro is the perfect place to perform an anthropological study. Old and young, humans and even animals of the canine species can be seen enjoying the extremely convenient Paris Metro. It is pretty accessible and reasonably priced. The metro proved to be one of the more comical aspects of Paris especially. I knew every time I got on something or someone would provide me with great entertainment. Metro Etiquette is quite comical in itself. The first and foremost rule is do not make eye contact and don't dare make eye contact and smile at the same time. This insinuates one of two things or both. You are American, or you are flirting. You don't necessarily have to look angry but definitely don't look like you're enjoying yourself either. One of our guides told us that when she sees people smiling at her she thinks they could be crazy. The next thing I learned is that those who pickpocket are extremely well trained and hold on to your bag. I guess part of the appearance of having a frowning face may be a device to deter these petty criminals because you look much less approachable. The next two things I learned in times of urgency. As much as you chuckle at the people hopping, kicking, and sliding through the metro gate when the last train of the night is leaving, your fight or flight response engages and you find a way to make the train. Lastly, and maybe the most important is that when you stick your hand in the train door it will not prevent it from closing. You may lose your arm. I didn't realize that this was the case and how much it frightened

people until a woman screamed and jumped up help unjam my arm from the door. There are very few things I haven't seen done while in the metro system. You can enjoy an alcoholic beverage, you can sing and dance on the metro, and you can bring your pets on the metro. You can get into a brawl on the metro. You can conveniently even relieve yourself in the metro and also sleep in the metro. A moment of unification among different ethnicities actually happened while we were on the metro our first night in Paris. A couple had gotten in argument and things got physical. A group of boys who were out celebrating Paris soccer team's win immediately jumped in to extinguish the situation. It started a huge commotion and our train was delayed for a few minutes. However it provided me with great entertainment, a good story to tell, and an everyday example of teamwork.

Parisian fashion did not disappoint. I've followed Parisian street style fashion blogs as a hobby. I arrived ready with my best outfits to go out and explore the city. Unfortunately for me, I packed for May in Georgia, not May in Paris so few of those outfit left my hotel room. But it was still nice to be an observer. Fashion and sense of style was just as much an anthropological experiment as riding the metro. Whether or not you liked what a person was wearing or not you couldn't deny the personal sense of style that went into getting dressed. Some trends I noticed that were worn across all demographics in Paris were American sneakers like Converse, Vans, and Nikes. Leather jackets, trench coats and military jackets were a staple. Also for women, large purses and

silk scarves were very common. Dark colors seemed universally worn. Another interesting observation noted was helped made a friend of mine who was living in Paris at the time. What is seen as attractive or sexy for a woman in France is quite different than in America. When going out to enjoy the nightlife of Paris and even Toulouse, I noticed this among the youth around my age. Showing too much skin is not favorable. Confidence and the way you style your clothes seem to go a much longer way than just showing skin.

I learned an immense about immigration through museum visits and site visits to immigrant neighborhoods while with our group and just by wandering with friends. However, the most memorable culture of immigration I learned in a Paris bar. Yes, a Paris bar. The name of it is called L'Embuscade and it's a Cape Verdean restaurant by day and a small *discotech* by night where DJ's around Paris who love African music come and spin their best music. My friends and I adored this place and mainly because we felt like locals.

It was great to see such a mixture of people coming together to share a love for music and just dance. While we were enjoying ourselves, sweating profusely, we met another group of friends who were no strangers to L'embuscade. They were all DJ's in Paris who specialized in playing specifically African music. Along in their group was a tall, lanky German boy who worked at an African record label out of Germany. He had such an obsession actually wrote his dissertation about a subculture in Paris called Coupé-Decalé. In fact most of the music that had been playing that night was Coupé-Decalé music which

neither of my friends and I had known. Currently, it is the most popular type of music in Francophone West Africa. I'm from West Africa and although I couldn't recognize the name, I could most definitely recognize the rhythms.

What is significant about the Coupé-Decalé movement is that it actually originated from a dance in African nightclubs in Paris and swiftly spread south to the African continent, not the other way around. As L'embuscade closed the group of friends told us about an event going on where the founder of Coupé-Decalé, Douk Saga would actually be playing a set. We could not miss this opportunity to meet the founder. The taxi drove all of us to the edge of Paris, and in what looked like an abandon building on the outside was actually a huge Coupé-Decalé event on the inside.

It's rare that we ever think about dances as political statements. Not only is Coupé-Decalé this, but it also started off as a symbol of a survival strategy among Francophone immigrants in the diaspora. The dance begins when "first the right hand makes a cut through the air: couper, French for cut. In nouchi, the youth slang of Abidjan, this means something like swiping or snatching away. Next comes a step backward, the hands reaching up and imitating the wings of an airplane: décaler, French for shifting or displacing. This means making off with the booty, for preference back home to Abidjan. Once there, the idea is to spend all the money on expensive luxury goods, designer clothes, expensive drinks, cigars, and handing out money at parties, which is called *travailler*" (Milz,Georg) . Many of the Coupé-Decalé dances are associated with political themes. For

example, one move the hands are held together as if they were in handcuffs and they alternate from in front to behind. Another interesting dance move actually won one artist called DJ Lewis was presented with a medal by the Agrarian Minister of Cote D'Ivoire when one of his dance moves brought attention to farmers about proper sanitation and an outbreak of foodborne illness. The dance is called *le Grippe Aviaire*, and it consists of floundering around on the ground as if in an attack of fever.

Back in 2002 when the movement first started, crowds of people from Ivorian middle class flocked to Europe especially to Paris. Some could afford the trip to Europe from their own funds, but it was common to see that others had fundraised in their communities or even borrowed money all for the goal of reaching a high status in Paris. African nightclubs in Paris became a place where you could make a name for yourself. The more lavish and extravagant your outfits were and the bigger your personality seemed, individuals would gain higher and higher status. They would buy rounds of drinks and it even became the fashion to hand out money to the guests at the clubs. The dance started out of gratitude for receiving some money from Douk Saga. Later is when specific music was developed in collaboration with DJs and a group called Jet Set, which formally became known as Coupé Décalé after becoming popular in Abidjan.

For many people, including myself, when defining my identity I am a mixture of two countries, two or three different languages, and several cultural influences. National identity should be able to exist with personal identity, and if

mindsets change about accepting others into we can all have a much better cultural understanding of one another that could potentially solve a lot of conflicts. National identity is not something you're born with. You are brought up in it, or taught it: you experience it.

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