

Livi Yoshioka-Maxwell
St. Olaf College

“UN CRÉOLE EXTRÊMEMENT VIVACE”: LINGUISTIC IDENTITY AND BELONGING IN BESSORA’S *53 CM*

Abstract

This article draws on applied linguistics approaches to examine how Swiss-Gabonese author Bessora’s novel *53 cm* (1999) engages with the image of the il/legitimate speaker to challenge the myth that cultural assimilation grants acceptance in France. Bessora’s novel represents the bureaucratic machinery of the immigration system as a means to police French nationality as not only a political identity, but as an ethnic and racial entity as well—a practice that presents a fundamental contradiction to the republican philosophy of acceptance through integration. Bessora’s manipulation of the written word on the page, from typeface choice to punctuation, evokes oral discourse while also creating intertextual relationships with earlier critical and literary works to show the lingering influence of the colonial imaginary on contemporary perceptions of linguistic legitimacy in France. Pushing back against myths of French cultural purity, *53 cm* suggests that the cultural hybridity historically associated with contact zones far from the hexagon is in fact deeply embedded in the French cultural *patrimoine*.

Keywords: Linguistic legitimacy ♦ Bessora ♦ cultural assimilation ♦ national identity ♦ contact zone

Introduction

The increasing focus on assimilation in public discourses surrounding French immigration policies since the 1980s tends to frame immigrant cultures as threats to a coherent French national identity that is at once political and cultural.¹ Immigration policy, therefore, seeks to control this threat by mandating assimilation, even as certain groups are perceived as unassimilable. As Dennis Ager demonstrates in his study of immigration and language policy in France, “Immigration can only be tolerated if it accepts the strength of the French identity structure, based on and around the myth of territory (the geometrical hexagon), of individual acceptance by the citizen of his role in defending the universal values of human rights, of the specific French contribution to humanism, and of the special role of the French language in representing these values” (1994: 47-48). Odile Cazenave observes that, as politicians moved to impose restrictions on the naturalization process in the 1980s–1990s, figures that were largely relegated to the background in the previous generation of African “romans de formation” (*Bildungsromane*) gained new prominence in immigrant narratives set in Paris.² The protagonists of novels by Alain Mabanckou (*Bleu Blanc Rouge*, 1998) and J.R. Essomba (*Le Paradis du Nord*, 1996), among others, are “non-heroes,” defined by their “marginality and illegality” (Cazenave 2005: 56). In a context where politicians and large swathes of the public were consumed by the question of “*who belongs* as French national and citizen—the redrawing of borders and boundaries” (Favell 2001: 156, emphasis in original), socially, culturally, and economically marginalized subjects moved to center stage in African diasporic literature written in French (Cazenave 2005: 58).

In her first novel *53 cm* (1999), Swiss-Gabonese author Bessora constructs a riotously funny satire of assimilationist myths around her protagonist, Zara, an anthropology student whose career as a self-proclaimed “Gaulologist” in France is jeopardized by her expired *carte de séjour* (residence permit). *53 cm* both parodies and deploys ethnographic modes of observation to engage with the competing discourses surrounding race and republicanism in France, textual strategies and themes that are present in a number of Bessora’s subsequent works, including *Les taches d’encre* (2000) and *Petroleum* (2004). Zara’s ambiguous ethnic and national identities reflect her multiple positions within different, overlapping cultural and political frameworks: her father is Gabonese, her mother is Swiss, and she was born in

Brussels. This hybrid background complicates her attempt to legalize her residency in France. However, the obsessive attention to race in the novel suggests that Zara's struggles are not merely the product of her complex administrative status (Gabonese and Swiss passports, a Belgian birth certificate, an expired French residence permit). Zara constantly seeks to locate the people she encounters within a convoluted, pseudo-scientific racial framework inspired by naturalists like Georges Cuvier, and her interlocutors in turn attempt to classify her, assuming that she is Antillean, South African, South Asian, or Brazilian, among other various identities. Although she is a native (Swiss) French speaker, perceptions of her linguistic and cultural competence are filtered through these assumptions about her ethnic and racial identity. Focusing on the question of linguistic legitimacy, this article will show how *53 cm* challenges the notion that assimilation grants acceptance, highlighting the ways in which identity markers such as race and ethnicity often trump cultural competence so as to exclude non-white immigrants and citizens from the contested spaces of French national identity, and for some, from the territory of France itself. The novel's vision of the central role played by linguistic performance in negotiating national belonging in the late 1990s remains highly pertinent today, as the assimilationist rhetoric espoused by various "Gauls" in *53 cm* continues to shape the terms of immigration policy.

Assimilationist Immigration and Language Policies

The emphasis on assimilation in French immigration policies has two major antecedents, both associated with the standardizing and homogenizing force of republican ideology. The first is the "absorption" of regional cultures within the hexagon into a unified cultural identity aligned with the borders of the nation-state (Ager 1994: 42). The second lies in the colonial doctrine of the *mission civilisatrice* (civilizing mission), which figured colonial domination as a form of cultural apprenticeship whereby French colonizers bestowed superior cultural norms and technological advances on colonized populations (Fogarty 2016: 44; Ager 1994: 46).³ Immigration policy has increasingly emphasized that the naturalization process carries both promise and obligation: in order to obtain the expanded political rights and social and economic integration that citizenship will afford, candidates for naturalization must attain a standardized level of cultural competence and adhere to French cultural values. Reforms to the naturalization process since the 1980s have created a model of citizenship to which it is nearly impossible to conform, such that assimilationist policies ostensibly designed to ensure successful integration into French society in practice end up having an exclusionary effect: "[T]he *surenchère* of the formal category of *citoyen*, into a fully-fledged moral and political definition of the ideal liberal individual ... has created a difficult and distant ideal that fails

many of the new ‘liberated’ *citoyens* it is supposed to support” (Favell 2001: 156–57). In 2003, the *Code civil* article (21–24) addressing cultural assimilation was amended to require that candidates demonstrate knowledge of the “droits et devoirs” (“rights and duties”) of every French citizen. During the Sarkozy administration (2007–2012), immigration policy reforms imposed increasingly stringent requirements regarding cultural competence and ideological conformity; in 2011, a further amendment to article 21–24 imposed new requirements regarding candidates’ knowledge of French history, culture, and society.⁴

Mastery of the French language has long been highlighted in immigration policies as a criterion of successful cultural assimilation and as a requirement for naturalization. Among the considerations of cultural competence now included in the *Code civil*, the French language has a unique historical standing, as linguistic proficiency was the only measure of assimilation explicitly identified from 1945–2003: “Nul ne peut être naturalisé s’il ne justifie de son assimilation à la communauté française, notamment par une connaissance suffisante, selon sa condition, de la langue française” (“Nobody may be naturalized unless he proves his assimilation into the French community, and notably by a sufficient knowledge, according to his condition, of the language of France.”)⁵ The legislation of linguistic competence predates the debates over proposed restrictions on the naturalization process in the 1980s–1990s.⁶ This legislative history reflects what Ager identifies as widespread perceptions of the French language’s “special role” in upholding republican ideals—an exceptionalist myth at the heart of French national identity.

French perceptions of linguistic competence have long been and continue to be influenced by racist notions of European cultural superiority. As Richard Fogarty argues, such attitudes shaped French military language policy with regards to West African colonial troops during World War I, where the pidgin French that sprang up in the contact zone of the army was used and even formally taught by French officers as the *lingua franca*, not simply as a practical means to facilitate communication among soldiers and officers, but because military officials—and the wider French public—believed that Africans were incapable of mastering standard French. Colonial subjects were well-aware of the particular weight assigned to French language proficiency within the French cultural sphere. Frantz Fanon introduces his seminal 1952 essay “Le Noir et le langage” (“The Negro and Language”) with a reflection on the symbolic importance of the act of speaking, particularly fraught in the colonial context: “Parler, c’est être à même d’employer une certaine syntaxe, posséder la morphologie de telle ou telle langue, mais c’est surtout assumer une culture, supporter le poids d’une civilisation” (13) (“To speak means to be in a position to use a certain syntax, to grasp the morphology of

this or that language, but it means above all to assume a culture, to support the weight of a civilization” 2008: 8). Using black Antillean speakers as a case in point, Fanon shows how assimilationist doctrine and racial ideologies structuring colonial relations influence these subjects’ perception of the power of linguistic competence: “le Noir Antillais sera d’autant plus blanc, c’est-à-dire se rapprochera d’autant plus du véritable homme, qu’il aura fait sienne la langue française.... Un homme qui possède le langage possède par contrecoup le monde exprimé et impliqué par ce langage” (14) (“[t]he Negro of the Antilles will be proportionately whiter—that is, he will come closer to being a real human being—in direct ratio to his mastery of the French language.... A man who has a language consequently possesses the world expressed and implied by that language”, 8–9). However, as Fanon goes on to show, in encounters between white colonizers and non-white colonial subjects, whether in the colonies or in the metropole, perceptions of colonial subjects’ language ability are filtered through racist assumptions of intellectual inferiority (1952: 24–30). Mastery of the linguistic conventions that Fanon identifies—syntax, morphology—does not guarantee language ownership nor does it grant acceptance.

Although Fanon’s observations on linguistic legitimacy were published over 65 years ago—and nearly 50 years before Bessora’s novel *53 cm*—current research on language policy and social attitudes in the context of mass immigration in France demonstrates that the colonial heritage of racism continues to shape expectations regarding non-white speakers, regardless of their citizenship status. As Maya Smith observes in her recent study of conceptions of linguistic legitimacy and experiences of social exclusion among Senegalese immigrants and French citizens of Senegalese origin in Paris, “while on the surface identity markers such as race and language ability may seem to be independent entities, they are actually inextricably linked to one another” (2015: 318). Linguistic competence has been an eligibility requirement for naturalization since 1945, but its power to grant cultural and social legitimacy to speakers in France is increasingly in question as the *Code civil* has been expanded to require further proofs of assimilation. An examination of the progressively heavier burden placed upon citizenship applicants suggests that policy and discourses surrounding immigration have increasingly promoted exclusion rather than integration. This phenomenon on a policy level is one feature of what Dominic Thomas identifies as a broad shift in both policy and public discourse, “from the focus on the causes and problems of *immigration* [...] to a commitment to reduce the proportion of foreigners to the French population while dramatically limiting entry and circulation into France” (2013: 74, emphasis in original). Thomas is here referring to the years of the Sarkozy government, but the policies developed during this administration

merely built on exclusionary legislation created in the 1980s and 1990s under the auspices of anti-immigration proponents such as Charles Pasqua, Minister of the Interior in the center-right Balladur government, who declared in a June 1993 interview with *Le Monde* that “La France ne veut plus être un pays d’immigration” (“France no longer wants to be a country of immigration”) and announced the government’s intention to seek a policy of “immigration-zéro” (qtd. in Gastaut 2004: 116).

In spite of the deliberate exclusion of language concerning ethnic or racial identity from immigration laws, certain policies are designed to facilitate the exclusion of specific groups. For instance, Alec Hargreaves argues that deportation policies laid out in the 1993 Pasqua laws were formulated in such a way as to counteract family reunification procedures that allowed polygamous families to maintain their kinship structures in France; immigrant families from the sub-Saharan ex-colonies Mali and Senegal were particularly affected by these new policies (2007: 98-99). While looking at the consequences of the laws can tell us a great deal about the intentions driving the legislation, examining discussions of immigration outside the carefully constructed textual sphere of the *Code civil* also reveals the ideological impetus, as such policies are easily linked to discourses that involve explicitly racist language. A particularly (in)famous example can be found in a June 1991 speech by center-right politician Jacques Chirac (then mayor of Paris), in which he contrasted the successful integration of hard-working European immigrants with the problems posed by the presence of “musulmans” (“Muslims”) and “Noirs” (“Blacks”), sympathetically evoking the rage felt by the average French worker in the face of “le bruit et l’odeur” (“the noise and the smell”) produced by polygamous immigrant families (qtd. Laurence and Vaisse 2007: 261–62). This mainstreaming of the rhetoric of extreme-right ideologues such as Jean-Marie Le Pen set the stage for the passage of restrictive immigration legislation such as the 1993 Pasqua laws. While the text of the *Code civil* provision concerning linguistic competence has remained virtually unchanged in the midst of transformations to the legal and discursive landscape, since at least 2003 the provision has been implemented in ways that facilitate exclusion, not integration.⁷ In an October 2011 interview with *L’Express*, then Minister of the Interior Claude Guéant openly associated stricter guidelines regarding linguistic competence with his goal of reducing the overall number of naturalizations by 10% in one year (Mandonnet and Pelletier 2011: n.p.).

Although written at the end of the 1990s, 53 *cm*’s vision of how the legacy of French colonialism and racist ideologies continue to shape notions of Frenchness remains highly relevant today, as debates over French national identity continue and Front National candidate

Marine Le Pen's historic performance in the second round of the 2017 presidential election signals a growing normalization of racist and xenophobic rhetoric in immigration debates. Analyzing *53 cm*, a literary text, through linguistic methodologies highlights the social realities of exclusion for both literary figures and real-world speakers. In what follows, I draw on applied linguistics approaches to examine how Bessora's novel plays with the image of the il/legitimate speaker to challenge the myth that cultural assimilation grants acceptance in France, keeping in mind the unique status of linguistic competence as a criterion of successful assimilation in the history of immigration policy. *53 cm* represents the bureaucratic machinery of the immigration system as a means to police French nationality as not only a political identity, but as an ethnic and racial entity as well, a practice that presents a fundamental contradiction to the republican philosophy of acceptance through integration. Bessora's manipulation of the written word on the page, through arresting typeface choices and non-standard punctuation, simultaneously evokes oral discourse and creates an intertextual relationship with earlier critical and literary works to show the lingering influence of the colonial imaginary on contemporary perceptions of linguistic legitimacy in France. Furthermore, pushing back against the myth of cultural purity embodied by the figure of the "Français de souche" ("true" or "pure" French person), Bessora suggests that the cultural hybridity historically associated with contact zones far from the hexagon is in fact deeply embedded in the French cultural *patrimoine*.

Our Ancestors the Gauls?: Cultural Legacies of French Imperialism

In a parody of European colonial anthropology, the narrator of *53 cm*, Zara Sem Andock, frames her quest to obtain a French residence permit as ethnographic fieldwork among the tribesmen of France.⁸ Zara, an anthropology student, assumes the scientist's authoritative voice to describe her interactions with the indigenous Parisians, whom she refers to as primitive "Gaulois" ("Gauls"). However, Zara's attempts to lay claim to the privileged status of colonial anthropologists are stymied as she fails to obtain the prized native talisman, the *carte de séjour* (residence permit, italics in original), which would confer greater access to the social and cultural spaces that she endeavors to penetrate. Unable to mold her complicated cultural and political identity into the homogenous entity expected by the French bureaucracy, she is denied the residency papers that would allow her and her daughter to "regularize" their situation in France.⁹

Bessora's satire places Zara alternately in the role of the explorer, the ethnographer, and the racialized native; her narration of her experiences in Paris oscillates between asserting her

position of dominance and recognizing her marginalized and tenuous status in France. In her role as a Gaulologist, Zara interacts with the Gauls in a way that belies her real precarity as she struggles to obtain a residence permit. When a social worker comes to inspect Zara and her household, Zara not only transgresses French social codes by condescendingly addressing this stranger in the informal *tu* form, but adopts an overtly primitivist discourse to declare her use of the typical anthropological practice of unobtrusive observation of her subjects' cultural and social practices: “J’observe ton peuple sans interférer, car un observateur civilisé est invisible à l’œil nu des indigènes, et à l’œil habillé des citadogènes” “I observe your people without interfering, because a civilized observer is invisible to the naked eye of the natives, and to the clothed eye of the urbanatives” (37, all translations of Bessora mine).¹⁰ Here, Zara stakes out a position of cultural superiority vis-à-vis her object of study, playing with the expression “l’œil nu” and the associations between nakedness and primitiveness to suggest that the native gaze, being unclothed, is also undiscerning. But despite Zara’s arrogant pretensions to invisibility, she fails to recreate the unequal power dynamic that characterized the field work interactions of anthropologists such as Marcel Griaule and Michel Leiris, whose (in)famous Mission Dakar-Djibouti in 1931–33 had the administrative backing of the imperialist state.¹¹ She is, in fact, often hypervisible to her objects of study, whether bureaucrats or strangers in nightclubs, who return her scientific gaze with their own inquisitive looks, seeking in turn to classify her body and fix her identity. Zara’s physical appearance, clothes, and certain behaviors tag her as a suspicious, foreign body in the supposedly colorblind realm of the French republic. These identity markers create problems for Zara the international student (as opposed to the unassailable Gaulologist of the conceit) because, in spite of her condescension toward the “natives,” Zara urgently needs to collapse the difference between herself and her object of study in order to demonstrate her potential for integration.

53 *cm* suggests that perceptions of cultural competence are influenced by a racist model of national belonging that excludes non-white subjects and regulates access to citizenship accordingly, such that Zara, a Swiss national whose first language is French, is seen as an intrusive, foreign body. Framing Zara’s quest for a residence permit as a series of vexing encounters with native Gauls reminds readers that the binary opposition between immigrants and “Français de souche” frequently evoked in xenophobic discourses is anchored in the myth of a racial lineage connecting the modern French population to the pre-Roman Celts (Citron 2008: 161). This racist conception of Frenchness has its roots in the ideological construction of the Republic, as revolutionary leaders grappled with the problem of creating a

sense of community for a new nation of citizens. As Michael Dietler points out, prior to the Revolution, class distinctions were naturalized “through appeals to differences of ethnic identity [that] tended to take on a strongly racial character,” as the nobility claimed the conquering Franks as their ancestors, to the exclusion of commoners, who were associated with the (defeated) Gallo-Romans (1994: 587). While Roman political culture offered models for constructing new republican social and political institutions, “the Celts provided a better potential foundation for an emotionally charged sense of ethnic community” (588). Nineteenth-century historians such as Amédée Thierry and Henri Martin, whose romantic images of the Gauls had a lasting impact on nationalist mythologies, were heavily influenced by biological anthropology. Their typology of the Gauls associated stereotypical ethnic traits with physical characteristics, figuring the ancestors of the modern “Français de souche” as tall and white, with light-colored hair (Citron 2008: 159–63).

Zara’s presentation of the *Gaulois* tribe as an ethnic or racial group, however, does not affirm the biological myth of Gallic blood (Citron 2008: 163), but rather exposes the fact that French immigration policy relies on twin processes of “ethnisation” and “effacement” (Célérier 2002: 77). Even though immigration discourses often essentialize the lack of conformity to French cultural norms among immigrants as proof of fundamental incompatibilities, a form of “ethnisation”—for instance, Jacques Chirac’s rhetorical flourish pitting the integration of specific groups of European immigrants (Spanish, Polish, Portuguese) against that of immigrants belonging to the monolithic racial category of “Blacks”—republican universalism requires a quiet “effacement” of similarly essentialist conceptions of Frenchness. The parodic conceit of Zara the Gaulologist uncovers these erasures and links such ethnic or racialist understandings of national and cultural identity to Zara’s eventual exclusion from the French political and social body, as the novel closes with her probable deportation back to Switzerland.

Zara’s discourse and her erudite “Gaulological” commentary on the French natives’ language play a key role in the novel’s broader demystification of assimilationist doctrine. Given the importance placed on mastery of the French language as a criterion of belonging, it is unsurprising that Zara repeatedly insists upon her proficiency in the Gauls’ language. Zara’s first-person narration and reported speech are both written, for the most part, in standard French. However, on the page, her discourse presents several typographical quirks that denaturalize Zara’s relationship with the language and mark her as an outsider. One typographical effect nevertheless positions her as an authority on the language and culture: the italicization of various words ranging from the common to the jargonistic in order to mark

them as belonging to the “native” lexicon and to set them apart from the rest of the narrative, which, confusingly, is in the same language.¹² Playing the role of Gaulologist, Zara often glosses the italicized words for the benefit of her audience. For instance, in the temple, she describes the material properties of the native artifact *papier*—“une pâte séchée de fibres végétales broyées” “a dried mixture of crushed plant fibers”—and identifies the role it plays in Gaul culture as a “symbole animiste” (29) with “fonctions rituelles...riches et diversifiées” (“rich and varied...ritual functions”, 46). This tactic reinforces the distance between Zara and her object of study and supports her scientific objectivity. However, formatting ordinary words such as *papier* (paper) and *écriture* (writing) in the same way as bureaucratic terms such as *acte de naissance* and *carte d’identité* defamiliarizes the first group of mundane words, even without the exoticist glossing. This effect of estrangement shows how such quotidian objects can become politically charged for those struggling to be “regularized” by the state. *Papier* is always more than its material and functional properties for someone who is *sans-papier*—(someone) without papers—the conventional term for an undocumented immigrant.¹³ The use of italics, then, sets Zara up as an expert on the convoluted rites of the Gallic naturalization process, but it also reveals how terms belonging to the rigorously standardized French lexicon have very different resonances depending on the speaker or interlocutor’s citizenship status.

In spite of her frequent assertions of expertise, Zara’s authority on the Gauls and their culture is challenged by the intermittent appearance of a second set of typographical markings on her discourse, in both her narration and in cited speech: apostrophes marking a non-standard pronunciation and accent—namely, the elision of R sounds. Any challenges to her linguistic competence that such non-standard language production might incur would represent a threat to her ability to obtain a residence permit. It is appropriate, then, that this form of non-standard speech appears almost exclusively in Zara’s narration of her quest for identity documents or in her musings on race and nationality. The talismanic *cartes* are marked with an apostrophe to indicate where an R sound is elided: *ca’t d’identité*, *ca’t de Gymnasium*. At times, but less systematically, the Rs in other parts of the phrase are also dropped—for instance, in the often evoked *ca’t de séjou’*. Terms that are seemingly unrelated to the lexicon of immigration bureaucracy are roped into this semantic field through R-dropping, for instance, when Zara embarks on a “chasse aux *ma’is de ‘ace f’ançaise*” (hunt for husbands of French race” (93) in order to secure a residence permit through marriage.

I argue that these apostrophes represent neither a phonetic transcription of Zara’s speech, nor that of her interlocutors. Rather, the elision of the Rs is meant to evoke stereotypical

representations of speakers of French regional languages and creoles, specifically in the Antilles, and the perception of colonial contact zones as sites of unbridled creolization more generally. By associating such seemingly mundane items as residence permits, ID cards, and even gym membership cards with racist stereotypes regarding colonial and postcolonial subjects' inferior language skills, Bessora suggests the lingering importance of categories of race and ethnicity for policies concerning the documentation and classification of residents, be they citizens or not. The allusion to R-dropping in terms such as *ca't de séjou'* is a reminder that colonial and postcolonial subjects are constantly seen as inadequate speakers of standard French and that their French is frequently seen as an impure dialect, inflected by regional creoles.

**Mais de *passoport*, je n'en ai pas.
La *ca't de séjou'*, elle ne me la donnera jamais.
Elle a le pouvoir, elle fait sa loi.**

Figure 1. Typographical markings on Zara's speech. (Bessora 2001: 32)

In “Le Noir et le langage,” Fanon famously described the cultural anxieties of black Martinicans who, upon their arrival in Paris, hasten to debunk “le mythe du Martiniquais qui-mange-les-R” (16) “the myth of the *R*-eating man from Martinique” (11) by overpronouncing his Rs. According to Lambert-Félix Prudent, this perception of the Antillean accent has been widely disseminated through written caricatures of Antillean speech, in which all Rs are systematically replaced by apostrophes, even in those cases where they would actually be pronounced in Martinican or Guadeloupian French (Prudent 1993: 602, qtd. in Pustka 2007: 110). One influential source of such stereotypical representations is found in the popular *Astérix* comics, created by writer René Goscinny and illustrator Albert Uderzo in 1959, which, significantly, have also played a prominent role in perpetuating a mythological Gallic ethnic identity in the 20th and 21st centuries to a wide readership, diverse in ages and class background (Blanc-Hoàng 2014: 15–19). The 1964 comic *Astérix Gladiateur* introduced a minor recurring character named Baba, a black pirate who occupies the post of look-out. Baba’s speech features systematic R-dropping: for instance, after he and his fellow pirates scuttle their own ship to avoid being taken by the Gauls in *Astérix aux Jeux Olympiques* (1968), Baba asks his crewmates, stuffed into a rowboat, “On ti’e à la cou’tte paille, les ga’s?” (20) “Who’s for dinner? Shall we draw lots, boys?” (1972: 20).¹⁴ Nicolas Rouvière interprets fellow pirate Triple Patte’s response to Baba’s cannibalistic overtures—“Toi, tu ne manques pas d’air!” (ibid) (“You’ve got some nerve”)—as a reference to the R-dropping Martinican

accent, as the letter “R” and the word “air” are homophones in French (2009: n.p.).¹⁵ Consistent with Prudent’s observation regarding written imitations of the Antillean accent, Baba’s speech is marked to signify elision of all Rs, even where the R would not be dropped in Antillean pronunciation.¹⁶ In the same scene, Rs are systematically elided in Baba’s remark “C’est ‘empli à ‘as bo’d d’une t’ipotée de te’’ibles gue’’ie’s gaulois!” (20) (“It’s swarming with ferocious Gaulish warriors!”, 20), even though the R in “rempli” and “ras” would be pronounced in Antillean French as [χ] or [ʁ], just as in standard French (Pustka 2007: 110). Baba’s caricatured speech serves to further distance him, not only from the “Gaulish warriors,” but also from his Roman crewmate Triple Patte, whose speech is not marked as phonetically different from the Gauls’. It is hard to not associate this unique marker of linguistic difference with the heavily racialized physical representation of the character: in a cultural production that allegorizes resistance to various foreign invasions—Nazism, as well as American cultural and economic imperialism (Pellegrin 2014: 47–52)—through its narrative of Gallic resistance to the Roman occupation, the non-white member of the pirate crew is portrayed as more foreign than his white counterparts. Even though fellow pirate Triple Patte often inserts Latin phrases into his speech, his French discourse and pronunciation are represented as entirely standard—he is granted the linguistic legitimacy that is denied to Baba. Neither character appears to be a native of Gaul, but the polyglot Triple Patte is presented as culturally assimilated in a way that Baba—whose speech has not changed since his introduction in 1964—is not.



Figure 2. Scene from *Astérix aux Jeux Olympiques*. (Goscinny and Uderzo 1968: 20)

The continuing prominence of such caricatured representations of Antillean speech in popular culture—Baba has appeared in 24 *Astérix* albums, including the most recent one (*Le Papyrus de César*, 2015)—is no doubt a factor in keeping the stereotype of the “R-eating” Martinican speaker at the forefront of the French cultural imaginary. This image remains the “shibboleth

par excellence” of the Antillean accent (Pustka 2007: 234).¹⁷ In Elissa Pustka’s recent study of regional French speakers (Parisian, Guadeloupian, and Aveyronnais), the very terms of the stereotype are repeated by the 21st-century metropolitan French test subjects, nearly half of whom responded to the question “How do you recognize a Guadeloupian?” (229) by citing such characteristics as “they have a hard time pronouncing Rs” or “he swallows the Rs” (110). Bessora engages with the cultural history of racist representations to which *Astérix* belongs to show how caricatures of non-white French speakers participate in broader discourses anchoring French national identity in a racist conception of the “Français de souche.” Whereas the italicization of the expression “*ma’is de ‘ace f’ançaise*” is reminiscent of ethnographic conventions for identifying words belonging to a native lexicon, the R-dropping in *53 cm* is not a part of the ethnographic conceit; it is not a transcription of observed speech patterns. Rather, Bessora’s “overcorrected” imitation of the Antillean accent in phrases such as “chasse aux *ma’is de ‘ace f’ançaise*” (where Antillean speakers would generally pronounce the R of *mari* and *race* as [χ] or [ʁ]) recalls the representation of pirate Baba’s speech. Although Zara’s narration and speech are generally not marked by elided Rs, the appearance of this pronunciation feature in the context of her quest to legalize her immigration status suggests that the mandatory assessment of her French language proficiency will be filtered through racist perceptions of non-white subjects’ linguistic ability.

Linguistic (II)legitimacy in the Temple of Gallic Bureaucracy

Early in the novel, Zara offers a revisionist history of the cultural and political relationships between metropolitan France and its Antillean overseas departments (and former colonies) in the narrative of her journey to the *centre d’étudiants étrangers* (Center for Foreign Students, italicized in the original), a bureaucratic office in Paris that she frames as a temple safeguarding the Gauls’ prized talisman: the *ca’t de séjou’*. Zara’s breezy disruption of dominant historiographies is marked by typographical flourishes that link France’s imperialist history to the denial of linguistic legitimacy in the context of contemporary immigration policies.

Zara narrates the episode at the Center in the voice of the colonial anthropologist, adopting a primitivist discourse to describe the natives she encounters. For example, as she approaches the temple, she spots a native sentinel, whom she tentatively identifies as the eunuch guardian of the temple’s harem of priestesses, and carefully details his appearance and cultural attributes, citing her academic training to bolster the authority of her reading: “Un petit visage pâle à longs cheveux noirs, valeureusement armé, est posté dans l’entrée. Il parle *français*, un

créole extrêmement vivace. Je pratique cet idiome couramment: il était en option dans mon cursus scolaire. J'ai aussi suivi un cours intitulé : *la Gaule, presque île des Antilles*, où j'ai appris que les ancêtres des Gaulois étaient des Amérindiens appelés Caraïbes" "A small, pale face with long black hair, valiantly armed, is posted at the entrance. He speaks *French*, an extremely robust creole. I speak this dialect fluently: it was an elective in my school curriculum. I also took a course entitled: *Gaul, peninsula of the Antilles*, where I learned that the ancestors of the Gauls were Amerindians named Caribs" (28). In this passage, Zara casually disrupts the power dynamic, as she strips the armed policeman—a potent symbol of state power and an integral part of the bureaucracy of immigration control—of his subjecthood, dismembering his body such that his person is represented synecdochally by a pale face and sweep of black hair, two blobs of color. She then proceeds to challenge the cherished origin myth of French cultural and national identity by inverting the colonial doctrine of "Nos ancêtres les Gaulois," a standard feature of the colonial education system, to position the Gauls not as ancestors but as descendants—of the Caribs.¹⁸ Furthermore, she systematically disrupts the official cartography of France's cultural and political relationships with its overseas departments and former colonies, by identifying Gaul as a "presqu'île des Antilles," and thus provincializing the metropole. And to top it all off, she recasts *français*, an ostentatiously standardized language, as a "créole extrêmement vivace," emphasizing a long history of contact between French and its speakers, and other cultures and speaking subjects.

In spite of Zara's obsessive attention to race, it seems initially that in the hallowed halls of Gallic bureaucracy, categories like race and ethnicity are transcended by the political category of nationality. Following her encounter with the eunuch guard, Zara prostrates herself before one of the "temple priestesses": a bureaucrat who processes applications for residence cards. As with nearly everyone else she encounters, Zara describes her interlocutor's physical appearance in detail through racially coded language and exoticist tropes:

Une prêtresse m'invite à prendre place. Elle n'est pas monstrueuse, mais quand même, une autochtone, vue d'aussi près... Du milieu de sa figure chocolat au lait se détache un nez si long, à l'arête si droite, et aux ailes si étroites qu'il ressemble à une arme blanche fraîchement aiguisée. Je me prosterne à ses pieds, baise son orteil droit, y passe un anneau d'argent forgé par mes ancêtres, sur les rivages du lac bleu de Mouila. Interdite, l'Antillaise chocolatée me dévisage de ses grands yeux noirs, admirablement fendus.

—Saloperie d'étrangers... Pourquoi qu'y r'tournent pas tous en Yougoslavie. (31)

A priestess invites me to take a seat. She isn't monstrous, but still, a native, seen up close... From the center of her milk chocolate face rises a nose so long, with a bridge so high [and] sides so narrow, that it looks like a freshly sharpened knife. I bow low at her feet, kiss her right toe and slide onto it a silver ring forged by my ancestors on the banks of the blue Lake of Mouila [in Gabon, capital of Ngounié region]. Dumbfounded, the chocolate-skinned Antillaise stares at me with her large dark admirably shaped eyes.

—Damn foreigners... Why don't they all just go back to Yugoslavia?

While the priestess is vigorously othered and racialized by Zara's Gaulologist gaze, she is nevertheless an "autochtone"; as a functionary of the regulatory agency, she represents the institution and the law. In fact, whereas before the priestess speaks Zara classifies her as an Antillaise, as Zara muses inwardly over the priestess's harsh invective ("Saloperie d'étrangers")—attempting to interpret the hostile epithet through the lens of ethnic conflict—she identifies the woman as a Gaul: "Appartient-elle à un ordre gaulois supérieur? Y a-t-il un conflit ethnique entre la Gaule et d'autres tribus? Y a-t-il une guerre clanique entre les Gaulois, les Helvétès et les Fang?" ("Does she belong to a superior Gallic order? Is there an ethnic conflict between Gaul and other tribes? Is there a clan war between the Gauls, the Helvetians, and the Fang?"), 31). This reclassification seems to suggest that the priestess's other racial or ethnic markers are effaced by her display of hostility, as if the expression of xenophobia aligns her with the "Français de souche." Zara's observation that the priestess "a le pouvoir [et] fait sa loi" ("has the power and rules her roost", 32) constitutes a strong assertion of the priestess's power over someone with such a precarious position in Gaul society as Zara. Racial categories and the hierarchies on which they are constructed, particularly ones that are largely dependent on skin color, are disrupted by the presence of this "chocolate-skinned" woman in a position of power. That Zara is rejected by the priestess based on her lack of a passport, a political document, would seem to suggest that her exclusion is not tied to her problematically ambiguous ethnic identity, but rather is a bureaucratic issue.

In some ways, the priestess's cultural belonging seems to be confirmed by the phonetic transcription of her speech: unlike in lexical items associated with naturalization procedures, the apostrophe on "r'tournent" marks the elision of the E, a typical feature of Parisian French. The pronunciation signaled by the apostrophe establishes parallels between the priestess and native speakers in novels featuring vernacular French, such as when Raymond Queneau, in *Zazie dans le métro* (1959), contracts the surrounding consonants: "le métro" becomes

“Imétro” and “petite” becomes “ptite” (Gaitet 1992: 174). However, the use of an apostrophe for contractions (a marker that Queneau eschewed, sometimes even where dictated by standard orthography) renders this phonetic transcription of Parisian French visually similar to the representation of stereotyped Antillean speech on display in this scene, even as the many Rs in the priestess’s remark are very much present on the page. The woman’s typically Parisian pronunciation, as phonetically transcribed, is contaminated by this resemblance. While the scene in the *centre des étudiants étrangers* suggests that citizenship can confer power on non-white subjects who hold French nationality, the representation of the priestess’s speech leaves her in an ambiguous position. This sense of instability is reinforced when Zara reverts from referring to her as a “Gaul” to again highlight her Antillean origins, identifying her as “La Chabine” (32)—one of several terms of racial classification used to identify mixed-race individuals in the Antilles.

Meanwhile, Zara’s interpretation of the priestess’s hostility towards her as indicative of a larger ethnic conflict pitting the Gauls against tribes such as the Helvetians (an archaic term for the Swiss that refers to an ancient Celtic ethnic group) and the Fang (an ethnic group of Gabon)—groups that Zara identifies as central components of her hybrid ethnic and national identity—reveals her fear that the bureaucratic implementation of immigration policy is influenced by an ethnicized conception of Frenchness.¹⁹ It seems Zara’s linguistic legitimacy is particularly threatened by such a notion of French identity, as the priestess’s xenophobic discourse puts her at a loss for words: “Devant la prêtresse préfectorale, je suis muette: je sens bien qu’elle est sourde” (“Before the prefectural priestess, I am silent: I can tell that she is deaf”, 31). On the one hand, Zara’s assumption that the priestess is deaf is consistent with her scientific arrogance and her unsubstantiated interpretations of various social interactions. On the other hand, the priestess has already demonstrated that she herself is interpreting Zara’s actions as expressions of radical alterity—perhaps this deafness is a metaphor for the priestess’s inability to assess Zara’s linguistic competence in an unbiased way.

Card-Carrying Creoles: Linguistic Legitimacy and Hybridity

In the scene at the *centre des étudiants étrangers* temple, the ways in which racial stereotypes shape perceptions of linguistic competence is only obliquely evoked through the recasting of metropolitan French as a robust creole and in the juxtaposition of regional accents (Parisian, Antillean). However, this problematic is more explicitly addressed in Zara’s subsequent account of her father’s social ascension from a member of the local elite in colonial Gabon to the status of international diplomat. When he was twelve years old, it came to light that he had

no birth certificate; since the *act' de naissance* (birth certificate) is the glorious talisman that precedes all subsequent bureaucratic documents, steps were taken to rectify this situation, allowing her father to pursue his trajectory along a path signposted with document after document: student ID card, French ID card, and diploma from the *École Nationale d'Administration* (National School of Administration), the elite feeder school to the upper ranks of civil servants and government officials (69). In order to establish his birth record, her father appears in 1946 before a local tribunal and testifies as to his age. He speaks French, having attended missionary school since the age of 4, but his audience of colonial bureaucrats assumes that he cannot communicate and an interpreter is assigned to translate his speech into French. Zara mocks this assumption, remarking sarcastically to her father's past self: "Tu as oublié de fournir ta fausse *ca't de c'éolité* 'moi y en a pa'lé beaucoup bon f'ançais mon commandant'" ("You forgot to provide your fake *créolité* card 'Me speak much good French my commander'", 63). Here, Zara explicitly lambasts the persistent ascription of linguistic incompetence to colonial subjects, even to members of the indigenous elite in the process of being groomed for positions of power in the colonial administration.

The reference to a fake *ca't de c'éolité* evokes connections between this historical refusal to grant linguistic legitimacy, the continuing denial of language ownership to Antillean French speakers, and the myth of a culturally and linguistically homogeneous metropole.²⁰ The meaning of this counterfeit *ca't de c'éolité* is slippery. If the reference to *créolité* is meant to identify the cardholder as a Creole speaker (in the general sense, without reference to a specific geographical region), then this document is a material sign of how the state classifies her father: as someone who does not speak standard French. On the other hand, given that Zara had earlier characterized French as a Creole, it is possible that a real *créolité* card would be proof of *French* linguistic proficiency—in which case, the attribute "fausse" might reflect the denial of legitimacy. It is important to note, however, that the speech that Zara quotes, ostensibly to illustrate the discourse of card-carrying members of *créolité*, is not Creole. Given the historical context, the reference to a commanding officer, and grammatical features, this discourse is likely an allusion to the pidgin known by the formal (and largely academic) designation *français tirailleur* or by the more colloquial but pejorative *petit-nègre*.²¹ Just as written representations of Antillean speech are familiar enough from popular culture that the R-dropping on *ca't de séjou'* is legible as a reference to the Antillean accent, caricatures of *français tirailleur* are a prominent enough feature of the colonial cultural imaginary that the average French reader would recognize the reference.²² While the quoted speech presents several of the most familiar grammatical features of *français tirailleur*—for instance, the use

of the locution “y en a” as an auxiliary (Van den Avenne 2007: 4)—the R-dropping on “parlé” and “français” does not reflect a typical pronunciation. Like the apostrophe marks on *ca’t de c’éolité*, it evokes stereotypes of the Antillean accent. Bessora’s pastiche of linguistic caricatures connects the colonial administrators’ refusal to see her father as a French speaker to monolithic conceptions of standard French according to which pidgin, Creole, and French spoken with a regional accent are equally unacceptable.

Bessora’s mocking treatment of this conflation does not attempt to restore a hierarchy among these different languages. The use of the term *créolité*, which evokes a more general cultural identity than would, for instance, a reference to *créolophonie*, is arguably most closely associated with the model of Caribbean identity and experience theorized by Jean Bernabé, Raphaël Confiant, and Patrick Chamoiseau in their influential 1989 manifesto *Éloge de la créolité*, which described the concept thusly: “La créolité est une annihilation de la fausse universalité, du monolinguisme et de la pureté” (28) (“Creoleness is an annihilation of false universality, of monolinguisism, and of purity”, 90). Connecting this reference to the *créolité* card in the colonial context of Zara’s father’s history to the earlier inverted representation of Gaul as a “presqu’île des Antilles” suggests the extent to which the metropole is itself a site of *créolité*—including its languages. Jennifer Westmoreland highlights these connotations of the *ca’t de c’éolité*, arguing that, in the scene before the colonial tribunal, “Créole is chosen as the default immigrant tongue since, with its multiple influences, it is [the] antithesis of a ‘pure’ language” (2007: 211). Bessora remaps the colonial contact zone onto the provincialized *Gaule* as an Antillean peninsula, recasting the standard French ideal, the language of the French empire and, since 1992, the official language of the Republic, as a Creole.²³

A final look at the scene in the *centre des étudiants étrangers* deepens the challenge to notions of French cultural and linguistic purity by pointing to France’s long history as a contact zone, profoundly undermining xenophobic discourses regarding the threat posed to French national identity by immigration that frame this cultural contamination as a recent phenomenon—for instance, when Jacques Chirac distinguished between “pre-war” waves of European immigration and migrations from former African colonies in the postcolonial era. Identified as the culturally hybrid, mixed-race progeny of a French-speaking Swiss mother and a Fang- and French-speaking Gabonese father, Zara has an equally complex political identity, as she was born in Brussels. The goods that she carries with her in her traveler’s sack—manioc, Belgian fries, Ricola cough drops, etc.—represent both a confirmation of these diverse origins and a humorous questioning of scientific attempts to fix cultural difference through cataloguing artifacts. Imagining the surprised reaction of a Gaul to this wildly diverse

stock of goods, Zara counters with an assertion of the equally diverse and fundamentally hybrid nature of Gaul culture: “Et vous autres? Que font ces haricots blancs et amérindiens comme du manioc dans votre cassoulet rose et gaulois ? Synchrétisme originaire.... Pour être blanc, le plus blanc des Gaulois n’est pas moins bâtard, pur ou impur” (“What about you? What are these beans, white and Amerindian like manioc, doing in your pink and Gallic *cassoulet*? Native syncretism. For all that he is white, the whitest of the Gauls is no less of a bastard, pure or impure”, 27). The dish that Zara refers to here, *cassoulet*, is a traditional French stew whose origin story, relating its creation during the Hundred Years’ War, plays a role in nationalist celebrations of French history (Rupp 2011: 40–41). Zara here undermines the status of a nationalist symbol in a manner reminiscent of her use of the primitivist term “Gauls” to describe the group that she studies. While the presence of these beans in a French stew is on one hand a reminder of European exploitation of the Americas, on the other hand, as Zara slyly points out, it also shows that even centuries-old French nationalist symbols are hybrid artifacts.

Both Zara’s own identity and that of her object of study, the Gauls, are hybrid, and the fact that both identities resist classification points toward a fundamental challenge to the generally opposed figures of the anthropologist and the native group under study. However, while the novel exposes this hybridity, the revelation does not lead to an overturning of the opposition between Zara the “Gaulologist” and the natives, secure in their citizenship. Disrupting these categories does not carry much political weight if the historical relationships of dominance remain in place. On the one hand, Zara’s failure to operate within the appropriate social and cultural codes exposes the arrogance of the ethnographer who claims to know and understand the native, but at the same time, it reveals the real precariousness of her situation. Despite her patronizing attitude toward the primitive Gauls, Zara fails to exert any real authority and is subject to both the discriminatory policies of the French state and the whims of the “priestess” of bureaucracy. Zara has reinvented the French metropole as a New World, a destination for explorers and anthropologists; she has also subjected a group that has historically monopolized the gaze to a probing ethnographic study. However, she cannot change the power differential that exists between the natives of Gaul and an erudite visitor such as herself, who nevertheless has the shaky legal status of any immigrant without proper documentation.

Gaulophiles and Gaulologists Abroad: Voices in Contested Spaces

In its account of Zara’s journey through the channels of the immigration system, *53 cm* reveals the ways in which the regulation of linguistic and cultural competence serves to exclude non-white subjects from the French national body. Zara’s interactions with members of the metropolitan bureaucracy are illuminated by her journey back into the overlapping histories of her family and of the French empire: the colonial administrators’ inability to recognize her father’s demonstrated mastery of standard French is mirrored in the priestess’s metaphorical deafness. Beyond the world of Bessora’s text, former Minister of the Interior Claude Guéant’s attempts to limit the number of naturalizations by sharpening bureaucratic practice in the last year of the Sarkozy administration echoes colonial governments’ efforts to block naturalizations without appearing “indigénophobes” by establishing a language requirement; this criterion was, according to Abdellali Hajjat, a “filtre redoutablement efficace dans la situation coloniale en raison du faible taux de scolarisation des indigènes dans le système d'enseignement français” (“formidably efficient filter in the colonial context owing to the low enrollment rates of natives in the French education system”, Hajjat 2010: 60–61).

The scene in the *centre des étudiants étrangers* reveals how racist presumptions as to the fundamental unassimilability of non-white subjects—from Baba to Zara—still shape the way immigration policy is developed and implemented. Bessora’s intertextual engagement with a longstanding popular tradition of racial caricatures signals the ways in which the colonial imaginary continues to shape metropolitan perceptions of speakers hailing from overseas departments or former colonies, among other geographic and cultural points of origin. The novel situates individual speakers’ struggles to obtain linguistic legitimacy and cultural belonging in relation to a conception of Frenchness as not only a political and cultural identity, but as an ethnic and racial entity as well, despite the Republic’s pretensions to colorblindness.²⁴

The tribunal scene returns not only to the question of linguistic competence, but also the notion of *créolité*, raising further questions about the relationship between (unattainable) standards of language proficiency and myths of linguistic and cultural purity. The novel’s references to *créolité* and Creole languages shift the discourse away from alternately vindicating and questioning Zara’s and her father’s linguistic legitimacy to an interrogation of what mastery of “*la langue française*” (emphasis mine) might mean in a multilingual, culturally hybrid France. The notion that, in a contact zone such as the hexagon, metropolitan French is likely inflected by the kinds of cultural and social encounters that Zara satirizes in

the *centre des étudiants étrangers* scene seems to threaten the singular status of French as the sole official language of the Republic—in a class of its own, despite recent, unofficial recognition of Antillean Creoles as one of many regional “langues de France.” The representation of French as a Creole and France as a contact zone undermines the myth of cultural purity underpinning ethnicized notions of Frenchness. Such assertions of the fundamentally hybrid and dynamic nature of language and culture do more to challenge the mythical figure of the “Français de souche” than any mere vindication of the legitimacy of an individual speaker. In blurring the distinctions between the singular *langue française* and the plural *langues de France*, Bessora recasts the struggle to establish a legitimate voice as the emergence of a plurality of voices, even as she recognizes the lingering power imbalances that define the lived experience and social reality of racialized subjects, both immigrants and citizens, in France, the latter-day incarnation of Gaul that remains a destination for Gaulophiles and Gaulologues of many backgrounds.

Acknowledgements

Many thanks to Stacey Batts, Karl Britto, Juan Caballero, Suzanne Guerlac, Bill Maxwell, Celine Piser, Maya Smith, and Maria Vendetti for their thoughtful feedback on earlier versions of this essay.

References

Article 5, Loi n° 2011-672 du 16 juin 2011 relative à l'immigration, à l'intégration et à la nationalité.

<https://www.legifrance.gouv.fr/affichTexteArticle.do?cidTexte=JORFTEXT000024191380&idArticle=LEGIARTI000024193058>

Article 21-24, *Code civil*.

<https://www.legifrance.gouv.fr/affichCodeArticle.do?cidTexte=LEGITEXT000006070721&idArticle=LEGIARTI000006419880>

Article 21-24, *Code civil*, translated by David Gruning.

https://www.legifrance.gouv.fr/content/download/7754/105592/version/4/file/Code_civil_20130701_EN.pdf

Article 50, Loi n° 93-933 du 22 juillet 1993 réformant le droit de la nationalité.

<https://www.legifrance.gouv.fr/affichTexte.do?cidTexte=JORFTEXT000000362019>

Article 69, Ordonnance n° 45/2447 du 19 octobre 1945 portant code de la nationalité française.

http://www.legislation.cnav.fr/Pages/texte.aspx?Nom=ORD_452447_19101945

Ager, Dennis E. 1994. "Immigration and Language Policy in France." *Journal of Intercultural Studies* 15(2): 35-52.

Bell, Anthea. 1981. "Translator's Notebook." In: *The Signal Approach to Children's Books*, edited by Nancy Chambers, 129–139. Metuchen, NJ: Scarecrow.

Berliner, Brett A. 2002. *Ambivalent Desire: the Exotic Black Other in Jazz-Age France*. Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press.

Bernabé, Jean, Raphaél Confiant, and Patrick Chamoiseau. 1993 [1989]. *Éloge de la créolité: édition bilingue français-anglais*. Paris: Gallimard.

Bessora. *53 cm: roman*. 2001 [1999]. Paris: J'ai lu.

Betts, Raymond F. 1961. *Assimilation and Association in French Colonial Theory, 1890–1914*. New York: Columbia University Press.

Blanc-Hoàng, Henri-Simon. 2014. "Antiquity and Bandes Dessinées: Schizophrenic Nationalism Between Atlanticism and Marxism." In: *Comics as History, Comics as Literature: Roles of the Comic Book in Scholarship, Society, and Entertainment*, edited by Annessa Ann Babic, 15–32. Madison, NJ: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press.

Bleich, Erik. 2004. "Anti-Racism without Races: Politics and Policy in a 'Color-Blind' State." In: *Race in France: Interdisciplinary Perspectives on the Politics of Difference*, edited by Herrick Chapman and Laura L. Frader, 162–88. New York: Berghahn.

Burns, Thomas S. 2009. *Rome and the Barbarians: 100 BC–AD 400*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.

Cazenave, Odile M. 2015. *Afrique sur Seine: A New Generation of African Writers in Paris*. Lanham, MD: Lexington Books.

Célérier, Patricia-Pia. 2002. "Bessora: De la 'gaulologie' contre l'impéritie." *Présence Francophone: Revue Internationale de Langue et de Littérature* 58: 73–84.

Citron, Suzanne. 2008. *Le mythe national: l'histoire de France revisitée*. Paris: Éditions de l'Atelier / Éditions Ouvrières.

- Clifford, James. 1998. *The Predicament of Culture: Twentieth-Century Ethnography, Literature, and Art*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Costantini, Alessandro. 2011. “Bande dessinée franco-belge, petit-nègre et imaginaire colonial: La BD francophone.” *Publiforum* 14: n.p.
http://publiforum.farum.it/ezine_pdf.php?id=207
- Decamp, David. 1971. “The Study of Pidgin and Creole Languages.” In: *Pidginization and Creolization of Languages*, edited by Dell Hymes, 13–39. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Delesse, Catherine and Bertrand Richet. 2009. *Le coq gaulois à l'heure anglaise : analyse de la traduction anglaise d'Astérix*. Arras: Artois Presses Université.
- Dietler, Michael. 1994. “‘Our ancestors the Gauls’: Archaeology, Ethnic Nationalism, and the Manipulation of Celtic Identity in Modern Europe.” *American Anthropologist* 96(3): 584–605.
- Fanon, Frantz. 1952. *Peau noire, masques blancs*. Paris: Éditions du Seuil.
- . 2008. *Black Skin, White Masks*, translated by Charles Lam Markmann. London: Pluto Press.
- Favell, Adrian. 2001 [1998]. *Philosophies of Integration: Immigration and the Idea of Citizenship in France and Britain*. 2nd ed. Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire: Palgrave in association with Centre for Research in Ethnic Relations, University of Warwick.
- Fogarty, Richard S. 2016. “‘We did not speak a common language’: African Soldiers and Communication in the French Army, 1914-1918.” In: *Languages and the First World War: Communicating in a Transnational War*, edited by Julian Walker and Christophe Declercq, 44–61. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Gastaut, Yvan. 2004. “Français et immigrés à l’épreuve de la crise (1973-1995).” *Vingtième Siècle: Revue d’histoire* 84(4): 107–118.
- Gaitet, Pascale. 1992. *Political Stylistics: Popular Language as Literary Artifact*. London: Routledge.
- Gilliver, Catherine. 2003. *Caesar's Gallic Wars, 58–50 BC*. New York: Routledge.
- Gosciny, René and Albert Uderzo. 1968. *Astérix aux Jeux Olympiques*. Paris: Dargaud.

- . 1972. *Asterix at the Olympic Games*, translated by Anthea Bell and Derek Hockridge. Leicester: Brockhampton Press.
- Hajjat, Abdellali. 2010. “La barrière de la langue. Naissance de la condition d’assimilation linguistique pour la naturalisation.” *Les nouvelles frontières de la société française*, edited by Didier Fassin, 53–77. Paris: La Découverte.
- Hargreaves, Alec G. 2007 [1995]. *Multi-Ethnic France: Immigration, Politics, Culture and Society*. London: Routledge.
- Ireland, Susan. 2004. “Bessora's Literary Ludics.” *Dalhousie French Studies* 68 (Fall): 7–16.
- Jules-Rosette, Bennetta. 1998. *Black Paris: the African Writers' Landscape*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press..
- Laurence, Jonathan and Justin Vaisse. 2007. *Intégrer l'islam: la France et ses musulmans, enjeux et réussites*. Paris: Odile Jacob.
- Lazimi, Charlotte. 2015. "Astérix est-il raciste?" *L'Express*, 23 October. http://www.lexpress.fr/culture/livre/la-bd-asterix-doit-elle-cesser-de-caricaturer-les-noirs_1728572.html.
- Léticée, Marie. 2009. *Education, Assimilation and Identity: the Literary Journey of the French Caribbean*. Coconut Creek, FL: Caribbean Studies Press.
- Lieberman, Robert C. 2004. “A Tale of Two Countries: the Politics of Color-Blindness in France and the United States.” In: *Race in France: Interdisciplinary Perspectives on the Politics of Difference*, edited by Herrick Chapman and Laura L. Frader, 189–216. New York: Berghahn,
- Mandonnet, Éric and Éric Pelletier. 2011. “Guéant: ‘Je veux que l’identité de la France soit respectée.’” *L'Express*, 24 August. http://www.lexpress.fr/actualite/politique/gueant-je-veux-que-l-identite-de-la-france-soit-respectee_1023215.html.
- Moudileno, Lydie. 2009. “Returning Remains: Saartjie Baartman, or the ‘Hottentot Venus’ as Transnational Postcolonial Icon.” *Forum for Modern Language Studies* 45(2): 200–212.
- . 2003. *Littératures africaines francophones des années 1980 et 1990*. Dakar, Senegal: Conseil pour le développement de la recherche en sciences sociales en Afrique.
- Murphy, Cliodhna. 2016. *Immigration, Integration and the Law: the Intersection of Domestic, EU and International Legal Regimes*. London: Routledge.

- Pellegrin, Annick. 2014. “‘Ils sont fous ces Gaulois!’: Astérix, Lucky Luke, Freedom Fries, and the Love-Hate Relationship between France and the United States.” In: *Comics as History, Comics as Literature: Roles of the Comic Book in Scholarship, Society, and Entertainment*, edited by Annessa Ann Babic. 47–64. Madison, NJ: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press.
- Prudent, Lambert-Felix. 1993. *Pratiques langagières martiniquaises : genèse et fonctionnement d’un système créole*. Doctoral thesis, Université de Rouen.
- Pustka, Elissa. 2007. *Phonologie et variétés en contact: Aveyronnais et Guadeloupéens à Paris*. Tübingen: Narr.
- Rosello, Mireille. 1998. *Declining the Stereotype: Ethnicity and Representation in French Cultures*. Hanover, NH: University Press of New England.
- Rouvière, Nicolas. 2008. “Astérix et les pirates ou l’obsession que le pire rate: La Conjuración d’un naufrage de l’histoire.” *Témoignages de l’après-Auschwitz dans la littérature juive-française d’aujourd’hui: enfants de survivants et survivants-enfants*, edited by Annelies Schulte Nordholt. 151–168. Amsterdam, Netherlands: Rodopi.
- Rupp, Rebecca. 2011. *How Carrots Won the Trojan War: Curious (But True) Stories of Common Vegetables*. North Adams, MA: Storey Publishing.
- Sibille, Jean. 2013. “La notion de *langues de France*, son contenu et ses limites.” In: *Histoire sociale des langues de France*, edited by Georg Kremnitz, 45–60. Rennes: Presses universitaires de Rennes.
- Silverman, Maxim. 1992. *Deconstructing the Nation: Immigration, Racism and Citizenship in Modern France*. London: Routledge.
- Smith, Maya Angela. 2015. “Who is a Legitimate French Speaker? The Senegalese in Paris and the Crossing of Linguistic and Social Borders.” *French Cultural Studies* 26(3): 317–329.
- Thomas, Dominic. 2013. *Africa and France: Postcolonial Cultures, Migration, and Racism*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Van den Avenne, Cécile. 2005. “Bambara et français-tirailleur. Une analyse de la politique linguistique au sein de l’armée coloniale française: la Grande Guerre et après.” In: *Les Documents pour l’histoire du français langue étrangère ou seconde* 35 (December): 123–148.

———. 2007. “Petit-nègre et bambara. La langue de l’indigène dans quelques œuvres d’écrivains coloniaux en Afrique occidentale française.” *Citer la langue de l’autre: mots étrangers dans le roman, de Proust à W.G. Sebald*, edited by Danielle Perrot and Christine Queffelec, 77-95. Lyon: Presses universitaires de Lyon.

Westmoreland, Jennifer T. 2009. “Surrealism in diaspora: Bessora.” In: *New Black & African Writing: A Critical Anthology: Vol. 1*, edited by Charles Smith and Gloria Monica Emezue. 199–214. Enugu, Nigeria: Handel.

¹ See Favell 2001: 40–93, 150–99; Hargreaves 2007: 140–210; and Silverman 1992: 70–152.

² On generational shifts between mid- and late-20th-century African writers in France, see Moudileno 2003; and Jules-Rosette 1998.

³ For an in-depth treatment of this issue, see Betts. For a targeted discussion of language proficiency as a criterion for naturalization of colonial subjects before its codification in the *Code de la nationalité*, see Hajjat.

⁴ 2011 additions to the 2003 version are italicized: “Nul ne peut être naturalisé s’il ne justifie de son assimilation à la communauté française, notamment par une connaissance suffisante, selon sa condition, de la langue, de l’histoire, de la culture et de la société françaises, dont le niveau et les modalités d’évaluation sont fixés par décret en Conseil d’Etat, et des droits et devoirs conférés par la nationalité française ainsi que par l’adhésion aux principes et aux valeurs essentiels de la République. A l’issue du contrôle de son assimilation, l’intéressé signe la charte des droits et devoirs du citoyen français. Cette charte, approuvée par décret en Conseil d’Etat, rappelle les principes, valeurs et symboles essentiels de la République française.”

“Nobody may be naturalized unless he proves his assimilation into the French community, and notably by a sufficient knowledge, according to his condition, of the language, *history, culture, and society* of France, whose level and whose means of evaluation are fixed by decree en Conseil d’État, and of the rights and duties conferred by the French nationality, as well as an adherence to the essential principles and values of the Republic.

Upon issuance of the verification of his assimilation, the person concerned signs the charter of the rights and duties of the French citizen. This charter, approved by decree en Conseil d’État, restates the essential principles, values, and symbols of the Republic of France.” See Thomas 2013: 59–88, for an overview of the debates and policies regarding national identity and immigration fostered by the Sarkozy administration. The language established by the 2011 amendment remained intact under the Socialist government of Sarkozy’s successor, François Hollande, although the incoming administration loosened the guidelines regarding assessment procedures (Murphy 2013: 223).

⁵ Article 69 of the *Code de la nationalité française* (CNF) adopted by the post-war provisional government in 1945 stated the language proficiency standard. This article was subsequently subsumed into the *Code civil* as article 21–24 by a 1993 law abrogating the CNF (Article 50, Loi n° 93-933 du 22 juillet 1993 réformant le droit de la nationalité).

⁶ On revisions to the nationality code, see Hargreaves 2007: 155–64 and Favell 2001: 150–73.

⁷ Interestingly, the sole change to the original language of the provision was the deletion of the negative adverb *pas* (“s’il ne justifie *pas* de son assimilation...”) in 1993, a stylistic change apparently made to render the language of the text more elegant.

⁸ Ireland 2004 and Moudileno 2009, among others, observe the ways in which Bessora’s parodic reversal of the colonial ethnographic gaze allows for a critique of the links between contemporary immigration policies and 19th-century scientific racism.

⁹ The term *régulariser*, commonly used by politicians and the media to discuss immigration, is both euphemistic in its seeming casualness as well as evocative of the normative force of the naturalization process in France.

¹⁰ On narrative strategies for constructing ethnographic authority, see Clifford 1988: 21–54. One of many neologisms that Bessora invents, *citadogène* is a portmanteau of *citadin* (city-dweller) and *indigène* (native). While the meaning of this term is ambiguous, Zara generally uses it to identify Parisians. Interestingly enough, she often refers to herself as an *indigène* (as well as, at other times, a foreigner), which highlights the persistent Othering of non-white immigrants and citizens of France, viewed as perpetual outsiders and colonial subjects—native to somewhere else.

¹¹ The expedition returned to France with over 3,500 objects for the Musée de l’Homme. On the power dynamics structuring relations between the expedition’s members (especially Griaule) and the colonized subjects they encountered, see Clifford 1988: 55–91.

¹² As Cécile Van den Avenne points out, this is also a common typographical practice in colonial novels set in French West Africa (2007: 80).

¹³ Patricia-Pia Célérier addresses the complexities of Bessora’s identification of Zara as a *sans-papier*: while the choice to label as a *sans-papier* a bourgeois woman who opted to leave a lucrative job in Switzerland to pursue her studies in France is perhaps Bessora’s effort to “sortir l’immigré(e) de l’image misérabiliste qui est la sienne” (“release the immigrant from the bleak image that is his/hers”), at the same time, this gesture of reappropriation often hides her privilege (2002: 83).

¹⁴ Whereas the suggestion of cannibalism is left implicit in the original French edition, the question “Who’s for dinner?” is added in the 1972 English translation.

¹⁵ This is my own translation of this idiomatic expression; the remark is translated quite differently in Anthea Bell and Derek Hockridge’s 1972 English translation as “You’ve managed to keep your place in the sun, I see!” (20). This divergence might be explained by the fact that the English translators, having chosen to retain neither the apostrophes nor the jokes surrounding Baba’s accent, must find alternative sources of humor in word play that necessarily strays farther from the original (Bell 1980: 136).

¹⁶ It should be noted that there is no consensus among *Astérix* scholars about the character’s ethnic origins. Several critics have contended that the R-elision marked by the apostrophes is meant to evoke an African accent (Rouvière 2008: 156; Delesse and Richet 2009: 271) or the speech of “nonwhite peoples in the former French colonies” more generally (Blanc-Hoàng 2014: 19). However, in the long and flourishing tradition of French-language comics that present Africans through racist caricatures, the prevailing stereotype—for instance, in Hergé’s classic *Tintin au Congo* (1931)—represents Africans as speakers of the pidgin French closely associated with West Africa (*français tirailleur* or *petit-nègre*); these characters’ speech generally does not present elided Rs. Saint-Ogan’s *Zig et Puce*

aux Indes (*Zig and Puce in South Asia*, 1932) features a rare example of African discourse marked with R-dropping, but which also presents linguistic characteristics of *français tirailleur* (Costantini 2011: n.p.). In contrast, the R-dropping in Baba's speech is the only distinctive linguistic marker (Delesse and Richet 2009: 271).

¹⁷ Pustka points out that whereas the term “accent antillais” is attributed to speakers from Martinique and Guadeloupe alike by metropolitan French, her Guadeloupian informants distinguish between a Guadeloupian and a Martinican accent in their self-representation (220). Since my concern here is with the colonial legacy of racial stereotypes and how they continue to circulate in the popular imaginary, I have found it useful to examine how Fanon's evocation of the experiences of Martinican speakers—an experience that he sometimes expands to include Antillean subjects or even more broadly, black subjects—resonates with later studies addressing a generalized Antillean accent or a Guadeloupian accent.

¹⁸ On the legacy of a Francocentric colonial curriculum for identity formation among Antillean subjects, see Léticée 2009: 95–109.

¹⁹ On the history of the Helvetians in contemporary Switzerland, see Gilliver 2003: 26–29 and Burns 2009: 94–103.

²⁰ Drawing on Bonny Norton (1997), Christina Higgins defines language ownership as “the degree to which [outer-circle speakers] project themselves as legitimate speakers with authority over the language” (Higgins 2003: 615). Higgins' focus on English speakers in the “outer circle,” former colonies of Great Britain where institutionalized varieties of English are commonly used, provides a helpful theoretical model for examining questions of language ownership in French colonial and postcolonial contexts. The denial of language ownership to Zara's father at this point in *53 cm* is highly reminiscent of Fanon's observation that the refusal to grant linguistic legitimacy to black Antillean French speakers cuts off access to broader forms of cultural ownership—possession of “the world expressed and implied by that language” (Fanon 2008: 9).

²¹ The name for this pidgin derives from its association with West African soldiers during World Wars I and II, referred to indiscriminately as *tirailleurs sénégalais* (Senegalese riflemen) in spite of the fact that the troops were recruited (often forcibly) from all over the French West African colonies (Van den Avenne 2005: 2). While there is no consensus among linguists around the differences between pidgins and creoles, many linguists emphasize the question whether or not a viable community of speakers exists to transmit the language to subsequent generations (Decamp 1971: 16).

²² Van den Avenne uses the term *romans 'y a bon'* to create a typology of comedic colonial novels whose humor derives principally from the *mise en scène* of *français tirailleur* (5). While these colonial novels have fallen into obscurity, the primitivist image perpetuated by uses of this pidgin in popular advertising for Banania (Rosello 1998: 4–7; Berliner 2001: 9–17) and the use of *français tirailleur* in comics keeps the racial stereotype of sub-standard French competence in the public eye. It should be acknowledged that the distinction between caricatures of African and Antillean speech is not clear to all readers, some of whom attribute systematic R-dropping—already a stereotype in the context of Antillean speech—to a generalized “African” accent as well. This assumption is present both in scholarship on *Astérix* (see endnote 17) and in popular discussions. For instance, in an article in *L'Express* entitled “Astérix est-il raciste?” Charlotte Lazimi cites Baba's pronunciation of Rs (or lack thereof) to support her contention that he is “doté d'un énorme accent africain” (“endowed with an enormous African accent”, 2015: n.p.)

²³ It is important to recognize that, even as French was designated the official language of the Republic in the Constitution in 1992, French-based Creoles (including Antillean Creoles) were recognized among 75 “langues de France” (in the sense of regional or minority languages) in a 1999 report issued by Bernard Cerquiglini (the “liste Cerquiglini”) as a member of the Délégation générale à la langue française; however, none of these languages shares the status of French, identified as the sole *official* language (Sibille 2013: 48–49).

²⁴ On France’s colorblind ideology and its impact on policy, see Lieberman 2004; and Bleich 2004.