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FUTURE SHOCK

By Eric Pape

Three dark-skinned teenagers, all French citizens, but from immigrant families, were returning from playing soccer on October 27 when they were allegedly confronted by a police identification checkpoint. It's a routine occurrence in the outskirts of Paris, which is ringed by mammoth housing developments populated primarily by low-income families from North and West African countries from Algeria to Gabon. These immigrants' children are born in France, they grow up in France, and yet they face regular stops to verify that they are French. An American might call it WWB, Walking While Black.

This police check turned out to be anything but routine. One of the kids said the cops started chasing them (though the police denied it, suggesting the youths just took off), and they just kept going, leaping a fence into an electrical transformer station that once represented technological progress, but had become a danger. They climbed an eight-foot high wall topped with barbed wire that surrounds an actual power transformer and jumped in. Zyed Benna, 17, and Bouna Traoré, 15, were electrocuted. The third boy, Muttin Altun, 17, was gravely burned.

The young people of Clichy-sous-Bois, a drab neighborhood in the urbanized northern *banlieue* of Paris, were shaken. They had all endured police stops, sometimes several in a day, and often by white, take-no-shit cops from the provinces. Local logic says that if you don't want your fate in the hands of such men,

you run. Thousands of teenagers and young men had the same instinctive thought: It could have been me. Amad, a 24-year-old local rapper and community leader (he didn't want to give his last name because of right-wing extremist threats to his organization), saw the boys' deaths as a natural result of cops told to—he punches his hand with each syllable for emphasis—"Be firm! Be firm! Be firm!" "Then they come here and say, 'Shut up! Against the wall!!' When you talk back, they say, 'Shut up or you'll end up in a transformer.'"

This time, the community of Clichy-sur-Bois—and eventually many others all over France—did talk back, in a big way. When the time authorities declared the situation "normal" three weeks later, the nation had endured a scale of social unrest unknown since the student-worker uprising of May 1968. Almost 12,000 cops and special police, backed by helicopters, arrested nearly 3,000 people and jailed nearly 600 of them in three weeks. Televisions sparked with images of some of the nearly 9000 cars that were torched, including 1,400 during the single night of November 6. (Charred cars were stacked three and four high, like children's discolored toys, at towing depots.) Dozens of buildings, community centers, gymnasiums, and schools were reduced to ashes and hundreds of firefighters, locals, and police were injured. Amazingly, only one death—that of a 61-year-old man who died after being knocked down on the street—was blamed on the riots.

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IN THE OLD DAYS, the angry reaction of people like Amad might have spread through word of mouth, eventually reaching the farthest ends of Clichy-sous-Bois. As kids here rarely leave the neighborhood, though, the sentiment would have been unlikely to travel much further. Now, halfway into the first decade of the 21st century, word of the deaths flew over cell phones and the Internet, and ultimately to the mass communicators—radio and television. When police vans barreled into a neighborhood already reeling over the deaths of the two teenagers, the sense of siege turned the communications tools of daily life into communication weapons. Today, a young generation, even in some of France's most walled-off projects, inherently knows that every poignant, glorious, or enraging aural or visual moment can be captured and immediately shared thanks to cameras, text messages, and blogs.

"We live in 2005, so we all have cell phones that take pictures and that film. So we passed the images around," graffiti artist and comic book writer George Gamthety explains. The police say that kids did more than that; that they used cell phones to coordinate urban guerilla attacks and arrange meeting places. Authorities accused grown men in the Parisian outer-city of Aulnay-sous-Bois of using text messages to direct minors (who are too young to go to prison) to destroy specific vehicles.

By October 28, the day after the electrocution, the homage blog "Bouna93" was already up and running condolences from many of the dead boys' neighbors. Others blogs followed, like "Banlieu93" (the number identifies the department—the French equivalent of a county—where the riots started)," all housed on the Web site of one

of the nation's largest hip hop radio stations, Skyrock. And as the riots got going in earnest, militant blog postings labored to channel the street's anger. A person named *mec* (guy) reacted on a 'condolence' blog for the two dead boys: "The cops stir up shit, fire on the mosque, pull guns on our families, must react like in clichy [one of the *banlieue* communities]...people in each project, show your hatred." By November 3, as arson and confrontations with police spread to outer cities all over France, blogger CE.ES declared "war" and hardcore 93870 promised "kaos in the poorest burbs" because the poorest citizens "won't starve alone in their corner."

Peacemakers battled back. "For the moment, the sole success is having burned the cars of your neighbors who face the same struggles as you," fired back a blogger who signs his name Nigga. Another, Calm, asked whether "burning a nursery school that your little brothers and sisters no longer go to is good." Yet others retorted that the rioting should push into the wealthier city centers and target police stations. On November 6, Skyrock pulled the plug on several incendiary blogs, although most quickly popped up elsewhere, and police arrested several bloggers on accusations of 'incitement to violence.'

Beginning in the late '90s, Interior Minister Nicholas Sarkozy had eliminated community policing and pulled police departments out of the projects, while seeking to install surveillance cameras. He has also pushed for an increase in the state's powers to spy on e-mail, Web surfing, and phone conversations, ostensibly to bolster the war on terror as part of an antiterrorism bill.

Other people used outer-city tech in purely defensive ways. When a French television program showed riot police chased someone down a sidewalk, near the peak of confrontations, and firing a "flashball" (a high-tech stun gun that fires rubber balls), the target let out a scream. Suddenly, a man who was videotaping this incident yelled out a warning to the police: "You are being filmed!" He repeated it several times, saying he was on the balcony of a nearby project. The police looked around, perplexed, and when they finally located the voice, they got the post-Rodney King message. They withdrew. But the tape still ran on French television.

AS A LOCAL TRAIN ROCKED back and forth on its return from Paris, Skarj Miala, a Zairian-born acquaintance of Bouna's older brother, received a mumbled cell phone call. All he understood were the tears. "We knew long ago that it would blow, with all the hatred on both sides, the everyday hatred, the police staring people down," he says. Miala can understand the anger, resentment and fear; it is why he sometimes toils 60-hour weeks as a contractor to pay for studio time for local rappers who articulate it. Hell, long ago he might have stood alongside the kids in the street. But as the fires burned, the 30-year-old former soccer player found himself acting as a "big brother" night after night, trying to talk little brothers down from their fury. "We tried to calm down the young, but we're not God."

And then he'd return home to his tenth-floor apartment in the projects, from which he can see the shimmering lights of Paris, the stage-like illumination of Sacré Coeur

church atop Montmartre, and the glittering Eiffel Tower further south. At such moments, he might well understand the kids best. "You look knowing it isn't for you," he says. "It's like you are an animal in the zoo. People see you through the bars, but they're afraid to touch you. So you just go around in circles."

When France's many housing projects were built, they were symbols of modernity. Most of the massive concrete apartment slabs are cheap imitations of the works of Le Corbusier, an influential mid-20th century Swiss architect who dreamed of entirely planned societies that would deconstruct the chaotic old cities that he saw around him. His spiritual brother was New York master builder Robert Moses, whose ambitious slum clearance programs leveled large swaths of decrepit tenements in favor of the housing projects in the Bronx, Queens and elsewhere that ultimately gave birth to hip hop.

Things in the Paris projects started out well enough. France showed its generosity toward former colonial subjects, who came as much-needed laborers, by housing them in newly constructed developments on the edge of its cities, especially Paris. Immigrants—many of whom moved up from sheet metal or cardboard shelters to sturdy suburban apartments with concrete walls, heating, electricity, toilets, and even a tempting view like Miala's—were generally ecstatic. Most of these new neighborhoods had a post office, a bank, a bakery, a few grocery stores, a health center—nearly everything you need to survive. But in the late 1970s, unemployment rose, government funds dried up, and these neighborhoods were forgotten. The highway around metropolitan Paris walled them out.

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THE PASSAGE OF TIME here is measured more through disintegration than progress, as shown by the old burn marks around apartment windows that once caught fire and were never scrubbed clean. The high towers, pedestrian underpasses, labyrinthine architecture, and meandering parking lots have mutated into mazes of graffiti-stains and stale urine. In Clichy-sous-Bois today, there is no public library, no public pool, no movie theater, nor will you find a public square in which people can gather.

As for work, good luck. Unemployment in France's outer cities is typically well over 20 percent, with that rate hitting 36 percent among men younger than 25. It is even higher for the young adult children of immigrants. The world of jobs is far off, and if you get there, they look at you and see the differences: you are poor, or maybe you have darker skin or an accent. They know you live on the wrong side of the highway, and a lot of them want you to stay there. The residents of such neighborhoods "are practically invisible" to the rest of France, explains Jérôme Ferret, a sociologist who co-authored the book, *Fear Across Cities*. "They are the republic's forgotten people."

But if you look carefully enough, you will find a quixotic array of devices that locals manipulate to stay connected. Everywhere, it seems, are parabolic satellites dishes amid laundry on balconies, sucking in television from around France or from the homelands of immigrant parents or grandparents. Bootleg CDs and DVDs subsidize

home entertainment and can broadcast American-style gangsta rap aspirations into the homes and minds of a young and unsatisfied generation. Inexpensive CD burners allow plenty of local rappers to study up on hip hop from elsewhere and to rap to, or on behalf of, their communities, families, or friends.

For more than a decade, hard-core French rappers have been predicting, or in a few cases, advocating, a social explosion. But they did it in a language that mainstream France hardly understands. They, or their imitators, often communicate in a barely comprehensible patois so imbued with SMS text-messaging abbreviations that adults labor to decipher blogs, cell phone screens, or rap CD packaging. And the language of hard-core French rap is often rooted in a French pig-Latin long used by the mafia, known as *verlan*, along with French-accented words ripped from urban America's lexicon. So you get blogs proffering a "mixtape" presented by "Ghetto Fabulous Gang," with songs like "Mes Negros Sont Fly" ("My Niggas are Fly") featuring Balastik Dog.

In a nation whose long history has been marked by repeated violent surges of people power, deep-rooted resentments between the rich and poor, and high tolerance of shock value in the name of the arts, angry rappers have had to go far. "France is a bitch, don't forget to fuck her to exhaustion, you gotta treat her like a ho, man," raps Monsieur R (Richard Makela) in the song FranSSe. As the fires flamed out in late November, more than 200 French legislators called on France's Ministry of Justice to investigate seven rappers or groups, including Monsieur R, for "incitement to hatred and racism," spurring a long debate. The politicians argue that

hate speech shouldn't be any more acceptable in song than it is in the rest of society, while free speech advocates say that the courts shouldn't stone the messenger. In a statement, Skyrock responded that authorities are blaming a new generation's culture for society's problems, and they noted that the same happened decades ago when traditional French-language singers such as Jacques Brel, Léo Ferré, and Renaud were blamed for revealing the grim truths of their time. "It was as ridiculous then as it is today," the statement says.

Back in Clichy-sous-Bois, another debate has led to something more constructive. The freshly ripped CD, *Pour Rien* (For Nothing) spins in the little boom box on the dinner table even as riots continue elsewhere in France. On a brisk mid-November day, a grooving beat kicks in, and a melancholic piano riff alternates with a needling guitar sample. A lineup of rappers, from locals like Amad, who knew one of the dead boys, to famous artists such as Diams 713 and Kerry James spit their rhymes of loss, with sales and radio proceeds going to Zyed and Bouna's families. The raps come in styles ranging from Snoop-esque to distinctly Senegalese, always returning to the chorus: *mort pour rien* – dead for nothing. One of the co-producers, Cyril Njantou, 23, leans against his living room door. His large mournful eyes look up toward the heavens as he taps his foot, in a black house slipper, to the beat. Deep into the song, Cyril sings along in the living room as a rapper insistently repeats: "Paradise for them."

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IF PARADISE IS HIDING somewhere nearby, it could easily be missed in the surreal hall of media mirrors that the riots brought to the fore: With cops and politicians on one side, and rioters and their neighbors on the other, they could gather around televisions to watch the previous night's destruction, and sometimes even hear the other side's version of events, then head out to battle again. In the outer cities, the chain of echoes and reflections went further. Thanks to the balcony satellite dishes, kids could watch the TV news from their parents' homelands (in the former French colonies in Africa) offering their own perspectives on the resistance-like flames sparking in France's suburbs. Azouz Begag, the son of Algerian immigrants from a shantytown in Lyon, who has become the nation's minister for equal opportunity, says, "Many are physically present in France, but reside mentally in another country—another universe."

Regardless of where the minds of disconnected kids in the 'hood truly reside, many discovered by watching the flames rage on "foreign" television channels that the riots succeeded in something beyond pure self-destruction. Past the smoldering day-care centers, the blazing schools, the smoking cars and buses, the businesses reduced to ashes, the violence reminded France that its forgotten neighborhoods exist and that a generation in the outer cities wants in on the French promise of equality. Perhaps more important, to plenty of those once voiceless kids is that they grabbed the attention of the world.