

**Anya Sen: Examining Post-Colonial Immigrant Identities in Marseille and Morocco
Plastino Scholar, 2022**

The experience that my Plastino Scholarship allowed me to have during the summer of 2022 has fundamentally changed and enriched the way I view the world. It is also an experience I will look back on as one of the greatest periods of my life, filled with memories of the most kind-hearted people I have ever been lucky enough to meet. I had the unique opportunity to bundle my independent research component with a semester long study abroad program in Aix-en-Provence, France. Knowing that I was going to the South of France, I was already curious about the identities and perspectives present in the extremely diverse region that housed the vast majority of ethnic minorities in the entire country of France. Going into my semester while planning to lay the groundwork for my continued research afterwards really pushed me to take the initiative to seek out professors who had expertise in fields relevant to my research. I think that the knowledge that I would be staying in France after the semester concluded made me start off my semester with so much momentum that I actually started conducting my preliminary research throughout the semester. I sought out classes that covered topics such as French colonialism in North Africa, the Muslim presence in Europe, and the Arab-Israeli conflict in order to gain further context and insight into the French attitude towards immigrants, specifically the Muslim Arab immigrants from former French colonies. Through my classes, I got connected with other experts in the field that served as great resources and mentors to me throughout my journey. I also got to incorporate field research from my classes into my Plastino experience by taking class assignments one step further and interviewing people of various ethnic and political backgrounds that I met during field trips and guest speakers.

Two girls I met whose story really resonated with me are Mariam and Amel. Mariam and Amel are two sisters, around my age, who identify as Muslim and are the children of Algerian immigrants. I got the chance to sit down with these sisters and ask them about their experiences with discrimination in France on behalf of their race and religion, as well as learn more about the general French political climate from the perspective of young students. Both Mariam and Amel wear the *hijab*, a headscarf that some Muslim women choose to wear for a variety of reasons. In Western media, we are often led to believe that *hijabs* are something that is forced on Muslim women, a garment that represses women's rights and takes away their bodily autonomy. This is certainly the popular narrative peddled by French politicians as well, which is why wearing the *hijab* is banned in public schools in France. Mariam and Amel told me all of their different personal reasons for choosing to wear their *hijabs*. Mariam wears her hijab because it makes her feel closer to God and it is what makes her feel the most spiritual. Amel chooses to wear her *hijab* because it makes her feel empowered to choose who can see her hair and neck. She finds power in protecting herself from the view of strangers or people she is not comfortable with. I learned Muslim girls also choose to wear *hijabs* for cultural reasons and fashionable reasons that often have little to do with actual religious reasons. Learning about these various perspectives of Muslim girls exerting their own bodily autonomy and feeling empowered by wearing headscarves that are important aspects of their cultural identity made me marvel at the injustice that these girls faced everytime they were forced to remove their *hijabs* before entering school. It was April 2022 and France was in the midst of a contentious presidential election cycle where incumbent Emmanuel Macron was facing far-right candidate Marine Le Pen. Both candidates had made Islamophobic comments in the past, with Macron asking a Muslim woman wearing a *hijab* on the campaign trail if she had chosen to wear the *hijab* herself, insinuating that someone

else had forced her to wear it. The future for French Muslims did not look like it was going to improve in the near future as far as political representation goes. I also got to speak with Amel and Mariam about their experience as second-generation Algerian immigrants and whether they feel accepted into larger French society. The short answer is no, they both asserted that they would never be able to fully integrate themselves into French society, as they were Arab Muslims and France has had a long and troubled history with discriminating against this group. They were also physically separated from larger society by being housed in the *banlieue*, somewhat equivalent to the American *ghetto*, with no real path of breaking the cycle for their children. Regardless of this blatant inequality, both sisters agreed that they would much rather be immigrants in France than living back in Algeria, where they visit at least once a year. It seemed to me that they viewed this discrimination as the necessary price for them to pay in order to live in a developed nation with a higher quality of life than they would have experienced in Algeria.

Several Maghrebi immigrants I spoke to who lived in France concurred with Mariam and Amel's conclusion. Even though life as a minority immigrant in France meant facing relentless discrimination and political attacks, life in France is still preferable to life in the countries where they emigrated from. While most immigrants preferred living in France, immigrants from former French colonies also harbored lingering resentments over France's colonial past with their countries. I found that the attitudes of many French people reflected implicit biases and airs of superiority over populations from countries France once colonized, reflecting how the history of colonization endures in the French mentality. The same enduring mindset was present in the minds of people emigrating from former French colonies, they had a default of deferment and acceptance of the norms, not daring to think that they deserved any more of a voice or the same respect as general French society got.

Learning about how people in France felt about immigrants, especially during an election cycle where immigration was the most polarizing issue on the ballot, provided some very passionate conversations that gave me lots of insight into the implicit and explicit prejudices present in everyday French society. After learning about how people in France felt, I was excited to travel to a former French colony and hear from people who still lived there about their perspectives on the same issues. While traveling through Morocco, I met a host of characters from all over the country that all had very different views and attitudes towards the French. One general observation I took away from my time in Morocco was that if I hadn't been able to speak French, I would not have been able to navigate around the country and interact with the locals like I was able to. That fact alone goes to show the pervasive legacy French colonialism has left on countries like Morocco, Tunisia, and Algeria. In Fes I spoke to Adil, who could only speak French and had only nice things to say about France and French tourists he encountered after learning that I was studying in France. On a trip to Chefchaouen, I met Sufa who told me that she chose to learn English because it offered her more lucrative job opportunities than French did. I also observed it as a subtle act of rebellion against the status quo that the French language was the superior ideal in Morocco. On the train from Fes to Rabat, I had an hours-long conversation with Sharif, who spoke to me mostly in French and told me about how he wished to join his daughter who lives abroad in France with her kids. In Rabat, I ate dinner at Yassin's home, where he expressed that most successful students in Morocco dream of going to university in France and working there, because that is where the best opportunities are. He told me that he is mad because of what the French did to Morocco, but told me of the King of Morocco's cordial relationship with French authorities as we walked past his palace in Rabat.

While traveling through the Northern part of Morocco, I found that most people's opinions regarding the French were wistful at worst, nobody seemed to harbor serious resentments, potentially because of their closer proximity to France. When I finished the long journey south to Marrakech, this is when I first started to find people who hated the French for the way they subjugated Morocco and Moroccans. I walked around the souks of Marrakech with Mohamed, who shared with me that he thinks French colonization diluted the authentic African and Berber roots of Moroccan culture. He said that the reason that Morocco is more attractive to European and American tourists is because of the way the King let France minimize Morocco's Islamic and African influences on society. The next day, I met Mustapha, who took me to his home in a traditional Berber tribal village in the Atlas Mountains. While there, I learned about Berber traditions in a village so remote that it was insulated from being impacted by French occupation. In Mustapha's village, I got to have a traditional meal cooked by his mother while we discussed the cultural differences between his Berber tribe and the more metropolitan areas of Morocco that I had been to already. He told me that he hates what the French colonization has done to Moroccan cities and Moroccan culture, which is authentically Berber culture in his opinion. Mustapha has never been to France or anywhere outside of Morocco, and he said that he has no desire to work or live in France, because he enjoys his way of life that only exists in traditional villages in the Moroccan countryside. I found this dichotomy between people's attitudes towards the French differing in Northern and Southern Morocco, as well as urban versus rural Morocco, to be very telling of who benefitted the most from French colonization and who was hurt the most by it. While the people living in northern cities are grateful to the French for building their advanced railroad systems and teaching them French so they can engage with a

larger international economy, people in rural Southern Morocco tend to view French colonization more harshly and in terms of what Morocco lost in the process.

My Plastino scholarship allowed me to speak to such a diverse range of voices and truly broadened my global worldview beyond what I could have ever imagined. I am so grateful for this invaluable opportunity to grow while pursuing my passions and I hope to use what I have learned this past summer in future academic pursuits. After this experience, it has solidified my desire to focus on the Middle East and North Africa in my larger International Relations studies. Additionally, the stories I have heard about injustice and discrimination in France has made me want to go back and work towards helping immigrants and refugees in France, who are otherwise ostracized by general society. Speaking with so many locals pushed my French language skills to a new level of fluency which I hope will serve in making me a better diplomat sometime in the future. I am planning on applying for a Fulbright scholarship for the upcoming year, and I will take a lot of what I learned from this experience into my application and hopefully into that experience abroad if I am lucky enough to be awarded this scholarship. Overall, I have grown immensely through this Plastino experience and I look forward to helping other students pursue their dreams through this incredible opportunity in every way I can.

**Nana Ohemaa S Asante: The Dora Milaje Project: Becoming A Stuntwoman in A Month
Plastino Scholar 2022**

This summer, I was truly honored to be selected as a 2021 Plastino Scholar. My project, a culmination of interviews and training sessions, pushed me to both reconsider my personal definition of strength as well as forcing myself to face my fear of being uncomfortable.

Before I could go on my trip, I had to complete some preparations in order to transition into living in California as smoothly as possible. One major pre-trip situation I needed to smooth out was my living accommodation. During the Spring 2022 finals week, just hours before taking a final for a course, I received a notification that the Airbnb I had reserved months ago was canceled. The only explanation I received was that the host had moved. Not was moving, not was planning to move, but had moved. I immediately tried searching for a new place to stay and looked at the backup options I had. Unfortunately, it was too late, all 17 backup homes were no longer available. Two hours before my final, I had to try and place my nervousness in the back of my mind and steer my focus back to studying. For the rest of the week, I spent hours switching between writing papers, studying, and searching for a replacement accommodation. All \$6,000 I had received was already allotted to other expenses, and I didn't think it was fair to ask for even more money. I decided to leave requesting more money as my absolute last option.

I spent days trying to restructure my entire plan. First, I tried reallocating my funds, but that would mean that I needed to get rid of certain pieces of training. I felt that all of my training

options were crucial to the trip, so that choice was eventually dismissed. Next, I looked into finding a new location to stay at, like going to a different city or living with my godmother who lives in Rialto. However, that option quickly fell through. A new living location also meant having to find new training locations. I initially chose the LA/Hollywood area because of how close everything is and selecting a new scene meant also having to change my transportation budget as well. Most of my day would be spent commuting and changing buses and trains, which would only make me more likely to arrive at my locations late. I also thought of changing the time of my trip to winter, but I had already paid for my plane ticket, but my American Airlines ticket was no longer refundable.

At this point, I couldn't help but feel as if this was some sign that I shouldn't go on my trip. Maybe I wasn't ready, or worse, maybe I wasn't worthy entirely. If it wasn't for my mother, my biggest supporter, and motivator, encouraging me to not give up, as cliché as it sounds, I'm truly not sure what I would have done. She strengthened my resolve and told me that I was selected because of the effort I put into this proposal. If the Plastino Committee was able to approve a trip that I wasn't even sure would meet their expectations, then of course I was meant to go, even with all of the problems I was facing. Feeling enlivened, I eventually met with Dr. Sloane-White, and after some further conversation with some higher-ups, I was thankfully approved for the extra \$500 I needed to secure new housing.

I found a second Airbnb, just a few blocks from my first one, and reserved it. Happy and confident that that was the end of that, I went back to focusing on working. In order to graduate from my master's program, I was required to complete a 200 hours internship, which I fulfilled with the Delaware Racial Justice Collaborative. I spent the first half of the summer completing the internship by helping finish a directory for Black Physicians in Delaware and researching

Black mental health providers for their next directory. Additionally, I worked part-time in UD's Residence Life and Housing Department as a Graduate Hall Director for summer researchers. Two days after I made my new reservation, while getting an oil change for my car, I received another notification from Airbnb, stating that my second reservation was also canceled. The host's guest at that time wanted to extend their stay for a few more months, and they needed to give priority to that guest. I immediately started laughing, not from joy but from a sense of disbelief. I called my mom to tell her the news, but in the middle of our conversation, my phone died. I sat in the mechanic's lobby, watching the random movie playing on the screen (which happened to be "The Lord of the Rings"), and let my mind roam and wander.

As soon as I got home, I began researching more places to live. I refused to let myself get discouraged again. By the grace of God, the third time was truly the charm for me, as the third place I selected ended up being my home for the 32 nights I spent in California. It was about 3 blocks away from my original option and wasn't directly on the Hollywood walk of Fame, which made me feel a bit safer. It even was on sale, so the price I received it for was much lower than its usual cost. My mother came to California with me and my sister to help scope out my AirBnB and make sure I felt comfortable. Satisfied with the area, she and my sister left to stay with my godmother for a week and a half and then travel home. She cooked a lot of food and bought me groceries, which was a big help in transportation and meal-wise. She even connected me to my godmother's sister-in-law. Knowing that I had people around me to support me made it easier for me to enjoy myself on my trip as it was relieving knowing that there were people in the state looking out for me.

The first few days I spent scoping out the area and finishing work for my department and internship. I got a metro card and made sure I knew the different routes close to my apartment so

that I wouldn't have to rely on my phone to navigate around the city and look more vulnerable.

On the second day of my trip, the ESPY Awards were held just a few blocks away from me as I lived very close to the Dolby theatre. I was starstruck but tried my best not to show it. I felt like a teenager, trying not to look like a tourist in a city I had only ever dreamed of seeing in person.

The palm trees scraped the clear skies, the people walked around each other like they had seen it all before, and I felt so at home in only a matter of days.

After getting acclimated to the West Coast, I hopped straight into my training regiment. I made some adjustments to my schedule and taught myself how to be more flexible, physically and mentally. One change I made was the fighting gym I attended, I found a different gym that used the bus route I was more comfortable with and had both Brazilian jiu-jitsu (BJJ) and Muay Thai. I had already spent about a month in Newark doing kickboxing, so this was the training that I felt the most comfortable doing. I spent three hours at that gym two days a week; the first hour was for my Muay Thai class, the second was to rest, and the final hour was to take the BJJ course.

I took a wide variety of classes, just as I intended, and some that were pretty spontaneous. I spent two hours under the hot, Crenshaw sun, learning how to ride a motorcycle in a parking lot. I drove a total of about 100 kilometers, and even when my body ached from steering and stumbling off the bike, I pushed on. I learned how to put people in holds and break out of them in BJJ. I took fight choreography classes, learning how to fight for a camera with blades, light sabers, bo staffs, and no weapons at all. I slammed through mats, flipping, and spinning during my wire working class. I learned about comedic acting from a coach and what it meant to have an auditioning mindset from an acting teacher. I sat in on a four-hour methods acting class, watching the students leave their bodies behind to explore different emotions and feelings through their memories, while I felt so trapped in mine and in the present. For the first time in

years, my body felt weightless as I tried indoor skydiving, and felt the rush of air pushing my screams inward to get trapped in my throat. Like a trapeze artist and an acrobat, I gained calluses on my hands as I wrapped myself around ropes and held myself up with my hands. I relied on my upper body, even when I didn't fully believe in myself to keep myself steady. As my hands became raw from the wooden bars and coarse ropes, I asked my instructor how long would it take until my hands stopped hurting. He smiled, showing me the rough calluses scattered on his palms. "Not really," he laughed, "but you do learn to not focus on the pain."

For me, this trip exceeded the need for motivation because motivation is just temporary. It is not concrete, it exists only to arise sporadically and dismiss itself without warning. For me, this trip had deeper roots than just "because I think it will be fun." Because honestly, it was not always fun. I truly did not account for my need to constantly compare myself to others. Everyone has a different starting line, but I could not help but judge myself for where I was. With each failed handstand, each lackluster BJJ grapple, and each time I was afraid of falling, I felt so present in a body that I did not feel like it fit in with the rest of the bodies around. That was something I had trouble letting go of during this trip. The fact that I did not look like my classmates, both in skin tone and physique. This trip was about being comfortable with sticking out, for the sake of finding something more firm than motivation. For me, this trip was about discipline. I wanted to be more committed to myself for the sake of a younger version of myself, and all Black girls who have ever felt as if they did not belong in any environment they found themselves in.

Ultimately, did I become a stuntwoman in a month? Absolutely not, but that was never truly the goal. I went on this trip knowing that it would not completely change my views on

myself, but that it would be a beneficial jumpstart to my mindset on personal fortitude. If anything, I truly did not account for my need to constantly compare myself to others. Everyone has a different starting line, but I could not help but judge myself for where I was. But once I got myself into the routine of showing up, even when I was scared to, I began to notice the people around me. I met people who happily cheered me on, even after knowing me for only 10 minutes. People who heard of my project and wanted to learn more. People who connected me to others who would further elevate

Being in LA was weird because it was like you know everyone is out there trying to make it, and that any moment, you could be meeting a current celebrity, or the next big star. For example, on my first day at muay Thai, I met Denzel Curry, a popular rapper, and didn't even realize it until someone told me the next day. My friends were very upset when I told them the story, and even asked me to get his autograph, but I unfortunately never saw him again. Interestingly, at the same gym, my BJJ teacher was Riley Stearns, a filmmaker who recently won a Saturn award. LA, the Land of Artists, was teeming with people who wanted to be seen and heard, and I resonated strongly with that.

I would like to formally thank the Plastino Committee for believing in my dreams and I would like especially like to thank David A. Plastino for funding my trip. The currency for life is time and experiences and although I had a budget for this trip, my memories of this trip are greater than any amount of money in any currency. My return in August marked the end of my physical trip, but it did not dictate the end of my journey. My Plastino project won't stop here. After I graduate, I hope to interview more Black stuntwomen. Last month, I took my mother and

sister out to watch the “Woman King” movie, and only two minutes into the film, I cried. Not out of sadness, but awe that this was exactly what I spent my summer in LA doing. I do not want my trip to stay only in LA as a distant memory. With my video diaries, journal entries, and collection of interviews (both during my trip and soon), I hope to create a more formal and extended representation of a trip that I could have never taken without the Plastino Program’s support.