Special Issue
Beyond Hate: Representations of the Banlieue Body in Recent French Cinema

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Transitions is a scholarly journal of research addressed to both faculty and graduate students in the humanities. Its primary focus is work on the literary and artistic interaction between Spain and France from the early modern era to the present day. The cultural and literary exchanges that have taken place between these two leading Western powers through centuries have often been characterized by political, historical, religious and cultural transitions—between nations and national traditions, between periods, between literary or artistic styles, schools or genres. Particular interest will accordingly be given to the circulation, transformation, cultural adaptation and criticism of ideas and of literary and artistic forms as these migrate back and forth across the Pyrenees.

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EDITOR’S INTRODUCTION

Beyond Hate: Representations of the Banlieue Body in Recent French Cinema

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As a peripheral space often deprived of historical prestige and classified as a hybrid space of cultural transition, the banlieue (suburb) of Paris has always developed its own culture since the industrial revolution. From the 19th century, when it became a space of entertainment, inspiration and recreation, to the often problematic and ignored urban zone that it has become in the last 30 years, the banlieue is a space of créolité and diaspora par excellence. The banlieue allows us to explore its socio-linguistic, cultural, historical, literary and filmographic hybridities, as well as the interactions of different cultures within its boundaries and its attempt to construct pockets of cosmopolitan spaces to overcome its complex of inferiorities, or eventually, a culture in constant transformation. Since the release of La Haine (Hate) in 1995, it has been producing and selling an image of its own as a reaction to the rejection of its cultural make-up essentially based on the beur body, the merging of Maghrebi and French genes. In the second decade of the 21st century, we can no longer identify or reflect the entire body of bodies living in the suburb in a single figure or style associated with immigration, and need to envision the banlieue bodies in a much more complex fashion, beyond hate.

This assimilation has turned out to be problematic in the recent past since the complexity of the banlieue cannot be assimilated to the reassuring smile of Zinédine Zidane. For these reasons, it is time
to look at the Parisian periphery from a variety of different angles in order to deconstruct the clichés to which it is too often reduced rather than envisioning it as a space of immigration, we need to emphasize its hybrid nature as well as the myriad of identities it has created. This special issue of Transitions: Journal of Franco-Iberian Studies, part of a two-volume series on the urban spaces of transitions in France and Spain, is dedicated to the following mission: to explore the multiplicity of self-generated bodies, and all other forms of new configurations and expressions of escape from an assigned condition.

First of all, it has become necessary to connect the suburb to its historical past as a space of entertainment and escape from the city in the 19th century to truly envision its odd juxtapositions on all levels (architectural, cultural, social and ethnic, among others). As Réda Caire used to sing in 1930s:

“Ma banlieue, ma banlieue
A des charmes que rien ne remplace
Pas bien loin, y a des coins
Où chaque dimanche on se délasse
Ma banlieue, ma banlieue
Grâce à toi, tous les ennuis s’effacent
On devient très fleur bleue
C’est pourquoi j’aime tant ma banlieue

My suburb, my suburb
Has irreplaceable charms
Not very far, there are corners
Where we go relax on sundays
My suburb, my suburb
Thanks to you all my sorrows disappear
I become very romantic
That’s why I love my suburb so much

Before WWII, the suburb is a place of escape from the city, associated with nature, guinguettes (inn by the water where people would dance), recreation, free love and drinking, and pleasure. The Surrealists project in this “world beyond city limits” their intentions to anthropomorphize the urban space. The Parisian bourgeoisie turns the banlieue into its idyllic space of recreation, trying to reproduce the impressionist perception of the peripheral landscapes. The richest city dwellers own their “pavillion en banlieue” and the middle-class would often end up renting rooms by the many rivers or canals that all converge to the Seine. Who would have thought back in the 1920s that the banlieue would
gradually become, after WWII, the space of the experimental housing projects (grands ensembles), a vision to house in futuristic beehives the North African immigrants who would reconstruct a country devastated by war?

Today, once again, the banlieue is a space of transition. Unlike its American counterpart (the inner-city, usually associated with a dangerous downtown and the suburban life with a ‘better’ lifestyle), the banlieue is a space that surrounds the French capital in what the Parisians know as the petite couronne (little crown) and the grande couronne (big crown). It is an ever-changing space, in opposition to the mostly safe historic center, kept intact for its historical value and financially inaccessible for the working class and the immigrants. One might wonder if a Derridean reading of the banlieue as a marginal space that defines the center that it surrounds would still be à propos in our day and age, given the fact that the banlieue has become, in turn, a periphery surrounded by another greater margin, that is, the rest of France, the historically Catholic countryside. The couronne is trapped between a city that cannot afford to lose its attraction and a country that envisions the peripheral space of the banlieue as the epicenter of all current socio-economical problems.

Popular cinema, television programs and political anxieties of all kinds have turned the banlieue into the most chaotic space in the entire territory of the aging nation. Consequently, there is a necessity for the arts to counter-represent the banlieue and balance the overly paranoid picture painted by the state through the media. Since the election of Nicolas Sarkozy (a president who had defined the banlieue as the habitat of the scum he intended to clean with a karcher), the binary oppositions between the couronne and the spaces around it have exploded: the war between la Sarkosie (new name for a security-oriented French territory) and the irresistible banlieue is everywhere to be found. This conflict of spaces has served the purposes of the economy of “security” on which the Sarkozy administration has based its agenda. In order to fall out of these binary oppositions that maintain France in the status quo of a never-ending conflictive situation, the banlieue needs to be reconsidered.
in much more complex parameters, which is partly what motivates the publication of the articles contained in this volume.

The banlieue reacts by creating its own language, its own codes, its own defense mechanisms, almost in imitation of the regionalist revivals of identities that we witness all around Europe. Instead of connecting with its immediate neighbors, the Parisian suburbs communicate with the entire world of the oppressed around the globe, diffusing their music to the four corners of the planet, bypassing the city and the country that define their territorial limits and rejects systematically everything they produce. Its warehouses and ruins, its untamed vegetation and the axis of public transportation that mark its map like scars all contribute to the creation of its mode de vie. This cultural reconfiguration has been made possible through the somewhat utopian “Black, Blanc, Beur,” an alliance of the youth originating from Africa and the West Indies (Black), from the working class already in place before the waves of immigration (Blanc or toubab), and from the Maghrebi immigrants born on French soil (Beur). Later projected in the football world, this successful slogan helped avoid more tensions between the different ethnic groups composing the banlieue.

Since the 1990s and the release of La Haine (Hate) in 1995, French cinema has witnessed the rise of a new generation of directors such as Tony Gatlif, Olivier Ducastel, Gael Morel, Pierre Morel, Abdel Kechiche, Sébastien Lifshitz, all interested in exploring the relationship between the beur body and the oppressive urban environment of the banlieue. Often constrained to the suburban ghettos of Paris and Marseille, the beur fights to recreate his/her spiritual identity, generally ignored by both the Catholic North and the Islamic South. At the turn of the century, however, their films have a marked tendency to focus on a new problematic associated with the beur subject: the impossibility for this bicultural body to overcome the spatial limits imposed by the socio-geographical configuration of the French territory. This impossible escape often takes the form of the road-movie and quests through forbidden lands. Outside of the city, when lost in the countryside, beurs are confronted to an unbearable absence of
familiar signs in a historically Catholic land, a cultural vacuum that forces them to rush to the next urban pocket. This special issue of Transitions also seeks to understand this problematic through the reading of key scenes from a variety of films. In our selection, the representations analyzed by our contributors will not only underline how the beur body has become an “Other” through his/her spatial struggle, but also how this phenomenon is linked to the construction of a margin serving the religious and spiritual debates of the whole French society, as well as an embodiment of its impossible escape from Otherness.

We can recall, for instance, the extremely controversial release of Baise-moi in 2000, the graphic nudity of several of its scenes, ranging from rape to orgies, all happening in the suburbs. The adaptation of the novel by Virginie Despentes had already gotten critics ready to acknowledge the superiority of the artistic over the pornographic in this film. Yet it was saved by its belonging to a new movement called “New French Extremity” whose inspirations are rooted in the works of Georges Bataille and their previous application in the movies of François Ozon. The sex scenes out of the banlieue are not only shocking for their aesthetic quality, but also because they are real and not simulated. Yet the hybrid bodies are at the epicentre of this road-movie around the banlieue and its darkest corners. The amateur-like quality of the film increases the harsh realism that the author of the book wants to transmit in the cinematographic adaptation of her novel. No places are named but the two characters are contained within urban parameters that define the banlieue as a French phenomenon of various cities (Bordeaux, Marseille and Paris, essentially). Manu and Nadine, the two female protagonists of this hellish parody of Thelma and Louise, try to resolve the emptiness of their condition through the odd combinations of violence and sex. Manu is a beurette without any perspective of future, while Nadine is a toubab who has adopted the ways of the beurs. Their rebellion through escape will be a failure since the whole system will track them down. Throughout their journey, their concern is to fill the void with images of violence that will help them in understanding the world around them, but
it will be a constant failure since their body is not allowed outside of the boundaries of the suburbs. Therefore they opt for a general rejection of French society and cross the borders to commit random murders in the country, without a plan or a map. This film shows that their body has no outlet between the city and the country, between the Catholic land and the Islamic heritage that are both felt like oppressing forces on the two women and their extreme feminism, taking the idea of “ni putes ni soumises” (not your whore, not your servant) to its visual limits.

The model of the fleeing pair will be recycled in Tony Gatliff’s *Exils* in 2004. The opening sequence of this movie sets the tone: a naked couple in a tiny apartment in one of the towers by the périphérique, the highway that circles Paris and marks a clear separation between the historical city and the banlieue, revolutionary music blasting their anger and anxieties, their need to escape from the banlieue. The film opens with a close-up on the skin of Zano’s—the protagonist (Romain Duris)—back. It seems as if the camera follows the points of a map, but instead it is human skin. Zano’s skin contains the memory of exiles, from Algeria to the banlieue. As the opening sequence continues to reveal in a circle the small space of the apartment from its centre, the viewer can contemplate the immensity of the view on the banlieue from the window. From this perspective that would please Albert Camus and Gilles Deleuze, since it turns Paris and its banlieue into a ville couchée, dominated by the human gaze at last, the two naked bodies decide to begin a backward exile, that is, from the banlieue back to Algeria. It is particularly interesting to see that the film is full of transformed religious iconography, such as a masked Christ on the wall of Zano’s apartment. The two lovers are trapped in an inescapable identity, just like the périphérique is trapped between the banlieue and the city, just like the banlieue as a couronne is itself trapped between the city and the country. The Algerian identity is yet to be re-discovered and their journey will have them go through various layers of religious imagery in which their bodies will participate. As Carrie Tarr writes in *Reframing Difference: Beur and Banlieue Filmmaking in France* (2004): “the road-movie is an invitation to engage with many questions of identity, particularly
what it means for someone brought up in France to have a missing father of Maghrebí origin. (. . .) the quest for the father opens up the prospect of discovering a completely different aspect to his identity” (147). *Exils* is *par excellence* the film that emphasizes this departure from an identity to a reconstruction of the individual through the escape.

Another instance we might want to recall is *Banlieue 13*. As we can see in this science-fiction-Hollywood-like-special-effects-saturated-action-filled film (translated all over the world as *District 13*), futuristic visions of the Parisian suburbs are rather pessimistic. This film from 2004 projects us into 2010 (now behind us) to present us with a hellish vision of the banlieue. The government has decided to build a huge wall around the *Banlieue 13* in order to separate it geographically from the rest of the territory. The number 13 is of course not only the number of evil and bad luck, but also the “treize” of Marseille’s administrative department number, and partially the end of “quatre-vingt-treize” or “Neuf-Trois,” that is the Northeastern problematic suburbs of Paris. This film presents the hybrid body through the spectacular escapes it does through the Asian-inspired art of *parkour*. Copying the concept of West Berlin before the fall of the Wall, the incarcerated suburb becomes a playground for the inhabitant who has acquired extreme familiarity with the space he can only escape from within. We can see in this film that the future of the banlieue is deprived of a monotheistic presence. The space is at the same time realistic and imagined, but the dichotomy between the Christian and the Muslim has been erased through the walling off of the district. Inside the *Banlieue 13*, the inmates have lost faith in all traditional forms of beliefs and can only rely on a return to the primitive defence mechanisms for survival. The suburb has turned in a jungle and its dwellers have returned to an animist lifestyle, prior to the ones imposed on them by monotheism. It almost seems that Asian martial arts have become the only recognized religiosity in the *Banlieue 13* as a way to deconstruct the oppressive and conflictive oppositions of Catholicism and Islam.

Moving back to a less spectacular genre, and in order to conclude
the presentation of this special issue, I would like to mention briefly another film further analyzed in this volume: Abdel Kechiche’s *Lesquive*, also released in 2004. Shot from a much more realist angle, this movie intertwines high-school life in the *banlieue* with the rehearsals of an eighteenth-century play by Marivaux, *Le jeu de l’amour et du hasard*. Five years before the success of *Entre les murs (The Classroom)*, Kechiche explores taboo or the unfamiliar spaces of the *banlieue*, such as the classroom, the interior of the apartments, the building halls, the playground where the students meet to escape to another identity: through the representation of the play their gestures, attitudes, tone, voice, body language, facial expressions, and language will all change to enter the body of the eighteenth-century character. Acting enables us to decode their environment and connect to the literary tradition of France, a space in which the young *banlieusards* can find some degree of answer to the exclusion and reclusion of their bodies as *beurs*. The main character, Lydia, is a blond, white girl: all the odds are against her in the cité. Yet she is an extremely interesting character since her whole body has become *beur*. She proves that the hybrid body no longer has to be attached to an immigrant identity: they are now detached in the suburban reclusion since non-beur are able to adopt the body in an effort of cultural communion. Recent releases such as *Le nom des gens (The Names of Love)* are the proof that France’s transitions appear nowhere clearer than in the *banlieue*.

The purpose of this volume of *Transitions* is to deepen the analysis of these questions in order to understand how the *banlieue* becomes a space of corporal transformation that currently progresses towards the deconstruction of both the space it contains (the city) and the space that contains it (the country) through a series of articles: the variety of angles each of these contributions offers will certainly inform the reader about the complexity of a space that is progressively moving beyond hate.

**Works Cited**

La Goutte d’ôr: Localizing a banlieues Aesthetic

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The surrealist project for liberating Paris from the imposition of quasi-colonialist urban superstructure in the early 20th century resonates in valuable ways, yielding possibilities for a new and vital understanding of 21st century banlieues art. In her Marxist analysis of Benjamin and Breton’s Paris, Margaret Cohen re-iterates the Surrealist fascination with the shape of Paris and the journeys taken through it by those artists and writers. She argues that Breton’s wandering characters are to be seen as “haunting selves.” Indeed, in his novel Nadja, Breton’s “haunting self” is to be taken as a “fissured and fundamentally constructed identity” (65). Breton’s reconfiguration of how identities are constructed through an encounter with urban spaces is indicative of the prescience of surrealist identity politics. The journeys taken through Paris by the enigmatic but disenfranchised worker, Nadja, are an appeal for balanced narratives about the oppressor and oppressed. This desire for unrepressed accounts becomes increasingly more important as a consequence rather than primary aim of the surrealist project and must be taken up today as emergent narratives of banlieues inhabitants are reaching new and innovative heights.

Surrealist critique of urban reform in Paris precedes and is then contemporaneous with the violent roots of contemporary urban planning in the banlieues, namely, the ghettoizing of North African workers, which was one of the triggers for uprisings linked to the
Franco-Algerian war in the late 1950s and early 1960s in Paris. The Manifesto 121, one of the central early critiques of France’s policies towards the Algerian war for Independence, was authored by surrealist groups and then circulated more widely, becoming integrally linked with larger intellectual protest against the war (Rosemont 346).

André Breton’s *Nadja* instructed in the early 20th century that the map of Paris unfolds like the skirts of a sultry mistress, hiding both sordid truths and exotic beauty beneath them. The misery of the Algerian immigrant workers was one of the truths lurking in those outskirts around the time of the seminal parisianist novels, an emergent literary genre in 1959, which has been analyzed in depth in Benetta Jules-Rosette’s sociological study, *Black Paris: the African Writer’s Landscape*. In her recent book, *La rançon du colonialisme: Les surréalistes face aux mythes de la France coloniale (1919–1962)*, Sophie Leclercq traces the anti-colonialist stance of the surrealists and the role it played in their representations of Parisian landscapes. Taken together, the work of Jules-Rosette and LeClercq provides sociological and ethnographic frameworks for analyzing the literary and cinematic resonance between pre-parisianist surrealist expression, parisianist narratives of the Franco-Algerian war period and contemporary banlieues creative production.

Journeys taken in *Nadja*, a text which can be posited as a precursor to the seminal parisianist texts, touch upon some of the traumas of the northern edges of the arrondissements and highlight surrealist fascination with primitive art as ultimately an anticipatory critique of the disenfranchised worker and their identity politics. In the beginning of the second part of *Nadja*, Breton implies that revolution against increasing disenfranchisement required preparation. As he gazes at the indifferent faces of people hurrying from their offices on the Grands Boulevards just inside the border marked by the Porte St. Denis, Breton announces that these particular workers did not appear ready for revolution (71–72). Their voices were silenced by the burdens of the working class system.

One fundamental surrealist principle, to be revealed in *Nadja* was
to anthropomorphize the city in order to humanize and critique the pain it was undergoing as new and indifferent superstructures were imposed upon it and its populations. Current banlieues artists often take up the self-fulfilling prophecy of the surrealist aesthetic, for example when Abd Al Malik compares Paris to an old woman who plays the role of femme fatale (Château Rouge, Centre Ville 2010). Breton equally feminizes the shape of Paris as he speculates on what she, Paris, will become (182). In film theory, the femme fatale is the central camera code for signifying an obstacle to narrative progression (Mulvey; Silverman). In evoking this generic figure, Abd Al Malik marks his work as being concerned with equally disturbing obstacles to narrative progression in the identity politics of banlieues dwellers.

**Parisianism in its Inception**

In 1959, parisianism, a generic category which bears witness to the obstacles facing Franco-Algerian and Franco-African struggles to assimilate is anticipated through Bernard Dadié’s *Un Nègre à Paris*, and also, as I have argued in a forthcoming article, through Richard Wright’s unfinished *Long Dream* trilogy (Jules-Rosette 8; Craven). Both the trilogy and Dadié’s novel were published at the height of Franco-Algerian tensions. Though neither author engages directly with these tensions, their mutual dependence on one of parisianism’s generic centers, the environmental gaze, nonetheless suggests that the urban space itself defines the identity politics of these novels, and therefore the sub-text of the Algerian War cannot be discounted as it was contemporaneous with the inception of the genre. The testimonial nature of the environmental gaze allowed writers shaping the genre to reveal their own fissured senses of identity in the face of the Parisian urban landscape. One of the specificities of the genre most crucial for my purposes is its substitution of protest literature with nuanced silences that force the reader to dwell upon the material conditions of those landscapes. In parisianist texts, the physical locations depicted must reveal themselves and their struggles through the silence of the environmental gaze, rather than mount a frontal assault on the
causes of those struggles. Demographics become fore-grounded in this way.

Thus just as Breton announces the Porte St. Denis as the historic marker of the exit from city proper into the faubourgs or as gateway to the suburban areas of Paris which both conceal and reveal violence for those who have been alienated or who have never belonged, the parisianist text combines the immigrant’s desire to belong with the awareness of the impossibility of realizing that desire, given the conditions the narrative describes. Though other articles in this present volume rightfully locate a banlieues aesthetic just beyond the current marker which separates Paris from its suburbs—the périphérique—I would contend that the principles of social exclusion practiced with the construction of the périphérique were already inherited from the colonialist and anti-colonialist debates of the surrealist writers and their adversaries. The anticipation of the périphérique, which now dominates as the marker separating Paris proper from its impoverished suburbs, was always already a figment of the French colonial imagination.

**Locus of Neo-Parisianism**

Pointing out liaisons between the themes, concerns and styles of seminal parisianist writers of the late 1950s with more contemporary artists, one can reconfigure La goutte d’ôr as a symbolic locus for new articulations of the parisianist environmental gaze. Just as the surrealist search for value and meaning in its creative production was reliant upon journeys of discovery through an evolving urban landscape, so too the banlieues and northern margins of Paris play a crucial demographic role in banlieues art. Michel Pinçon and Monique Pinçon-Charlot have suggested in their study Paris: Quinze promenades sociologiques that Emile Zola contributed to the neighborhood’s longstanding emblematic role with respect to the Parisian worker’s historical identity by using ethnographic methods avant la lettre in L’Assomoir (193).

The shared aesthetic base of many banlieues artists echoes the cultural diversity of La goutte d’ôr and calls attention to the indispensable use of physical location as an important common
trait in contemporary banlieues art. Coupled with the traumatic remnants of the Franco-Algerian war, the shattered streets of La goutte d’ôr bear witness to over a half-century of immigrant struggle which must be taken as the anchor for a contemporary banlieues studies. The immigrant workers’ struggles and the Franco-Algerian war served as the fertile ground from which the parisianist genre of writing has sprung up, and therefore parisianism or more suitably, neo-parisianism, can also be taken as a cornerstone of banlieues studies.

Hervé Breuil, owner of the Olympic Café and the Lavoir Moderne Parisien, has suggested on the first global channel of La goutte dôr, Ruelleon TV, that the secrets and the success of this culturally diverse world can be gleaned on the streets near the Square Léon, the lifeline of La goutte d’ôr. Its population’s search for affirmative identity is one of the primary concerns of the activities taking place in and around the Square Léon on a daily basis (www.ruelleon.net; Pinçon 213). Breuil’s establishments are also two of the most crucial showcase locations for exhibiting and giving a communal life to creative production in the banlieues.

The Echomusée is another local institution dedicated to uncovering the exotic beauties of La goutte d’ôr and to the banlieues, a practice that requires re-affirmation of worker and immigrant identities. One of the projects directly related to these concerns is the Cargo 21 project where there is a call for new cartographies of a neighborhood according to the sentiments of artistic impressions, inhabitants and visitors (www.echomusee.com). It is precisely in these places that the protagonists of parisianism have re-emerged to offer renewed testimonies of the lingering pains which can be witnessed in the workers’ cités. Finally, Marsa Editions, a local press run by Aissa Khelladi, is dedicated to the publication of works by second or third generation Franco-Algerian writers. Her “storefront” publishing house offers regular workshops and readings to effectuate the work of mourning over France’s collective colonial past, which she claims has yet to be fully realized (Khelladi).

Valorizing the art of the banlieues requires that repressed
histories of these immigrant worker neighborhoods become un-sedimented rather than transformed, a critical practice only made possible through the triangular aesthetic base of neo-parisianism, demographics and reconsideration of the traumatic effects of Franco-Algerian tensions. The use of the environmental gaze as employed by artists Abd Al Malik and Rachid Bouchareb and analysis of it in their works therefore serves as an initial case study in a call for banlieues studies rooted in neo-parisianism. These artists have been raised in the banlieues. The work they have done mimics a location which in and of itself is here taken as the emblem of a unique culture and therefore the base of a banlieues studies. Unlike others, however, these artists have achieved a certain level of recognition outside the local terrain, which makes them crucial subjects of study, in that they are part of the emergent public face of the banlieues.

The benefits of an aesthetic field of study dedicated to the banlieues are debatable, but it is nonetheless clear that some of the retrenchment that dismantled the surrealist project at the advent of World War II is perhaps avoided in the contemporary banlieues. As Abd Al Malik’s title, “la guerre des banlieues n’aura pas lieu” suggests, the artistic production of the banlieues might eventually be used to temper the depictions of violence which have plagued the outer regions of Paris and have led in some media cases to willful misrepresentation of the energies contained within, as indicated by Jocelyne Césari in her study on common misconceptions about the causes of the 2005 riots (5).

Hacène Belmessous also outlines the menace of super-structural organization overtaking the banlieues in his recent book Operation Banlieues: Comment l’état prepare la guerre urbaines dans les cités françaises. Belmessous analyses the current efforts of the French government to facilitate urban violence as a way of infiltrating and transforming the banlieues. The play of identity politics which has led to positive creative outlets for second or third generation children of immigrants in Paris has equally led to a crisis in French national identity. Such a crisis necessarily creates confrontational scenarios, which must be countered through deeper understanding of the aesthetic aspects of banlieues energies.
The aesthetic reactions of artists such as Abd Al Malik and Rachid Bouchareb are rooted in such contemporary concerns but nonetheless echo central tenets of tensions from earlier generations. While the voice of authors such as Richard Wright or Bernard Dadié are muted by the larger than life Malcolm X, iconic versions of Barack Obama, or the directly inherited violence of Franco-Algerian conflicts, understanding the resonance between multiple forms of disenfranchisement which have taken place on the Parisian landscape or in the banlieues seems crucial. In particular, the Algerian massacre has re-emerged in the past few years as a subject of scrutiny in such works as Rachid Bouchareb’s Hors-la-loi. Less prominently displayed texts, the plays Un Soir à Paris by Madjid Ben Chikh (1999) and C’était un 17 Octobre . . . by Marie-Christine Prati-Belmokhtar (2009) attest to the fact that the massacre of 17 October 1961 continues to fuel the poetic imagination of immigrant and second generation immigrant artists, but the film Hors-la-loi calls for attention in that it is produced in a blockbuster style. The film was released to a larger, more commercial audience than the theatrical works, which are published by Marsa Editions. As public reception of the film attests, the massacre of Algerian-French citizens in October 1961 in the streets of Paris is still a public embarrassment for the French government and thus Bouchareb’s cinematic recreation of the event from the perspective of Franco-Algerian protagonists constituted a minor scandal when the film was shown at Cannes (Cahiers du cinéma #660 88).

Bouchareb creates a three-way protagonist structure, shared by three brothers who adopt different attitudes towards their immigration into France. Bouchareb re-enacts an alienating and aggressive environmental gaze. In Hors-la-loi, the first brother abandons political principles in order to belong to French capitalistic society. The second brother takes up his belonging in France as a burden he must assume, given that his participation in the war for France left blood on his hands. Until he is able to join the third brother in the Algerian Revolution and the constitution of the National Liberation Front (Front de libération nationale), he mistakes
his blood guilt for the assumption of French national identity. In effect, he killed *in order to* become French. The third brother insists that the Algerians have been disenfranchised and must continue to struggle against their oppressors. Their oppressors are equally their hosts and the Algerian immigrants’ willingness to participate in the work force that will rebuild France after WWII creates the essential dichotomy of longing and belonging characteristic of the environmental gaze.

The film ends with each of these brothers bearing silent witness to the 17 October 1961 massacre. The cinematography of the last shots, shots which depict the events of the massacre, is one of extraordinary silence, where a lack of closure in the events of the film suggests that the sequence is less the ending to a film than it is an extra-diagetic call to acknowledge fully one of the most excruciating episodes in France’s colonial past. The death of the third brother is painfully and silently depicted in this final sequence as well. As Benjamin Stora and Renaud de Rochebrune suggest, the film could and should be placed within the context of any number of films treating the memory of the French and the Algerians on their communal past (89). They argue that the film is not a political film, but rather, a depiction of heroic violence from the perspective of the Franco-Algerian gaze.

Stora and de Rochebrune equally contend that it is ill-advised for Bouchareb to glorify violence which has negative resonance in today’s *banlieues* (90). In so doing, they fail to recognize crucial aesthetic dimensions of Bouchareb’s cinematography. Nonetheless, the use of the environmental gaze in this film insists on an act of mourning and recreates a much-needed narrative of longing and belonging rooted in the 17 October massacres which should not remain repressed. Prior to the 1990s, there were only two *eye-witness* accounts of the 1961 October massacre embedded in literary treatments: *The Stone Face* in 1963 by African American journalist W.G. Smith and Didier Daeninckx’s *Meurtres pour mémoire* in 1984 (Stovall 191). Other novels and films, such as *Elise ou la vraie vie* by Claire Etcherelli and its film adaptation by Michel Drach, make use of the massacre as a backdrop, though in
this case and in the case of other literary treatments the amount of eye-witness testimony varies. Eye-witness account or account based on testimonials after the fact, the goal of these creative works is to gaze upon a violent past in ways that allow for constructive moves from formerly repressed roots of contemporary unrest to new and healing perspectives.

In the final analysis, it is the political impotency embodied by the parisianist or neo-parisianist protagonists that gives poignancy to the genre and distinguishes it from confrontational protest literature. If there is any birth mother to the parisianist genre, it is precisely the tense environment of the immigrant worker and the reactions to it on the part of African, Franco-African and African American writers, who longed to embrace the credo of “liberté, égalité, fraternité” but for whom the blatant racial and social imbalance of their existences in France helped to foment fervent reactions to the Franco-Algerian war. While protest and demonstration was called for, writing direct protest literature coming from “guests” of the French state on the subject of Franco-Algerian tensions was an unthinkable practice (Stovall 98).

The parisianist genre shapes itself out of the collective desire of immigrant artists to bear witness to social injustices even as they realized their impotency to give political voice to such critiques. As a result, intense focus on spatial determinants in the parisianist aesthetic distinguishes it from pure protest literature, though the nuance of the genre can often go unrecognized in a writer’s legacy. Writers such as Richard Wright, Bernard Dadié, William Gardner Smith, Didier Daeninckx and Abd Al Malik have all in some ways been labeled as authors of protest literature, though the fine line between novels of protest and novels which can be seen as belonging to the parisianist genre is one which must be articulated in order to avoid oversimplification.

In his novel The Stone Face, William Gardner Smith evokes the October 17, 1961, Algerian massacres in Paris, and focuses on a literary representation of the Algerian worker in the racially tortured northern areas of Paris. For the face of the oppressors depicted in the massacre in The Stone Face, the protagonist Simeon
Transitions

claims, “They were all the same face. Wherever this face was found, it was his enemy; and whoever feared or suffered from, or fought against this face was his brother (1964, 176).” The uncompromised likening of Algerian immigrant to American Negro disfigures the complexity of identity politics in Paris during the Algerian war (Smith 57; Stovall 194), but a narrative of disrupted identities and virtual longing, as well as silence in the face of exclusionary practices is echoed in Simeon’s gaze upon his enemy’s symbolic face. W.G. Smith and his protagonist Simeon were both painfully aware that they could never participate in a protest against the struggles of Algerian compatriots.

By contrast, Hors-la-Loi brings the violence of the banlieues to the big screen and does so by rooting it in a specific past trauma, the Franco-Algerian war—a war about which Bouchareb feels entitled to speak. In addition, Abd Al Malik’s “novel” La guerre des banlieues n’aura pas lieu (2010), establishes links to seminal parisianist authors, despite generational and cultural disparities in setting. Abd Al Malik found new structural solutions in creating a novel that skirts direct confrontation. He calls for a new kind of identity politics based on the affirmation of balance between one’s claim to French citizenship and one’s claim to exilic cultural roots—a balance Abd Al Malik asserts is made possible through literacy. His novel follows the dictates of the parisianist genre though he has less need to lapse into the silence of longing or alienation that characterized the work of Dadié, Wright and W.G. Smith.

Nonetheless, as in the case of Dadié and Richard Wright, the literature, musical lyrics and cinema of the banlieues are born out of a deliberating scrutiny of physical spaces—spaces that both imprison and create an expectancy of journey towards a less fissured self-identity. On 16 December 2004, for example, Abd Al Malik organized a concert sauvage on the Place de la Sorbonne, for example, and reconstructed a replica of a banlieues location directly onto the Place. Place de la Sorbonne is historically one of the most venerated symbolic centers of free discourse in Paris. Abd Al Malik transformed the physical appearance of the place by
performing against the backdrop of a huge glass sheet situated just in front of the doors to the Sorbonne. This was done in the months leading up to the 2005 riots and student protests, a moment of profound unrest in Paris, which can be witnessed in localized films of the events.

Abd Al Malik sang his lyrics, as one of his colleagues created an elaborate graffiti typical of those seen in the banlieues. In the process of being painted, the graffiti began to block the audience’s view of the front door of the Sorbonne, emphasizing the eminent visibility of the Sorbonne and the absolute invisibility of the banlieues in the minds and lives of French nationals. Abd Al Malik thus delivered the message that if the intellectual elite of Paris did not want to come out to the banlieues, then the banlieues would just have to come into the center of Paris. The abjectness of the environmental gaze of banlieues inhabitants was symbolically recreated.

Abd Al Malik’s subsequent musical projects equally stress spatial dimensions, in particular, in his work with a collective of artists on a musical album entitled Beni Snassen. Each of the artists in the collective inhabits the banlieues and all but one was born in the banlieues. Furthermore, the name of their musical collective originates from a physical location. The population of Beni Snassen, a region in Algeria, is characterized by a collective diversity as are La goutte d’ôr and other northern Paris areas. Beni Snassen is also the name given to one of the French tanks used during World War II that was commandeered by Algerian soldiers fighting in the French army (www.chars-francais.net). Chronicling the involvement of Algerian soldiers in the French army is another locus of the popular imagination used by Rachid Bouchareb in his more broadly accepted film Les Indigènes.

Privileging physical location is at the base of Beni Snassen’s identity as a collective group and is echoed continuously in their lyrics, particularly in one of the lead songs, Spleen et Idéal: “The streets have become the grandest theater of the absurd . . . but I have transcended the banlieues with my pen . . . the books in my library are the only bling bling I know—my translation. (On Aime,
On Aide 2006). This type of lyric reinforces the links between literacy and the environmental gaze onto banlieues locations, which informs so much of Abd Al Malik’s life and work.

Abd Al Malik’s most recent album Château Rouge moves directly into a sub-area of La Goutte d’îr, continually stressing demographic space. Château Rouge’s place in the lives of Abd Al Malik’s parisianist protagonists is ever present, such as in the song Centre Ville: “un lieu est l’allegorie de l’être” a lyric which insists that place is an allegory of a being--one must visualize Paris and its banlieues in anthropomorphic shapes. Another lyric, written in English by Abd Al Malik, suggests that many banlieues youth are: “Born in Paris, raised like a virus, Born in Paris, raised like a crime” (We Are Still Kings 2010). Abd Al Malik even calls upon parallels to the Afro-American experience of physical exclusion when he speaks of his neighborhood as one where people live in similar ways to the way Malcolm Little lived before he became Malcolm X. The demographic dimension of the identity politics under scrutiny is thereby reinforced. By liberating himself from the oppression of American racism, Malcolm comes to be called by a new and powerful name and lives differently in the spaces he inhabits. In each of these lyrical instances, the silence of the environmental gaze is evoked by first calling attention to the physical location with ethnographic precision and secondly, to the beings it has produced. The spaces of social exclusion are aesthetically framed in this manner (Château Rouge 2010).

The Neo-Parisianist Novel:

La guerre des banlieues n’aura pas lieu

Despite early failures, Abd Al Malik converts to a life of reading that he claims was his salvation. Abd Al Malik revalorizes the traditional spaces of free discourse and juxtaposes the cités as overlays and as potential new spaces for free discourse as in the case of the Sorbonne concert discussed earlier. Throughout La Guerre des banlieues n’aura pas lieu, the reader follows the evolution of the central character, a young boy named Peggy, as he moves from a life in the banlieues which entraps him towards a life in
the *banlieues* which he controls. The reader is witness to the thin balance between the alienating silence to which Peggy is subjected as well as to a nuanced account of longing and belonging which terminates in his acquisition of an empowering education. In the closing chapter, Peggy has become many things, notably a father who must explain to his son, the only Black Muslim in his school, that he should not listen when his friends claim that he is not French just because he is black and when they insist that he is *per force* an Arab simply because he is Muslim. In effect, the father’s lesson to the son is that his longing to belong to his surrounding environment will always be thwarted by that environment’s willful revision of his identity or imposition of a super-structural definition of his place within the environment as a means of excluding him.

The lesson is equally explained to the son’s teacher when she tries to suggest that the young black boy is having trouble learning to read, but that this is not cause for great concern since he will probably have no need for reading in whatever future he pursues afterwards—being a black Arab, as she sees it. As Abd Al Malik expresses it through the words of his character, “there was one phrase which really *bugger dans ma tête* [got to me]” (2010, 153), namely, the teacher’s assertion that his son would do the kinds of jobs or activities where he wouldn’t be required to read when he was older. Two forms of irresponsible prejudice typical of national imagination about the Parisian *banlieues* are here evoked—that race, nationality and ethnicity are used confusedly to marginalize many French citizens who have descended from immigrant parents, and that literacy is unimportant for those citizens because they will never be able to assimilate in a productive way into mainstream French culture.

The echo of Malcolm X, who narrates a similar humiliation in his own autobiography, continually resurfaces explicitly and implicitly in the pages of Abd Al Malik’s texts. Abd Al Malik ends his novel with an insistence that one’s life must be shared with others (75), an echoing of Todorov’s call for alternative ways of evoking collective memory. In *Mémoire du Mal, Tentation du Bien: Enquête sur le Siècle* Tzvetan Todorov denounces repressive collective histories,
whose superstructures are intended to efface individual memory, particularly the individual memories of the disenfranchised. Along with the suggestion that what one remembers is a function of one’s identity and sense of empowerment, Todorov stresses the need for balance between la manie analogique and l’obsession literaliste—between the tendency to simplify past events through overdetermined analogies and the dubious insistence that there can be an objective viewpoint which, in claiming to be literal, often obscures important details, particularly with respect to colonial histories (10). Breton’s “haunting selves” re-emerge in Todorov’s appeal for unpressed reviews of 20th century events.

Abd Al Malik’s first prose work, Qu‘Allah Benisse La France, is completely autobiographical, but its environmental testimony on his troubled past is transformed in La Guerre des banlieues n’aura pas lieu, which aligns itself more precisely with parisianist tendencies. Abd Al Malik constructs a fictionalized narrator who is both a direct derivation from his experiences and also a literary construction. Peggy embodies the environmental gaze of the parisianist genre and is intended as a re-visititation of Abd Al Malik’s own doubled life of longing and belonging.

Dadié’s and Wright’s anticipatory parisianism is echoed in the epigraph to La guerre des banlieues n’aura pas lieu. Abd Al Malik gives to literature a voice of its own. Literature frees the human individual from indoctrinating forces and forms of social control that both Dadié and Wright witnessed as particularly debilitating for the Negro of their generation and social backgrounds. As with Bouchareb and others, the power of aesthetic distance gained through literary, lyrical or cinematic construction, complements the power of the environmental gaze in bearing witness to the racial and social constraints which bar banlieues populations from proper belonging.

The crucial work of mourning the birth of the banlieues has begun to take place and the efficacy of a field of banlieues studies would be precisely in documenting and facilitating this phenomenon. By anchoring the aesthetic in the parisianist genre, one can address the issues raised by Todorov in his call for a balanced
inquiry into the forces that have shaped the lives of the many disenfranchised beings of the 20th century. Physical location as a center to the genre does not always imply that the spaces evoked are literal. Indirectness at times dictates a move from literal to figurative spaces of entrapment or exclusion. In both *Un Nègre à Paris* and *The Long Dream*, the physical space of the airplane cabin replaced the segregated worlds of the respective protagonists of these two novels. The novels were both written as anticipations of the authors’ trips to Paris. During conversation with an Italian American in the plane, Fishbelly withdraws into silence because “he is not yet ready to admit what he had lived” (Wright, *Long Dream* 380). Exhilaration at potential entry into a new cultural experience coupled with the anxieties of longing to know in advance whether or not he will belong to that world push his narrative into the silence characteristic of the environmental gaze.

Like Fishbelly, Dadié’s protagonist Bertin begins with an exultation upon entering the airplane that will take him to Paris only to slide into silence as he becomes aware that no one wants to sit next to him or to speak to him. He thus witnesses the gap between his longing and his belonging. The culminating depiction of Wright’s environmental gaze is articulated in his unpublished manuscript, *Island of Hallucination*, the sequel to *The Long Dream* which is set in Paris. The reader witnesses Fishbelly’s narrative of longing and belonging as he journeys through the city and slowly comes to realize that no matter how long he might reside in Paris he would never BE French. Both characters are prologues, but prescient ones, to the full fledged and authentic voice of parisianist alienation articulated by Abd Al Malik and Rachid Bouchareb’s protagonists. Those protagonists in turn echo the lives of many local inhabitants of La goutte’ôr and the banlieues beyond, for whom silence in the face of harsh social environments is a way of life.

**Structure of the Neo-Parisianism Narrative**
Abd Al Malik’s novel is divided into a narration of a typical character’s life in the banlieues, a life of drugs, of confusion and violence sparked by moments of false freedom. Abd Al Malik
creates an aesthetic distance for a stereotypical depiction of a *banlieues* dweller by first reciting his narration as if it were spoken by the character who is caught in that role and then interrupting that narrator through the guise of several different voices—the voices of characters who are increasingly enlightened and who embody the environmental gaze of parisianism. In so doing, Abd Al Malik recreates the ironic distance of both Dadié and Wright in *Un Négre à Paris, The Long Dream*, and *Island of Hallucination*.

Abd Al Malik’s novel ultimately does propose a political perspective, but it is not a confrontational one. The violence in the suburbs of Paris can be avoided—the war will not and should not happen. The argument for how one can avoid the violence of the suburbs is constructed through the threading together of different aesthetically determined authentic voices of the Franco-African immigrant, which is to say that it is an argument through artistic crafting as opposed to protest. Abd Al Malik calls not for violence against the ethnic and color divides of Paris (and by extension, France), but rather against the abuse of those human beings who are unable to create identities for themselves because they are unable to escape the consequences of those divides. He compares the French suburbs to a huge nuclear power plant which could be used to provide light and electricity to the entire country but which have in fact been recklessly abandoned and can therefore only give way to atomic weaponry (35).

As Benetta Jules-Rosette suggests in *Black Paris: the African Writer’s Landscape*, parisianism recounts a narrative in which “the cultural exile becomes an immigrant” (10) and reflects “the identity discourse of a new generation” (185) as opposed to mounting a literature of protest. The narrative structure of parisianism pushes the writer toward witnessing the world by assuming an ethnographic and journalistic gaze on their social environments” (186). These artists, who wanted to belong to a landscape they would encounter as foreigners, therefore planted the seeds of the parisianist genre. What has been traced here is just how concretely contemporary artists in the *banlieues* adopt aesthetic dimensions of the parisianist genre despite the fact that they were born or at least
raised in Paris and therefore are not encountering the landscape as foreigners *per se*. Parisian artists coming from the *banlieues* struggle to assert a belonging which eludes them because of the alienation of their social environments in Paris. In Abd Al Malik’s novels, in his song lyrics and in the lyrics of his collective group Beni Snassen, as well as in Rachid Bouchareb’s latest film about the Algerian massacres in 1961, the use of creative techniques which mimic narratives of longing and belonging dominate. These works are rooted in the belief that lived experience must be transformed through aesthetic distance. Nonetheless, awareness of these artists’ shared conditions must come through recognizing their dependence on the tri-partite gaze structure which characterizes parisianness, and the silence of the environmental gaze which characterizes their works, and includes moments of virtual longing and loss (157–158).

The aesthetic forms which best serve Abd Al Malik in positioning himself, born as they are out of his exhilarating experience of learning to read, create continuity between the seminal parisiannist works and his own concerns, which are similarly echoed in the works of Rachid Bouchareb. Both artists call for new ways of reading and viewing their works. They seek new audiences which can include both inhabitants of their own urban landscapes and those seeking to learn more about the creative energies hidden within. Each of these artists has experienced a becoming particular, but they nonetheless share common threads in that they accept the shape of the city as it reveals and conceals many aspects of individual becoming, a crucial aesthetic base for surrealist urban studies as well. These contemporary artists also evidence through their work that the environmental gaze must be articulated precisely through whatever creative means are at the disposal of the artist or citizen and that it must be at the center of an aesthetic of *banlieues* studies. The surrealist critique of institutional forces which threatened to destroy the creative powers of the individual unconscious has been brought full circle and has found its home in a study of these works, emblematized by the physical spaces of La goutte d’ór.
Indeed, La goutte d’ôr has itself experienced a “becoming particular” and should be embraced as a gateway towards a productive journey into the Parisian banlieues. A concrete example of this would be the exhibit at the Echomusée where artist Philippe Férin has undertaken a series of portrait drawings of citizens of La goutte d’ôr who were born elsewhere, in Africa and other nations, but who are now old enough to suspect that they will pass the remainder of their days in La goutte d’ôr (Djabali 11). This tribute to senior citizens of La goutte d’ôr, who have no doubt found themselves gazing environmentally throughout their lives at the physical locations which will become their resting place, is an unprecedented proof of the power of art to transform worlds which could, if left unattended, erupt into violence. In La goutte d’ôr there is “le vin qui se met tout le monde d’accord (the wine which brings us all together)” and which might allow us some day to say “We are ALL Parisians”—a clarion call for banlieues studies.

Works Cited List


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In France, the portrayals of the nation in recent decades have mainly revolved around the advertising of the “banlieues” as a social problem. Generally speaking, the suburbs inside French society have been connected with recurrent images of “failed urban communities torn apart by violence, drugs, delinquency, unemployment and above all, young North African immigrants” (Derderian 145). Yet, prior to the rise of the immigrant problem, the issue in the 1970s of the deprived “cités rouges” had been at the core of the national debate. The destitution and marginality of their inhabitants symbolized the decline of the national community. They also called into question the integration and citizenship of the working-class in the nation.

Popular culture has played a vital part in stimulating debate about the suburbs in their relation to the national community. More specifically, representations of the “immigrant banlieues” (Dubet and Lapeyronnie 1992, 58) have been used to reflect on the national threat posed by the settlement of diasporic population. Here, my goal will be to propose a historical decentering in the study of suburban narratives and explore a first wave portrayals
of the “cités,” that of the “cités rouges.” My analysis is based on early portraits of a notorious working-class suburb, the Cité des Quatre-Mille, situated in La Courneuve in the north east of Paris. Through a close reading of the constructivism of the Quatre-Mille estate, I shall show how, between 1971 and 1981, the journalistic and artistic discourse combined to reactivate a deeply entrenched “class racism” in the French nation.

More precisely, my main purpose here will be to demonstrate how some cultural depictions of the housing projects played a part in the early characterization of the “cités rouges” as a social problem. According to historian Antoine Prost (7), the working-class suburbs, by conflating “la misère, le chaos, la délinquance, la barbarie,” have played a central part in the discourse on inclusion and exclusion in France; they have especially been used as a foil to the bourgeois center, which is associated with “[la] culture,” “la civilisation,” “le capitalisme” (7). Although recent images of the immigrant “banlieues” have been crucial in delineating suburban narratives, I contend here that the problematization of the “grands ensembles” during the 1970s represented a major feature of the French national debate. The sources under examination focus on the Quatre-Mille and include excerpts from television (1ère chaîne and 2è chaîne), newspaper and magazine articles (Paris-Jour, L'Aurore, France-Soir, Paris-Match) as well as a feature film (Alain Corneau’s Le Choix des armes 1981), a novel (Frédéric Rey’s L'Enarque et le voyou 1974) and a song (Renaud’s “Adieu minette” 1977). Drawing on Roland Barthes’s conception of myth, I shall argue here that these early cultural creations pervading the public imaginary of the 1970s did not only contribute to constructing a mythical image of the “cité rouge,” but also actively shaped the discourse on space, difference and belonging in the French nation.
Contemporary France and the “Banlieues” Issue: National Politics, Cultural Representations of the Suburbs, Overlooked Portrayals of the “Grands Ensembles”

In contemporary France, the “banlieues” issue has been at the centre of the national debate for many years now. First, a common characteristic of a nation is the fact that its existence is “imagined.” Each nation derives its cohesion by portraying itself in symbols, myths, legends and other elements, all referring to such notions as a specific territory, a shared language, and some common habits and practices. At the core of the national rhetoric, these items combine to represent what Balibar calls a “fiction” or a “myth” (130). In France, the construction of the “banlieues” as a social problem is certainly not as new as it may seem. Many historians have demonstrated how, in the 19th century, the labouring classes housed in segregated quarters of the cities were perceived as a most dangerous threat to French society (Chevalier; Merriman). Similarly, in the second half of the century, the inhabitants of the “zone” located outside Paris were seen as a subversive peril at the doors of the capital. In France, this magnified fear of the masses, justifying the urban exclusion of the proletariat, has also constituted a distinctive feature of the 20th century. After the “red belts” of the interwar years, the “cités rouges” have embodied, throughout the 1970s, spatial alterity, social distance and political subversion.

In French popular culture, representations of the “grands ensembles” are also, and logically, part of this “lointain héritage” (Boyer and Lochard 37), which largely antedated the building of the housing projects. Before the fear of the “cités rouges,” the theme of the immigrant problem has served to shape the common depiction of the suburbs. In the process, it has transformed the “cités immigrées” into the foreign lands of the nation. Specialists of postcolonial France, Simone Bonnafous and Alec Hargreaves, demonstrated how the racially oriented journalistic rhetoric of the 1980s and 1990s played a part in creating deviant portrayals of the suburbs by assimilating the immigrants as a-social and a-cultural
elements. Similarly, both Carrie Tarr and Leonard Koos showed how cinematic, fictional and musical productions contributed to heightening the threat posed by the “banlieues” and the so-called cultural difference of diasporic communities. My purpose here is by no means to undermine the significance of these studies (and others), which have spotlighted the connections between space, race and ethnicity in contemporary France. However, I want to contend that this focus on the relationship between immigration and “cité” has testified to a narrow take on depictions of the housing projects. Not only did this take hinder the specific portrayals of the French workers as a “damné” (Lazar) but, more importantly, it has also overshadowed the significance of the stigmatization of the “cité rouge” during the 1970s.

Representations of the “banlieues” issue in contemporary France—even if the point has been dismissed by critics—has also been linked to the existence of overlooked depictions of the periphery related to the “cité rouge.” In this study, my purpose is to re-read what I have called, first wave of representations of the “grands ensembles,” and re-situate their overlooked portrayals as a significant component of the history of the narratives of the suburbs. I shall propose, as a general rule, that the overlooked first wave representations of the “grands ensembles” have largely contributed to shaping the stereotypes and the topoï of (sub) urban exclusion in contemporary France. Inscribed in a “petite bourgeoisie” vision of society at the core of the “doxa,” I contend that the early portrayals of the “cité rouge,” divided between “violence” and “noirceur” (Papiaud), constitute a substratum for the depictions of the “grand ensembles.” Reflecting on a strong populism (Wieviorka 181), these depictions not only broaden our knowledge of representations of the working-class “cité,” but also help us rethink the developments of the “banlieues” issue in the French nation.

My analysis of the portrayals of the “cité rouge” in 1970s France is based on the estate of the Quatre-Mille situated in La Courneuve. An emblematic suburban town affected by violent and dramatic
events, La Courneuve and its housing project have received much attention in French popular culture, not only as a “cité immigrée” but also as a “cité rouge” (Breton 67). In this study, I shall propose that the early journalistic coverage of the Quatre-Mille by the 1ère and 2è chaîne, Paris-Jour, L’Aurore, France-Soir, Paris-Match, along with the following artistic creations (Alain Corneau’s Le Choix des armes, Frédéric Rey’s L’Enarque et le voyou and Renaud’s Adieu Minette), contributed to portraying La Courneuve as a myth inside the nation. My analysis will fall into three parts. I will first deal with the spatial alterity of the Quatre-Mille. I will then examine the social distance displayed by the depictions of the “cité.” Finally, I will concentrate on the subversive political threat represented by the “grand ensemble.”

An “Other” Space
In recent years, the dissemination of stereotypical images of the suburbs has identified the “cités” with crime, flames and revolts. The circulation of these sensational and dramatic images has thus played a crucial part in characterizing the periphery as a special territory, a dangerous site, an “other” space of the nation, though situated within its limits. In his classic “Of Other Spaces,” Michel Foucault has underlined the existence of “heterotopias” inside national communities. “Heterotopias,” for Foucault, crystallize “spaces of deviation (. . .) spaces where individual whose behavior is deviant in relation to the norm are placed.” The first impressions of La Courneuve’s housing project greatly intersect with spatial ab-normality characteristic of a class racism.

In Mise en image d’une banlieue ordinaire, Christian Bachmann and Luc Basier examine the metaphorical use of gigantism, disease and violence. A noticeable feature of the portrayals of the Quatre-Mille during the 1970s is the way a high proportion of journalists and artists depict this “cité rouge” as a monstrous space. When evoking the specific morphology of the estate, some newspapers and magazines talk about the “monstrueuse cité dortoir” (L’Aurore 8 mars 1971) as “inhumaine” (Paris-Jour 8 mars 1971), while some televisual programmes (“Le drame de La Courneuve” 1ère
chaîne JT 20h 6 mars 1971) underline through camera work the dehumanization of the “barres” and the “tours” of the “cité.” These depictions, which are suggestive of a different space, find an echo in the way artists portray the Quatre-Mille in their work. Examples in the films, fictions and songs of this period are numerous. In Le Choix des armes, Corneau, like Renaud in Adieu Minette, alludes on screen to the gigantism and uniformity of the urban block. In L’Enarque et le voyou, Rey describes at length the “hideur du monde” of the protagonist (63) mainly composed of “béton” and “plastique” (198).

Illustrations of the monstrous architecture of La Courneuve, which characterizes the “grand ensemble” as a special space, appear continuously, and in various subtle ways in journalistic and artistic discourse. They therefore contribute to shaping the general discourse on the working-class suburbs in their abnormal relation to the nation. In addition to their monstrosity, images of the diseases and dirt pervading the “cité rouge” abound. More than in the televisual media which, in the 1970s, were under the control of the State, articles from the written press talk about the “bâtiment lépreux” (Basier and Bachmann 28) or the “maladie des grands ensembles” (Paris-Match 20 mars 1971) or even the “maladie ( . . . ) qui écaille le coeur des habitants.” In a similar vein, repulsive artistic impressions of the housing project are multiple. The most illuminating example suggestive of the “otherness” of La Courneuve’s “cité rouge” certainly comes from Rey’s novel. The author’s emphasis on the dirt, along with his taste for the sordid, remind us of Pierre Bourdieu’s words (19), “Avec des mots ordinaires, on n’épate [pas] le bourgeois. Il faut des mots extraordinaires”:

Depuis longtemps, je ne faisais plus attention aux lieux que j’habitais. De temps en temps, une nouvelle copine ou un nouveau copain me disait: “Il est drôlement dégueulasse ton HLM.” Alors, je rouvrais les yeux: les gosses chiaient sur les marches d’escalier et se torchaient au mur (Rey 16)

Descriptions of the “grands ensembles” in the 1970s, with their focus on the monstrosity and pathologies of the working-class,
Transitions thus provide us with a fairly familiar image of the suburbs. Yet, the most significant characteristic of the otherness of the “cité rouge” probably concerns its level of dangerousness. In her study of the town of Bobigny during the interwar period, Annie Fourcaut (1986) indicates how the myth of the “wild west” came to symbolize the violence of the “red belt.” Going back to images of La Courneuve in the 1970s, the most illuminating example regarding the exaggeration of suburban violence concerns the “Huet affair” in 1971. If the televisual and print media provided ample comments on the tragic “fait-divers,” the coverage by *Paris-Match* (20 mars 1971), which focused on the “image du western,” strongly exemplifies the radical “otherness” of La Courneuve. The manner in which the journalist colours the tragedy does not only contribute to americanize the “cité,” but also mythifies the violence prevailing in the working-class. By complementing the spatial otherness of the “banlieue,” the social cultural distance of the outskirts constitutes another striking thematic regarding the developing in the 1970s of the suburbs as a social problem.

**Socio-Cultural Alterity**

Traditionally, the discourse on the “grands ensembles” as a national issue has been concomitant with a rhetoric that has contributed to turning the urban periphery into a zone of relegation. Presented in the light of their difference to the rest of society, the housing projects have often been regarded as a socially and culturally separated zone, as deprived enclaves far from the normative national culture. Discussing the alterity of the margins, Dubet and Lapeyonnie state that the “banlieue est méprisée [:] elle est hors de la société et réduite à une série de problèmes sociaux” (10). The main interest of the early depictions of the Quatre-Mille is to situate, in accordance with class racism, the “cité rouge” as an a-social and a-cultural territory inside the nation.

In the context of the crisis, the continuous rise in unemployment and poverty amplified the prejudices against the working-class representatives confined in the declining “cités.” Jean-Claude
Chamboredon and Madeleine Lemaire indicate in “Proximité spatiale, distance sociale” that “les rapports entre les groupes hétérogènes sont dominés par l'opposition de la morale petite bourgeoise à la condition populaire” (23). The depictions of the inhabitants of the Quatre-Mille in the 1970s clearly testify to the so-called insuperable difference of the suburban proletariat as perceived by the rest of society. A significant point about the dominant portrayals of La Courneuve during this period relates to the construction of a certain alienness of the residents of the “cité.” This alienness first manifests itself in reports of their use of language. Logically, Renaud’s song, Adieu Minette, which features a certain working-class slang, illustrates the discrepancy between linguistic standard and popular norms. However, it is probably in the media that the notion of not belonging to the linguistic space appears more forcefully. If the television appearances of the inhabitants of La Courneuve reflect on a suburban accent and mode of speech (“Incident à La Courneuve” 2e chaîne JT 20h 6 mars 1971), the painstaking portrayal of the relatives of the murdered youth, which focuses on their lack of linguistic capital, is eloquent. It places the “cité rouge” outside the “communauté de langue” (Balibar 132): “-J’té dis moi que le patron est mort. C’t’un homme mort, j’té dis. Lui, son fils, sa femme, I sont tous morts’. Il parle, il parle, mais comme il n’a pas beaucoup de mots, il fait de grands gestes . . .” (Paris-Match 20 mars 1971).

Besides their difficulty or inability to express themselves according to the linguistic norm, the characterisation of the inhabitants of La Courneuve further stresses the outsider quality of the residents of the “cités rouges,” just like the journalists of the printed word, who commonly portray the suburbanites, in a way that emphasizes their subhumaness—“la lie de la population parisienne est venue s’y installer” (Paris-Jour 6 mars 1971). A similar process is at work under the pen of Rey. The author of L’Enarque et le voyou forcefully insists on the incredible filth and ugliness of the characters: “baskets pourris” (134), “vêtements pourris” (155), “teint brique” (238). Going beyond the principal invariants of their social uniform, he also reduces the proletariat to animals as shown
by his description of the protagonist: “Je suis comme un animal qui emporte à l’écart son os pour le savourer” (142).

Depictions of the working-class suburbs and their concentration on the outsiderness of the residents through their linguistic practices and appearance thus reactivate the prevalent differentialist image of the worker. One last main interest concerning the emphasis on the alienness of the suburban proletariat relates to the abyssal difference between popular and “petit bourgeois” modes of life. In Le Monde privé des ouvriers, Olivier Schwarz showed the specificities of working-class culture and demonstrated the singularity of daily life inside a housing project. The manner in which the journalistic, literary and musical discourse represent La Courneuve’s “grand ensemble” illustrates in an exemplary way socio-cultural alterity prevailing in the “cités rouges.” From this perspective, Corneau’s Le Choix des armes is probably the creation which provides the audience with the most essentialist outlook on the Quatre-Mille. Examples of daily life difficulties and specific practices among the residents are found continuously in the movie. The scenes at the beginning when the family of a local man, Dany, shelters a dangerous thief (Mickey) are illuminating in this respect. Corneau’s camera, which invites us to discover the interior of the apartment (Figure 1 and 2), not only shows a family having specific popular tastes in terms of decoration, but also presents them as possessing

All images Corneau 1981.
a (very) distinctive lifestyle within which drinking prevails. The insertion of these scenes, in between sequences showing the cosy bourgeois environment of Noël’s mansion (Figure 3 and 4), insidiously reinforces the alterity of the “cite.”

The manufacturing of a mythical image of the “grands ensembles” in the 1970s does not limit itself to a focus on spatial otherness and socio-cultural alterity, both of which structure the discourse on the periphery as a problem for the nation. One last and most significant element of the “cités rouges” during this period is certainly the stress on political subversion. This emphasis, in a subtle but visible way, helps to inscribe the suburbs as a potential for the political cohesion and integrity of the nation.

**Political Subversion**

If the “banlieues” generally came to be pictured as the lost territories of France, the early construction of the “cités” as a myth also relates to the level of danger that prevails in the housing projects. Laurent Mucchielli insists in his work about urban violence on the importance of the “faux débats civilisationnels” and the “vrais enjeux sociologiques” linked to portrayals of the working-class. He shows how some debates related to “violence” and “crise de modernité” serve “les discours politiques sécuritaires” (85). The manner in which early journalistic and artistic depictions of the housing projects perpetuate the need for control of the barbaric suburbanites, contributes to representing the “cités rouges” as a political threat while testifying to the ongoing class racism prevailing in 1970s France.

In *La Peur des banlieues* (1996), Henri Rey examines the history of the deviance of the dangerous classes, personified as a threat for society and requiring policing by the State. “La banlieue rouge,” he writes, “[est] perçue comme une menace, une subversion aux portes de la ville et comme une forme tangible de contre société anticipant le modèle de transformation sociale” (20). A notable characteristic of the depictions of La Courneuve’s housing project, reactivating the themes of subversion and counter society during the 1970s, concerns the stress placed on the organizational
ineffectiveness of the “cités rouges.” Oscillating between the
dramatic and the sensationalist, the treatment of the organizational
dysfunctionalties existing in the “grands ensembles” accentuates
the menace represented by the youths. In this regard, the “Huet
affair” provides a logical reason for the editorial press to highlight
the lack of facilities and social control in the suburbs as well as
the extreme danger this represents for the rest of society. The
following headlines unquestionably exemplify the potential risk of
subversion prevailing in the “grand ensemble”: “Jeunes en révolte
à La Courneuve après le drame du café” (France-Soir 8 mars 1971),
“La cité de la peur” (France-Soir 9 mars 1971), “Le feu couve dans
la cité” (L’Aurore 8 mars 1971) and “La jungle de La Courneuve”
(Paris-Match 20 mars 1971). Predictably, the tone of the televusal
discourse sounds rather more nuanced in comparison. Yet the
closing remark of a debate involving the “préfet” and some
inhabitants of the “cité” leaves the viewer perplexed about the
feasability of a political management of the site: “Cet ensemble
très monolithique est inhumain. Il faut donner une âme (. . .) un
équilibre entre habitat et tous les équipements auxquels on vient
de faire allusion ["des terrains de football, des équipements médico
sociaux, des équipements scolaires"] ("La Courneuve vue par ses
habitants.” 2è chaîne Le Troisième oeil 27 mars 1971).

Similarly, the imperative need for policing social disorder is a
major theme of artistic creations and evocations of the Quatre-
Mille. In Le Choix des armes, Corneau provides an opportunity to
discover the derelict estate, but more importantly the filmmaker’s
camera also highlights the shortage of facilities in the “cité.”
The sequence of the car ride in the Quatre-Mille, where one of
the protagonists endeavours to track down Mickey (the thief),
dersecores the organizational disorder of the place. Along the
same line, Renaud’s Adieu minette is equally telling. The biased
evocation of the housing project by the singer not only reflects its
institutional void—“A La Courneuve y’a pas d’école, y’a que des
prisons et du béton” (song), but the central part of the line evokes
features of a penitentiary in which the city outskirts function as
a space to isolate dangerous individuals who represent a risk
for the cohesion and integrity of the community. In journalistic
and artistic discourse, the emphasis is placed on the need for a
political management of the “cité” and this contributes to equating
the outskirts with societal subversion. At the same time, through
the sensationalist and the dramatic posture adopted both by
journalists and artists, it creates a fictitious image of the working-
class community. Another major element concerning the threat
of political subversion imposed by the “cités rouges” relates to the
revolutionary ideals at work within the city margins.

In French history, working-class suburbs have commonly been
portrayed as “[des] contre-sociétés” (Lazar and Courtois 282)
and their residents as menacing invaders camping “at the gates of
the city” (Stovall 9). If the political role of the French Communist
Party has undergone a noticeable decline in the course of the
1970s, the traditional association between “banlieue” and
revolution (Fourcault Banlieue Rouge, 12) remains in the 1970s a
crucial element of representations of the “cités rouges” in general
and the Quatre-Mille in particular. Suggestive of a societal
takeover, the trope of invasion constitutes a major specificity of
the journalistic discourse, but also and most importantly of artistic
representations. In Le Choix des armes, the spectacular irruption
by Mickey in Noël’s bourgeois mansion (Figure 4) certainly is
strongly suggestive of the violence and the longstanding project
of the storming of the centre by the periphery. Besides Corneau,
a similar evocative image of a societal take over is present in
Renaud’s song. Here, the radical difference is that figuration of
this coup is evoked on a lighter note:

    tu m’as téléphoné cent fois/
pour que j’passe te voir à Neuilly/
dans ton pavillon près du bois/
et j’ai dit oui j’ai dit oui/
j’suis v’nul un soir à ta surboum/
avec vingt trois d’mes potes/
on a piétiné tes loukoums/
avec nos bottes/
(song)
Beyond the trope of invasion, the expression of the revolutionary ideals prevailing in the suburbs is also translated by the promise of the imminent destruction of society. Once again, numerous examples can be found in the journalistic and artistic discourse that account for the danger represented by young revolutionaries eager to replace the current model of society. First, this theme is apparent in Rey’s *L’Enarque et le voyou*. The way in which the young protagonist, who happens to be described as a “barbare” and a “hun” (156), discusses society is telling. Showing him as torn between his rejection and attraction to the “Parti” (212), Rey tells how the young protagonist chooses to go back to La Courneuve and its “eaux rouges” (66) to pursue his own “rébellion contre la bourgeoisie” (236). Overall, however, the most frightening description regarding the revolutionary project incarnated by the residents of the “cités rouges,” and the threat of subversion in this period, probably comes from *Paris-Match* (20 mars 1971). The following excerpt not only displays an extremely sensationalist account of the tragic “fait-divers,” but projects all the ills of French society on the Quatre-Mille. More specifically, it forcefully demonstrates how the “exposition decorative” of the myth is at the core of the interpretation of the “cités rouges” as a problem inside the nation:

Rois de ce désastre, seigneurs de cette guerre permanente qui chaque nuit éclate à La Courneuve: les bandes de jeunes. Enragés et qui sèment la peur. Leur domaine: la rue et les caves. On y vole, on y attaque, on y pille, on y viole. On y règne dans l’impunité la plus absolue (...) Et si l’insécurité, le viol, le vandalisme et le crime, chaque jour un peu plus était destinés à devenir maîtres (...) du centre de nos villes (...) Nos métropoles, nos villes deviendront des jungles (Barthes 219).

**Conclusion**

In France, representations of the “cités rouges” as part of first wave portrayals of the “grands ensembles” have offered a significant insight into the problematization of the suburbs inside the national community. Characterized by class racism, I suggest that the cultural
depictions of the “cités rouges” during the 1970s have constituted a significant moment in the history of the representations “grands ensembles,” which has coincided with the mythification of the housing projects in the French nation.

In contemporary France, the “cités rouges” have certainly formed a major “substratum” of the portrayals of the city margins. Translating a longstanding opposition between the center and periphery, representations of the “cités rouges” in journalism and art participated in an early manufacturing of the vertical “banlieues” as a territory torn between difference and violence, and perpetuated most of the negative and dark images usually attached to the periphery. By reflecting on the menace posed by the working-class suburbs, they have inscribed the “grands ensembles” as a social problem inside the nation. Similarly, they have brought to the fore the imaginary dimension of the national community (Balibar “La Forme Nation,” 130).

Barthes remarks in *Mythologies* that une “même pâte ‘naturelle’ recouvre les représentations nationales” (229). Throughout the 1970s, the stress of journalists and artists on the otherness of the “cités rouges” has helped naturalized the common perception of the “banlieue” as apart from the nation. Likewise their focus on the social distance and political subversion incarnated by the “cités rouges” has participated in essentializing the image of the periphery as a threat for the rest of society. Resorting to all the stereotypes and received ideas about the city margins, they have thus contributed to developing an early “moral panic” (Cohen) regarding the “cité” issue. At the same time, they provided a reductive and simplistic insight into the increasing dysfunctionnings within the nation.

In his analysis of the French suburbs, Alain Bertho argues that the “banlieues” today represent places deprived of history (15). Overall, it can be said that current research about issues of space, race and nation in contemporary France should not discard the working-class legacy of the stigmatized housing projects. Even though representations of the “cites immigrées” have become predominant and ethnicity and identity are now seen as societal issues, the first wave portrayals of the “cités” certainly form a
Transitions

significant part of the whole suburban picture and, as such, should not be forgotten.

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Ella Shohat and Robert Stam have argued that approaches to post structuralism and post structural film theories that deal with ethnicities are arguably located within the critical orbit of Eurocentric narratives and viewpoints (*Unthinking*; “Film Theory;” “Post-Third Worldist”). These Eurocentric approaches arguably fail to break away from “from the narrative of the nation as a unified entity” (Shohat 40) and often work to restrict critical debates aimed to set out a historical and geographic context for diasporic identities located within cultural difference. This inquiry will concentrate on how ideas commonly related to accentuated and diasporic cinema such as displacement, restriction and confinement are differently played out as central themes in relation to culturally different identities in Laurent Cantet’s *Entre les murs* (English title: *The Class* 2008). It will also focus on how the film sets up demarcations between different modes of language and social space at a formal/informal level in order to contest the civic, secular ideals of the contemporary French social order. The foregrounding of language and social space in the film is significant inasmuch as these aspects allow an exploration of the possibilities for a renegotiation of enlightenment ideas by French North African and Muslim diasporic groups.
Alternative critical frameworks from recent non-Eurocentric approaches to cinema (Naficy; Wayne) allow a possible reconfiguration of the concept of Beur and Banlieue cinemas in more heterogeneous ethnically specific terms. Such a rethink of this concept attempts to take into account a wider political recognition of hitherto marginal diasporic identities based on cultural difference as the product of a transnational intersection of class, gender and ethnicity in contemporary western societies. This approach provides a way of critically redressing what appears to be an invisible space in the representation of these ethnic groups in French cinema. In this respect, an exploration of how the film uses the cinematic codes from accented ‘Third’ cinema potentially allows a more specific understanding of how transnational and hybrid cultural identities are located and negotiated within the power relations of France’s post-colonial social order.

The principle social discourse of the Enlightenment project explored in *Entre les murs* is the French education system, which provides a political terrain to contest issues around class, gendered and ethnic based differences. In the context of recent political changes state education—which is seen as integral to a fully functioning civil society and secular social contract—has now become more central to ideas of citizenship and national identity than in any other period in France’s post-war history.

A free public education is a central principle of the secular social contract and one of the secured rights of citizenship in France. Mandatory right to a free education was originally introduced through the constitution of the Third Republic under the Jules Ferry law in 1882. Derived from Marie Jean Condorcet’s earlier Plan of Education Farrington (2009) argues that it enacted laws for a “compulsory free elementary education” through state provision as the legal right of all citizens to be delivered by “professional and normal schools” (Farrington 5). The underlying moral arguments for a non-sectarian education originally set out by Gabriel Seailles and Alfred Moulet in the late nineteenth century are still recognised today as guiding principles for the state curriculum. This central political project, which was shaped by the legacy of
French colonialism and the ideology of the Etat-Nation, worked to marginalise the ethnic and cultural identities of immigrants as assimilation into society was dependent upon successful integration into the fields of French culture and language. While this system was originally introduced as a way of guaranteeing a separation between a secular civil society and the religious values of the Catholic Church it has more recently been seen as a way of ensuring the assimilation of culturally different second and third generation North African and Muslim groups.

The release of *Entre les murs* is timely given that each of these central planks of the enlightenment project have recently been seized upon by Eric Besson—Immigration and National Identity Minister in Nicholas Sarkozy’s UMP administration. A range of initiatives have been launched by the administration as part of a great public debate on national identity which has been emphasised as integral to reclaiming France’s Republican cultural heritage from Jean-Marie Le Pen’s Front National in the run-up to the 2007 Presidential Election. Indeed, Besson took part in a controversial live national television debate on this issue with Marine Le Pen the vice president of the Front National in January 2010 so as to highlight the perceived importance of the issue of cultural identities to French society. Sarkozy’s UMP has also further intensified police surveillance operations, increased the use of DNA testing and lengthened detention periods for migrants and criminal suspects concentrated in the banlieues through a program of repressive new immigration legislation and policies. Following the substantial support registered for the FN in the first round of the 2002 Presidential Elections successive governments have conceded significant concessions to right wing groups through adopting a series of punitive nationalist policies toward France’s non-white residents and immigrants. Despite protestations by trade unions such as the CGT and from politically active left wing groups including SOS Racisme and the Union des Organisations Islamiques de France (UOIF) that these new directives are intended to stoke anti-Islamic prejudice stringent laws prescribing secularism have been revived, increasing the number of charters
used to deport undocumented migrants or sans papiers as well as introducing ‘Preventative Detention’, an accelerated procedure authorizing police to collect extensive personal information on individuals believed to represent a possible threat to public order. At the same time, The UN Human rights Committee have levied accusations against the DGPN involving specific cases of police brutality, racial abuse and unlawful killings involving young men of North African or Muslim origin in a series of high profile cases (Amnesty International Report 2009). These controversial incidents have served as the flashpoints for extensive urban rioting in the suburbs of Paris in October 2005 and November 2007 and more recently at Saint Etienne in July 2009. Each of these developments has worked to further heighten cultural tensions in French society between competing social groups aligned to civic and culturally different versions of national identity.

These migrant groups, controversially labeled by Sarkozy as “the racaille” (“the scum”), are predominantly composed of the North African Muslim “Beur” communities that make up the majority of residents in the banlieues or suburbs. This dynamic between the two terms prompt questions regarding how each term is categorized. Above all it raises one of the questions around which this volume is centered: can still talk about a distinct Beur identity within contemporary French cinematic culture? The term Beur, which has now become synonymous with the idea of the banlieues, is generally used to define second-generation citizens of Muslim-North African or Maghreb parentage primarily living in the working class outer districts of the main cities in France. Comprised of state provided housing for low-income residents in Paris, Lyon and Marseilles the banlieues were originally built for the working classes during the 1930s onward. It then became identified with an emerging North African immigrant labour force from former Francophone colonies which was absorbed into what became a multicultural urban space of ‘Otherness’ due to France’s protracted decolonisation and sustained economic boom in the 1950s and 1960s (These cultural and economic influences effecting the banlieues are more fully explored in Chapter Two:
Forgotten of The Grandes Ensembles and Suburban Exclusion in Contemporary France). As an economic and legitimation crisis in western capitalism took root within the French economy from the mid 1970s onward, changes in polices toward immigration and a sustained rise in unemployment have worked to marginalise Maghreb youth and reconfigure the banlieues as a transnational space of material deprivation, crime and racial tension. Tarr makes the point that films such as La Haine (1995), Rai (1995) and Bye Bye (1996), which were all made by directors of immigrant origin and focus on the experiences of Maghreb communities in France’s outer-city estates, were the first popular releases to combine cinematic elements from both Beur and Banlieues cinema. Indeed, given this synthesis between forms it is legitimate to advance the argument that each term has come to be virtually synonymous with one another in critical discussion on French cinema.

Throughout the 2007 election campaign the UMP resurrected the long-standing Republican myth of the ‘one and indivisible nation.’ Within this popular narrative the secular values of the Republican nation-state are perceived as under threat from ethnic and religious communitarianism. Hargreaves (Immigration, ‘Race’ and Ethnicity) argues that such policies can be seen as an attack on immigration and multiculturalism that are linked to wider fears of an encroaching Islamisization and the threat of ‘Islamic fundamentalism’. Such Islamophobic policies have been most conspicuously evident in legislation enacted by the Chirac and Sarkozy administrations that has aimed at prohibiting Muslims from wearing the hajab, niqab and burka in public spaces. As well as reinstating the compulsory singing of La Marseillaise in French schools from November 2008 all public buildings are now legally obliged to fly the national tricolor in public. Crucially, this civic model of integration into French society is widely seen as prioritising the legal affiliation of citizens to the nation state and an officially sanctioned national culture that does not constitutionally recognise Other markers of identities such as social class, ethnicity and religion. These contemporary policies around national identity and citizenship—which inform the educational system—are based
on an implicit political recognition that the idea of being French, which has now become so essentialised in relation to ‘official’ civil society, is now incompatible with the idea of being a Muslim. Within this one-sided Eurocentric process of assimilation Arab/North-African immigrants in general and Muslims in particular are compelled to give up their distinctive ethnic characteristics and become culturally and linguistically indistinguishable from the majority of French society. It is this tension between assimilation and cultural difference that forms the main axis of conflict and negotiation within the social discourses of the film.

*Entre les murs* uses the state education system as an emblematic space through which to highlight the marginalised positioning of a range of Muslim and North African diasporic subjects within the social and economic order of contemporary neo-liberal France. It also draws on themes explored in Cantet’s earlier films *Ressources Humaines* (*Human Resources* 1999) and *L’Emploi du Temps* (*Time Out* 2001) each of which focus on the relationship of the individual to the workplace as a way of interrogating the possibilities for collective unity, class resistance and struggle within the contemporary French social order. Consequently, the film calls attention to the effects of socio economic inequalities in French society through thematicising the class and ethnic differences between a socially fractured and ethnically diverse group of students and a member of its professional staff within a typical secular state education institution.

Adapted from the autobiographical novel *Entre les Murs* (Gallimard 2007) by François Begaudeau—who plays himself—the film largely centres around the experiences of an idealistic young teacher—François Marin—working in an ethnically diverse banlieue school in Paris. It follows his progress as he teaches a single class of 14–15 year old students (played by a non-professional cast) the national curriculum for French language and literature lessons over the course of a full teaching year. During the course of François’ lessons the French state education system and its curriculum are represented as rigidly fixed in their insistence on prescriptively following the national syllabus and
in their inability to accommodate the wide cultural differences and diverse cultural make-up of the group. The lessons are shown primarily as part of a wider process of socially integrating the students into the secular republican ideals of the nation as François struggles to successfully incorporate them into this space in any meaningful way. It is worth pointing out that the name François, the main practitioner of language lessons at the school, can be read to signify ‘France’ in the sense that he himself assiduously embodies these ideals. In this respect the school as an institution ‘stands-in’ as an allegorical model or microcosm of the civic nation state and what is commonly accepted in public discourse as ‘officially sanctioned’ secular culture.

Further weight is added to this idea of the school and François as allegorical representatives of the civic nation state by the fact that the whole of the film is set within the school itself and that (other than an official parents’ evening) very little space is provided within the narrative to explore the personal or domestic lives of the staff and students—indeed the only point in the film that contradicts this idea is a sequence where François relaxes alone in a local café for a brief moment of respite immediately before the onset of the new term. Such ideas contribute to a pervasive sense throughout the film that the concept of a French civic secular culture works to subsume all personal, linguistic and cultural markers of difference amongst both school staff and students.

Within the dramaturgy of the film’s social struggle a process of contestation takes place between officially sanctioned use of language, figured in terms of François’ prescriptive teaching practice and adherence to the curriculum, set against the agency of the students in the classroom, primarily registered in terms of their use of banlieue street slang (or verlan). Street slang is utilised in different ways to negotiate the various demands and constraints placed upon the students in their day-to-day experiences in the educational system. It also seems to provide a means through which the students can distance themselves from the linguistic constraints of secular French culture. This strategy whereby Muslim and North African youth utilize verlan as a cultural resource to (re)
negotiate ethnic identities is also evident in Abdel Kechiche’s film *L’esquive* (2004) and further explored in Gérardline Blattner’s work in the present volume. Thus in the classroom an atmosphere of teacher centred learning and mutual respect is often undermined as students use this informal slang to challenge François’ (French) teaching methods and ethics.

After one student appears to get the better of François in a classroom exchange another (unseen) shouts (within the subtitled translation) “He wiped you out sir,” while a little later on when probing the connotative meanings of the word “succulent” a male student, Boubacar, replies within informal sexualised terms “Suck off.” During another lesson when attempting to demonstrate the correct usage of the imperfect subjunctive as prescribed within the state curriculum François’ attempts to justify it’s importance are bombarded by a barrage of complaints from the class that “Nobody speaks like that anymore! It’s bourgeois!” and that “It’s not today’s language!” In the ensuing discussion he is forced to concede that such language is largely the preserve of the French upper-middle classes, but that it is also integral to formal written communication, much to the derision of the rest of the class who perceive such ‘affected and sophisticated’ behaviour as ‘homosexual’. In these sequences this struggle between the values of the school system and those of the students often take the form of a series of conflicts between formal written language based upon prescribed totalising knowledge, set against informal spoken words or images rooted in the local and immediate, or alternatively, over the meaning of words themselves.

This tension around linguistic forms and conventions, which is explored through François’ language lessons, takes on a wider symbolic significance in the film due to the diverse ethnic and cultural make up of the students. During his first class of the new term when setting out examples of how to correctly use words and construct sentences, two female students, Koumba and Esmerelda question his use of Eurocentric Christian names. Within the film’s subtitled translation they each attempt to renegotiate these versions of cultural identity in more diverse, multicultural terms:
Koumba: “What’s with the Bills?”
François: “The Bills?”
Koumba: “You always use weird names.”
François: “Weird? A recent US President was called Bill.”
Koumba: “Why don’t you use Aissata, or Rachid, or Ahmed or…”
Esmerelda: “You always use whitey names.”
François: “What names?”
Esmerelda: “Honky names.”
François: “What’s a Honky?”
Esmerelda: “Honkies, Frenchies, Frogs.”

It is worth pointing out that in urban areas of France such as where the film is set, banlieue families commonly have bi-lingual language skills as part of the process of having French as well as North and West African identities located within accented cultural traditions. This intersection of class, ethnic and gender identities, which are placed in tension with the civic ideals of the education system, can be seen as part of an attempt to renegotiate power relations in more inclusive non Eurocentric terms.

Within the formal social space of François’ classroom where teaching practice and lessons are defined according to the secular values of the nation-state, unity and consensus periodically breaks down to reveal hidden ethnic-class based barriers and hierarchies. In this sense, the film’s social struggle between the contemporary values of the nation-state, which O'Shaughnessy argues has traditionally formed ‘the implicit or explicit frame of French cinematic narratives’ (163), and the cultural diversity of the students, point toward a social tension that is near impossible to reconcile as consent for Republican ideas can no longer be taken for granted amongst the students. An emerging paradigm particularly relevant to the representation of ethnic diaspora within film systems is Naficy’s concept of *accented cinema* which attempts to provide a methodology that explains how these heterogeneous cultural identities operate within European ‘national’ film narratives. Such codes can be identified within a diverse selection of recent French diasporic films such as *Entre les murs* and *Paradis Allez* (*Paradise Now* 2005) as well as contemporary German examples such as
Gegen die Wand (Head On 2004) and Auf der anderen Seite (The Edge of Heaven 2007). Each of these cinematic examples interrogate diasporic cultural identities through utilising an open form, fragmentary narrative structure, often incorporating voice-over narration, direct address and critically juxtaposed editing so that a range of cinematic discourses are mobilised in order to support reading positions from which to ‘comment upon and critique the home and host countries societies and cultures’ (4).

The film also sets up a demarcation between the formal spaces of the school such as the staff room, classrooms and offices, where students are placed under direct constraint, and the informal space of the playground which is represented as a socially open and inclusive space where teachers seem to lack any legitimacy to control their responses, behaviour and movements. This is most obviously demonstrated when François confronts Louise and Esmerelda in the playground to contest the meaning of a remark he made earlier to them in which he labeled the two girls as ‘sluts’ following their disruptive behaviour at a student assessment meeting. At this point he is collectively challenged by a spontaneous show of social solidarity amongst the students as they gather around him in a random and intimidating manner. This tension is underlined by a series of tight close-up shots of over-excited students who proceed to dispute the accuracy of François’ claims as he struggles to convincingly rationalise his remark. In contrast, in every other sequence when we see the playground it is from a high downward angle (at times replicating François’ viewpoint and social position of authority) looking down from the classroom window onto this outside space. This idea of the schoolyard providing a neutral space seeming to locate students and staff ‘on equal terms’ is further explored toward the end of the film as teaching staff and male students compete in what appears to be an end of term football match. The sequence offers a utopian moment when class and ethnic hierarchies and barriers are dissolved for a brief period as each social group is literally re-placed onto a level position with one another for the duration of the game.

François’ remark and his decision to literally confront the girls on
their own terms in the informal space of the playground are clearly actions marking a departure from his usual adherence to formalised professional practice in dealing with day-to-day concerns. This action can be read as a reversal of character or counterpoint to an earlier confrontation in a literature lesson between François and Koumba after he asks her to read a passage from *The Diary of Anne Frank* and she stubbornly refuses this request point blank. This leads to a heated exchange between the two at the end of the lesson as he demands an apology for her non-co-operation and questions why their working relationship has broken down when they had been on good terms during the previous teaching year. In turn, Koumba’s decision to confront him through the formal means of a letter (which he finds in his locker) and using the written word to express her personal feelings on this breakdown of their relationship can also be seen as a departure from her usual method of dealing with day-to-day concerns at the school through attempting to speak to François on equal terms, redressing the hierarchical relationship that exists between each along the axis of social class, ethnicity and gender. Recited through a disembodied voice-over, it reveals a refusal to acknowledge or accept any personal dynamic in her relationship with François while questioning this unequal system of power relations that exists between (François) teachers and (Koumba) students:

Respect. Adolescents learn to respect their teachers because of threats and the fear of having problems. For starters, I respect you and respect must be mutual. For instance, I don’t say you’re hysterical so why say that about me? I’ve always respected you so I don’t understand why I have to write this. I know you have it in for me but I don’t know why. I’ll sit at the back to avoid any other conflicts unless you come looking for them. I admit I can be insolent, but only if provoked. . . . In theory in a French class, you talk about French, not your grandma, your sister or girl’s periods. And so, from now on I won’t speak to you again. Signed. Koumba. (dialogue)

This idea of using the written word as a means of personal expression is further explored as François sets the class the task
of writing self portraits in a formal standard style which they all proceed to read out publicly in class, recounting their mundane likes and dislikes about life. The students use the self-portrait—which is transposed through direct address—as a way of articulating their diverse transnational tastes in music, football and youth culture. Again, as with Koumba’s letter, use of direct address, a technique commonly used in accented cinema to register the dislocation of identities, provides a platform through which certain students, in particular Carl, (a French West Indian forced to repeat the year at his new school) speak about the complex personal and ethnic aspects of their identities that are repressed within civic, secular education:


It is significant that Souleyman, a young French Malian, is the only member of the class that refuses to participate in the written exercise of producing a self-portrait. Despite certain educational and disciplinary shortcomings as the film develops it soon becomes clear that he has a flair for art and photography, and obviously favours the use of symbolic imagery rather than the written word as his preferred means of personal expression. Of course such aspects of non-verbal culture are not fully acknowledged as legitimate in relation to Republican discourses so are often located within a marginal position in the official curriculum of the French education. His interest in symbolic art is first hinted when he reveals an intricately designed tattoo of a Koranic image on his arm, but after prompting initially refuses to communicate its translated meaning to the class. François’ reply (“If only you could write such interesting
things on paper that would be great”) is a tacit acknowledgement of the importance placed upon symbolism within Islamic culture and stands in contrast to the central emphasis placed upon signification within the European enlightenment and its education systems. François is able to slowly build up a productive working relationship with Souleyman as he successfully encourages him to further develop his interest in non verbal forms of communication through using a series of private photographs he has taken of his mother and friends instead of a written composition to produce his self portrait. François then patiently guides Souleyman through the process of using his computer skills to further develop his ideas and use text to frame the meaning of the photographs with personal references. A measure of progress has seemingly been reached as François, delighted at his efforts, places the set of images up on public display for the rest of the class almost as if to acknowledge Souleyman’s efforts.

Within the school, access to formal spaces such as staff rooms and school offices is highly regulated while these areas provide a forum for day-to-day decision making from which students are usually excluded and where its hierarchy of professional staff can negotiate with one another and pass official decisions on individual students as well as providing a means of organising the bureaucratic running of the institution as a whole. In an early sequence within this formal space, members of staff are seen discussing the merits and shortcomings of students on their new class lists before the term starts. During a later meeting the teachers debate the most effective method of imposing a system of school protocol and discipline upon the students, leading to a debate over the merits of whether such rules should be arbitrarily or rigidly enforced in practice.

At the level of professional practice the hierarchies of the school are only able to deal with cultural difference and resistance in a punitive way within a formal bureaucratic and social structure aligned to the national-civic project. Magrebi youth is given relatively limited space in which to reconfigure the dynamics of these power relations as this problematic is played out in the film’s themes and issues. The figure of Souleyman and his relationship to
the school hierarchy as a teenage French Malian is made a central concern in the film and can be seen as indicative of the containment and expulsion of Beur youth from the legally sanctioned spaces of the education system. Building upon the earlier sequences focusing on Carl and Koumba, central themes in accented and diasporic cinema such as the ‘confinement’ and ‘dislocation’ of the transnational diasporic subject are further interrogated in the narrative through Souleyman’s relationship with François and other staff members (Naficy 5–6).

Souleyman is located in contrast to Wei, a young Chinese male student who is fairly introverted and has difficulty making friends and ‘fitting in’ with the rest of the class. In further contrast to Souleyman, Wei is recognised by staff as academically intelligent, hard working and extremely disciplined in class. This is borne out by François’ discussion with his mother and father at a Parents Evening in which he warmly praises Wei for his standards of attainment, interests and behaviour. Wei’s parents attentively listen and continually nod in agreement, showing a compliant and deferential attitude toward François as he speaks, and a general enthusiasm and willingness to conform to the civic and institutional demands of their new life in France. Again, a stark contrast is set up between this sequence and François’ later meeting with Souleyman’s mother (his father’s absence is left unexplained), who arrives at the school dressed in a traditional Muslim headscarf and long dress. His brother is also present at the meeting to translate their indigenous Malian language of Bambara into French as she is shown to have none of the native language skills that, to all intents and purposes, are a civic requirement in contemporary France. The role of Souleyman’s brother as translator is significant in that he acts as a mediating figure between his mother and François struggling to accurately translate between one and the other. Both teacher and parent are placed in a dislocated relationship in terms of communicating their emotional response to one another as François reveals widely shared staff concerns over the shortcomings in Souleyman’s personal character and academic achievements to the bemusement of his mother. In this
case Souleyman, who is unable to draw on educational support from his mother, particularly when studying within such a rigidly defined secular nationalist institution, is clearly located at a point of social disadvantage because of this linguistic deficit.

These parallels set up between the students are explored further as events come to a head for both of their families as the school hierarchy reacts to each of their situations in different ways. In a later sequence one of the teachers announces in the staff room that Wei’s mother has been arrested to face trial as an undocumented ‘illegal’ migrant and is likely to be deported back to China with the distinct possibility that her son may also have to return. All of the teachers in the staff room show great sympathy for the family and immediately set about organising a collection in order to support them through the courts and fight the deportation order. The moment is then punctuated by one teacher, Marie, who announces her pregnancy with a toast hoping that the family wins her case and that her “child may be as intelligent as Wei.”

Following the school’s annual assessment on the students’ final year marks—which includes Esmeralda and Louise as two student representatives who are given formal access to the decision making process—in spite of François’ protestations that Souleyman is restricted by “academic limitations” the staff reach a consensus that he should face severe disciplinary measures for his behaviour. After Souleyman protests that he is the victim of revenge and remonstrates with François over his comment he becomes disruptive in class and storms out, accidentally injuring Koumba’s eye in the process. Later Koumba reveals to François that if suspended Souleyman’s father will intervene and send him back to their original home, a rural village community in Mali.

Despite François’ protestations at a preliminary meeting that all 12 students that have faced such hearings in the past year have been expelled and that in practice official disciplinary procedures are counter productive, the rest of the staff refuse to reverse their decision or show any collective support or sympathy for Souleyman’s predicament. As Souleyman’s translates his mother’s comments at the hearing, her defensive response, mediated
through her son, seems somewhat at odds with the views of the staff. Though this is uncertain as, again, no subtitles are provided to translate her indigenous language. The reasons for this are uncertain and are open to speculation. Perhaps she does not want to be separated from her son, or want him to be returned to Mali where his life chances would be dramatically reduced compared to those in France. No indications are given. The decision is a foregone conclusion and the sequence ends with a long shot from a high downward angle of Souleyman and his mother walking home, physically reduced to two tiny figures in a corner of the empty schoolyard to signify their lack of symbolic and material power in relation to civic, secular "Frenchness."

As the school year draws to a close François asks the students what they have learnt and enjoyed about their experiences in class. They proceed to offer a diverse range of replies ranging from Pythagoras’ theory to the slave trade, but two surprising responses in particular are worthy of note and seem to provide a subtle measure of the students’ progress within the education system over the period. François is taken aback to hear Esmeralda’s reply that she learnt nothing during the year but instead enjoyed reading *Plato’s Republic* at home, followed by her sly dig that it’s “[n]ot a slut’s book.” Previously, after François first began the year he cautiously replied to a colleague’s enquiry over the suitability of course material for his class that “[t]he Enlightenment will be too tough for them.” This contrasts with the sequence immediately following when a young anonymous Black female student waits behind to confide to François that compared to the others she had learnt nothing and had difficulty understanding all of the subjects in the curriculum. Perhaps most telling, she has already decided not to go on to further education at vocational school.

*Entre les murs* represents the education system, and by implication the French social contract and its founding principles drawn from western enlightenment ideas, as beset by sclerosis and as therefore unable to accommodate the contemporary challenges posed to it by culturally different identities. Thus, although the French education system is founded upon universalist principles of equal
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access for all citizens, this goal is not achieved in practice, primarily because of its failure to accommodate any recognition of the dislocations experienced by culturally different diasporic subjects such as Koumba, Carl and Souleyman. In the case of the latter, the institutional structure of the education system and its decision making processes can be read as a wider metaphor for the policies of exclusion enacted against North and West African diasporic youth within French society as a whole since the mid 1990s.

The film locates ethnicities and diaspora at the centre of its narrative and draws on the codes of accented cinema to articulate hybrid cultural identities within a post-colonial context. Its open form, critically juxtaposed editing, multivocality and fragmented narrative is centred upon a range of diverse cultural identities and issues which are explored through voice-over narration and direct address to critically comment upon the officially sanctioned secular culture of the nation state. The narrative explores demarcations between written and spoken language and within spatial relations along a formal/informal axis to contest relations of consent and interrogate the limited possibilities for legitimate cultural incorporation and social inclusion offered to French North and West African Muslim subjects. These stand as particularly pressing concerns at a time when France is in the process of reassessing its self-image and national-ethnic identities are situated within a tension between secularism and cultural difference. These identities renegotiate enlightenment ideals of citizenship in culturally different terms through using a range of transnational cultural resources that include language and knowledge rooted in both the local and immediate traditions of the North African/Muslim diaspora and Western popular culture. Use of the critical model of accented cinema allows an understanding of how narrative and visual devices in the film can potentially work to transform social relations and cultural identities beyond the narrow confines imposed within postcolonial discourse. Within this context, Entre les murs exposes the evident contradictions of traditional secular models of assimilation as new hybrid identities struggle to assert cultural pluralism and difference. Ultimately, such actions
are represented as a legitimate response given that the main enlightenment ideas and institutions that constitute citizenship work to marginalise these diasporic identities along ethnic, class and gendered lines in relation to the social order of contemporary French civic society.

Notes

Works Cited
This chapter looks at the French langage de la banlieue (outer city) from a sociolinguistic perspective. Frequently perceived and described as inferior to the standard variety of French, le langage de la banlieue is fascinating in many ways, as it is innovative and systematic as a language in general, and it is also considered to be the main object of an identity within a particular underprivileged social context. This variation of Standard French, which is commonly associated with immigrants living in suburban areas surrounding Paris and other major cities in France, presents interesting linguistic alterations. The differences of this vernacular, often influenced by the multilingualism and multiculturalism of its speakers, can be observed at the phonological, lexical, morphological and syntactical levels; even though the lexicon appears to undergo the most modifications. Certain features of this French sociolect are understood and also frequently used by French speakers who do not belong to the banlieusard (project-dwellers) speech community. The media in general, and particularly the movie industry, have been identified as one of the reasons behind this phenomenon.

To illustrate this trend, this chapter provides an analysis of the language used by the main characters in Kechiche Cesars’s winning film L’Esquive (2003), which takes place in la banlieue.
It is in la banlieue that new linguistic norms have developed in the last decade and continue to evolve and partially infiltrate the rest of French society. Kechiche and other film producers of the same genre (i.e. Kassovitz; Richet; Chapiron; Genestal) excel at presenting a current and realistic discourse within the cité (housing project). The main character Abdelkrim (aka: Krimo) and his classmates illustrate the colorful use of this informal way of speaking, which ultimately dissociates them from typical French speakers. The ability of cité youth to code-switch registers (langage de la banlieue-Standard French) in various situations and with different interlocutors also reflects their knowledge of ‘good’ French, which they purposely avoid when negotiating their identity that has clear linguistic foundations. I will present the linguistic complexity of this French variation and then question the social consequences of using such a language variation for these teenagers.

The French language has experienced several important periods of linguistic changes (i.e. La Renaissance or Le Classisisme). The creation of the French Academy in 1635 has had a tremendous impact on maintaining a bon usage of the French language. This notion has been preserved throughout history particularly since the French Revolution (1789), when French was considered to be the cement of national unity and equality as well as the pillar of an all-inclusive state (Judge 39). Later, the rejection of regional and local languages such as patois is a revealing illustration of the elitism associated with the French language. As Posner explains: “French is not a question of genetics but cultural allegiance” (48). Today, the consequences of this frame of mind are still alive as immigrants wishing to integrate into French society are expected to use Standard French language as a reflection of appropriate cultural behavior and as a tool for promoting their own integration and equality (Fagyal, “Rhythm types”; Judge). Orlando explained that: “The right to be different and recognition of ethnic specificity present some tough sociopolitical challenges for France’s republican ideals” (397). According to Blatt (2007), in this model, integration is viewed as a process by which individuals subordinate their
The importance of using this standard language has also lived through the domination of English and the evolution of technology and communication means. The Loi Bas-Lauriol of 1975 aimed at protecting French citizens by giving them the right to be informed in their mother tongue and to avoid the use of English in particular contexts, such as advertising (Judge 45). Subsequently, in 1994, the Loi Toubon was another attempt to further and more effectively protect French consumers; however, Judge explained that by the mid-nineties, peoples' opinion to exclude foreign words from advertisement or media had changed. The French recognized the importance of technological neologisms and the press started to actively mock this law by speculating about the arrest of journalists if they ever used an English word in an article. In the following years, “linguists and non-linguists stopped viewing French as the fortress capable of being defended by protectionist linguistic policies” (Judge 47).

Today, many French speakers still favor the use of Standard French as they recognize the power of language as a way of defining and validating their intellectual and educational backgrounds, which ultimately shape their identity. Despite this inclination, more and more French speakers are bi-dialectal and frequently include non-standard varieties in their everyday speech, revealing some of their geographical origins, social affiliations or educational background.

The objective of this chapter is to analyze the linguistic richness of the langage de la banlieue or langue contemporaine des cités and simultaneously provide illustrations of this variety of French used by the main characters of Kechiche’s film L’Esquive, to emphasize how these variations are associated with this suburban speech community and easily converges with other social groups. I first discuss the social motivation for the development of this cryptic dialect of French and then continue with a brief description of banlieue films and how they have been a platform for le langage de la
transitions to become more visible and influential in the francophone world. I then analyze specific linguistic characteristics of the cité French as used by the main protagonists in *L’Esquive* and also discuss the impact of using such a segregationist language variation.

**Banlieue French**

Language variations have always been fascinating, as they are intriguing in many ways. Billiez and Trimaille explained that the langage de la banlieue is no exception. Starting in the mid 70s and motivated by North American sociolinguistics investigations (see for instance Labov, 1972), immigrants’ language became a central topic of investigation. Fagygal explained that the youths living in impoverished banlieues often make the headlines for ‘inventing a new way of speaking French’ ("Prosodic consequences" 92), which is not surprising as Eckert & Rickford (2001) posited that adolescence is a coming age of full sociolinguistic competence. Fagygal further argues that teenagers in multi-ethnic working-class suburbs have been portrayed as the “movers and shakers” of language change in French ("Rhythm types" 91).

This urban sociolect is the result of the need for linguistic freedom of the 20th century and is also the language typically associated with the immigrants who live in the suburbs of Paris and other large French cities, and who usually belong to the lower/working class (Fievet & Podhorna-Policka). Fievet & Podhorna-Policka pointed out that naming this quotidian speech provoked polemics as soon as it was identified as a legitimate variation of Standard French; from *francais véhiculaire interethnique* (Billiez, 1992) to *parlers des jeunes urbains* (Trimaille, 2004) or *langue des cités* (Boyer, 1997). This language was initially a secret code that was known to a limited number of speakers. It was mainly used by groups to shape their identity, dissociate themselves from the rest of the French society and to express themselves freely in front of authority figures (parents or the police) to discuss specific topics such as drug trafficking.

Nowadays, with the impact of popular media such as hip hop music, rai and in our case *Beur* and *banlieue* cinema, this language is not only associated with certain groups from the Parisian region,
but also with people of different classes, ages and from other parts of the country, particularly French white youth who view the \textit{banlieue} sociolect as cool (Orlando) or as Lefkowitz (1989) explains, as a way to: “affirm their ties with their low income brothers and sisters by deliberately adopting their speech patterns” (“Verlan: Talking Backwards in French” 319). Boyer similarly noted that such urban vernaculars have a tendency to get diffused outside their initial restricted group and spread to non-immigrants whose social legitimacy is not questioned, and for whom this language is purely a sign of being linguistically savvy and trendy. Indeed, some words spread so much that they have been added to renowned printed (\textit{le Petit Robert}) or online dictionaries (\textit{Dictionnaire de la Zone}),\footnote{\textit{le Petit Robert} and \textit{Dictionnaire de la Zone} are well-known French dictionaries that include contemporary argot and verlan words as they are considered part of spoken French.} which include contemporary argot and verlan words (i.e. Keum—mec (\textit{guy}) or keuf—flic (\textit{police})) as they are considered as part of spoken French. Podhorna-Policka (2007) refers to these types of high frequency lexical items as \textit{mots identitaires}, as they allow speakers to dissociate themselves from other speech communities, while also indicating an affiliation with a particular generational group and are passively known by the majority of young French (Fievet & Podhorna-Policka).

\textbf{Linguistic characteristics and illustrations of le langage de la banlieue in \textit{L’Esquiv}}

\textbf{BANLIEUE FILMS}

Movie scripts of “\textit{banlieue}-films,” as identified by the famous French revue \textit{les cahiers du cinéma} (http://www.cahiersducinema.com/), are considered to be a concrete representation of spoken French, even though the screenplay cannot be fully compared to spontaneous language; it is assumed that screenwriters attempt to make their characters speak in a natural way that resemble as much as possible current authentic discursive trends (Fievet & Podhorna-Policka). Assuming the hypothesis that contemporary French cinema reflects not only the evolution of society, but also language variation, it is interesting to see how \textit{le langage de la banlieue} is used in \textit{L’Esquiv}. Mathieu Kassovitz was the first
French producer to dare making a “banlieue-film,” focusing on multiethnic, delinquent immigrant youths, their daily activities and fights with the rest of the society. This social and politically engaged cinema (Chibane & Chibane) tries to denounce the inequalities and injustice of la banlieue. In order to appropriately represent the social divide between the banlieusards and the rest of the French society, the language the main characters use is one essential aspect of their life that illustrates the social (linguistic) diversity that exists in France. For the projection of La Haine, the audience was given a glossary to facilitate comprehension, as this language was initially foreign to most French speaking person not living in such neighborhoods. Since La Haine, the langage de la banlieue is more commonly used in films, on television and other media and is consequently more commonly understood.

Contrary to La Haine, L’Esquive does not expose the harsh reality of urban culture focusing on the violence and anger that resides in the banlieue. Instead it characterizes a subtle and original human portrait of young multiethnic individuals. Most teenagers portrayed in Kechiche’s movie are North Africans and Muslims living in Seine-Saint-Denis, a community known to be ostracized and stigmatized by French society. Set during the school rehearsals of a classic of the 18th century theatre Marivaux play Le Jeu de l’amour et du hasard (The Game of Love and Chance), the film captures the mixed feelings of adolescents, focusing on the developing romance between two friends; Krimo and Lydia. Early in the movie, Krimo, a shy Maghrebi, realizes he has fallen in love with his long-time friend Lydia. In order to spend more time with the sassy blond and get closer to her, Krimo bribes his friend Rachid to take his place in the lead role of Arlequin, the play they will present at the end of the school year festival. To sum up: “Rejection, seduction, betrayal, and love are the heart of this universal coming-of-age story” (www.lovefilm.com).

Screenwriters (i.e. Chapiron, 2006; Kassovitz, 1995) have been typically using the parlers des jeunes urbains as an emblem of the youths to emphasize the social opposition between different characters; however, the originality of the French-Tunisian director Kechiche
is to blend different forms of language and registers produced by the same speakers. In other words, Krimo, Lydia and their acting classmates alternate the modern non-standard langage de la cité, Standard French (with their parents, school teachers and other authoritative figures such as the police) and the written classical French with its eloquent wordiness and grammatical complexity required to act out the Marivaux play. Kechiche’s play on words starts with the title of his movie itself. “L’Esquive” (dodge), symbolizes the link between the types of French variation used in the script. This word is used in the play and also in the contemporary banlieue in its verlanized version “j’ai vesqui et voilà, c’est tout” says Lydia to her friend Nanou towards the end of the movie as she explains her romantic indecision towards Krimo who asked her out. The romance between the two banlieusards echoes the plot of the play they are rehearsing. Marivaux’s character, Arlequin, falls for Lisette just as Krimo falls for Lydia. The teens in the film, which has the realistic feel of a documentary, speak among themselves le langage de la banlieue, but what are the specific linguistic characteristics of this French variation? This language defines who they are in many ways and as Planchenault points out, the cultural identity of social groups is largely based on their lexicon, as well as phonological and discursive forms that they commonly use, as analyzed in the following section.

LINGUISTIC OVERVIEW
The langage de la banlieue has been described as creative, colorful and expressive because of its many distinct original and systematic linguistic characteristics, especially at the lexical level. As Faygal noted, this is not specific to youth slang: “Le lexique constitue sans doute l’aspect linguistique le mieux connu des parlers populaires en France” (“Action des Medias” 41). Faygal’s claim is not surprising as many of the variations of le langage de la banlieue are lexically based; however, this language variation also presents some phonological distinctive features and a few syntactical variations (Planchenault; Sourdot; Valdman, “Comment gérer la variation”) as described below.
LEXICAL VARIATIONS

This suburban way of speaking contains a plethora of lexical variations. New vocabulary is used in specific contexts and situations. Neologisms are often created by semantic modifications (i.e., new meanings of already existing words, metaphors and metonymies), some resulted from other formal linguistic processes (i.e., truncation, resuffixation). Others result from a play on syllable (verlan) or borrowing. Using a corpus from the dictionary *Tchatche de banlieue* (1998), Duchêne established that typically, *le langage de la banlieue* is composed of 69% of these types of created lexical items. She further elaborated her analysis and identified that the *langage téci* (Doran, 2005) also includes a variety of imported words from various languages (African languages 0.5%, American English 2.5%, Arabic 3.5% and Romani languages 3.5%) and verlan (18%) and finally veul (1.5%).

Many words uttered in *L’Esquive* are the result of one of these linguistic phenomena. In several instances Krimo and his friends use borrowings from the foreign languages listed above. The Arabic saying ‘Insh Allah’ (God willing) is frequently used by Lydia, which is initially surprising coming out of the mouth of this blond, fair skinned young girl whose family is certainly not from the Maghreb region. However, given that this Arabic saying is typically used in this suburban speech community, it is particularly important for Lydia to clearly establish herself in the community by frequently using such a phrase despite her Caucasian origins.

Another Arabic lexical item is the verb *kiffer*, which is also commonly uttered by teenagers in these suburbs. This word comes from *kef* meaning ‘bag’ and referring to the bag needed to transform cannabis leaves in hashish. Subsequently, the word *kif* was used in Arabic to describe the sensation of pleasure and bliss experienced following the intake of hashish. In French, the verb *kiffer* does not strictly refer to this specific pleasure, but is associated with the liking of any persons, hobbies, or objects. Given the main plot of the movie being a romantic coming-of-age tale, discussions around Krimo ‘kiffer’ Lydia and vice versa are rather frequent.
Despite the important role of the English language in *banlieue* (Duchêne) French, none is heard in *L'Esquive*. Orlando explained that American English proliferates in French rap; however, this music of choice among the urban youth is not featured in Kechiche’s movie.

As Billiez and Trimaille pointed out, numerous metaphoric expressions as semantic variations are present in French vernaculars, such as in *le langage de la banlieue* (i.e.: *ça cloche*—something is wrong). These types of linguistic variations can be observed throughout *L'Esquive*. As Lakoff and Johnson explained, metaphors are culturally based; therefore, they are unique not only to each language, but to each sociolect linked to a specific subculture, in this case, *la banlieue*. In the opening scene, spectators are presented with an animated interaction between Krimo’s friends who use the expression *t'es chaud* repetitively. The latter is not used in its literal meaning -you’re hot-, but rather means -are you up for a fight-. *Tu me saoules* (literally: you are making me feel drunk- you are driving me insane) is another popular metaphor in vernacular French that Lydia uses when she argues with Magali to express her feelings. There are many additional examples of comparable semantic variations in Kechiche’s movie; however this chapter does not aim to simply focus on one type of linguistic variation, but rather understand the many systematic differences that make this sociolect so interesting.

Suffixation is also a common linguistic phenomenon used to create new words, as illustrated in the following example:

(1) *cloch* + *-ard* = *clochard* (beggar)

In example (1) the word *clochard* is formed of the root morpheme *cloch-* and the derivational morpheme *-ard*, which is a rather productive suffix in French implying a pejorative connotation used to qualify people. In the movie, Lydia uses this particular derivational suffix to negatively refer to Krimo as a *crevard* (weedy) after he asked her for the ten Euros he lent her earlier. This adjective formed on the base of the verb *crever* (to croak) has a
derogatory tone partially produced by the vernacular nature of the verb itself, but also reinforced with the suffix –ard.

Various types of truncations are also commonly used in the banlieue vernacular. Speakers often shorten or abbreviate multisyllabic words to produce apocopes (loss of one or more sounds at the end) as in example (2) or apheresis (loss of one or more sounds at the beginning) as in (3). In addition, speakers often create neologisms, which results from a truncation and resuffixation as illustrated in example (4). This linguistic feature is also frequently used in standard oral French. Finally, the langage de la banlieue has also words, which have been truncated and then reduplicated as in examples (5).

(2) mythomane – mytho (mythomaniac)
(3) autobus – bus (bus)
(4) clochard – clodo (hobo)
(5) dormir – dodo (to sleep)

It is important to note that suffixation or truncations are not linguistic phenomena that are exclusively associated with le language de la banlieue, but rather with vernacular and informal French in general.

Meanwhile, foul language is an integral part of youthful vernacular, which according to Stapleton, typically carries connotations of lower socioeconomic culture. As Trimaille and Billiez pointed out, vulgar language is rather preeminent and cussing appears to be understood within this particular community of practice,2 and in fact, offers additional opportunities for its members to define their identities. In the first scene of the movie, a group of teenage boys uses a variety of insults that revolve around the word pute—prostitute in French. They alternatively refer to another group of thugs as fils de putes (sons of a bitch) but interestingly, one of Krimo’s friends also makes reference to his own mates saying: “vous faites les putes?” Again, this word is used to refer to others in an aggressive way, but also to describe themselves and their affiliation with in a particular speech community, where swearing is expected and the norm. Defying many western cultural expectations, in the
following scene, a teenage girl, Magali (Krimo’s ex-girlfriend) asks him aggressively: “tu viens comme ça, tu crois que j’suis ta pute?” She continues by calling him with a variety of obscenities: “sale connard, va! Enculé, va!” This suggests that gender is not a consideration in terms of using vulgar and foul language, in this case, expletives. Magali is no gender exception, as in a following scene, fellow banlieusardes Dina and Lydia, in a banal conversation, exchange a number of phrases containing cusswords such as “tu t’en bats les couilles, putain de sa mère, oh l’enculé, putain j’lui aurais craché dans la gueule mon frère.” Stapleton explained that swearing can be used for a variety of reasons, but it appears that Magali excels at denigrating another group, in this case ‘men’ in an attempt to strengthen her own gender status. On the other hand, the second example (Dina and Lydia’s interaction) may be interpreted as an act of solidarity between women friends, as there is no animosity between the two friends. There are numerous additional scenes in which foul language is also used to express anger or fear, clearly establishing that it is the norm in le langage de la banlieue.

Another productive lexical variation in le langage de la banlieue is verlan. Using words that are formed by syllabic inversion is certainly not a new linguistic phenomenon. Merle explained that this type of word-formation process based on the inversion of syllables and segments within a word goes back several centuries. The first traces of verlan were identified at the end of the 16th century, after that, this type of play on words became somewhat infrequent until the beginning of the 20th century. As Lefkowitz (“Verlan: Talking Backwards in French”) noted, in the late sixties, its usage became so widespread that it started infiltrating Standard French with the assistance of different famous French speakers; from the French President Mitterrand, to the singer Renaud with his album Laisse Béton, to the film maker Claude Zidi and his film Les Ripoux. Lefkowitz’s remark also highlights the importance of this language variation as it has obviously withstood the test of time and proven to be more than a fashionable phenomenon as it is still currently used by a variety of French speakers.

Verlan (backslang) is an argot in the form of language play
Transitions featuring inversion of syllables in a word and varies in complexity depending on the number of syllables contained in a specific word (Lefkowitz). Verlan is a way to put a certain emphasis on specific words or hide their meaning so that a sentence becomes incomprehensible. It rests on a long French tradition of transposing syllables of individual words to create slang words. The name verlan itself is an example: it is derived from inverting the syllables in l’envers and slightly adjusting the spelling ("the inverse," pronounced lan-ver). These phonological variations are typically observed in content words (i.e. nouns, adjectives, adverbs and verbs); function words such as pronouns, prepositions or articles, however, remain unchanged. According to Lefkowitz, verlan is used in specific contexts, for instance when discussing subjects related to leisure and passions, topics about daily life, controversial and taboo issues (317). On the other hand, she explained that verlan is not used in formal settings, with authority figures or non-initiated interlocutors.

Many words of the language de la banlieue are made of a simple inversion of monosyllabic words as in example 1 and disyllabic words in 2 below:

(1) fou – ouf (crazy)
(2) cimer – merci (thank you)

These types of verlanized words are frequently used not only by banlieusards but also by many other French speakers. In L’Esquive Krimo thanks his mother with the word cimer—merci (thanks) and she smiles back at him illustrating her understanding of this popular verlanized word. Later, Dina uses chanmé-méchant (mean), which is not only a word made of inverted syllable but also a semantic variation as she really means in this particular context that Lydia’s new theatre dress looks great. It is indeed common for words to undergo several of the linguistics processes described above.

Some words have undergone several linguistic manipulations (i.e. spelling adjustment) to facilitate their pronunciation. For instance, after the initial inversion, a sound can be added to the end of certain words to ‘sound better’ as illustrated in example 3 and 4:
Both the words in (3) and (4) are used by the protagonists of L’Esquive throughout the movie.

Finally, *verlan* words can also delete their final vowel to make pronunciation logical as in example 5:

(5) *père* – *reupé* (dad)

*Verlan* is often compared to pig Latin, it is, however, actively spoken by certain speech community in France. Furthermore, because many *verlan* words have infiltrated Standard spoken French (Lefkowitz) and consequently lost their secretive status, they are often *revelanisés*. Words that have twice undergone syllables inversions are not called *verlan*, but *veul* as exemplified in (6).

(6) Feumeu – *meuf* – femme (woman)

Recently, Fievret noted that verlanization is still considered a productive identity marker, even though it is generally limited to one or two key words in the context of an interaction. *Verlan* words and expressions are typically mixed within a more general *argotique* language.

PHONOLOGICAL VARIATIONS

Besides lexical innovations, a few differences can be observed between the *langage téci* and Standard spoken French at the phonological level. The prosodic features present different characteristics than Standard oral French. Formal French is typically described as monotonous in terms of its intonation (Duchêne); however in informal speech the delivery is more rapid and vowel articulation is typically altered. Armstrong and Jamin explained a few important vowel features of *le langage de la banlieue*. For instance, Standard French has an open [ɔ] like in the word *sport* and a closed [o] like in the word *beau* (beautiful), which occur in different phonological environments. Namely, the open [ɔ] appears in closed syllables and the closed [o] in open syllables; however in a word like *police* a typical *banlieue* speaker would
pronounce it [polis] despite the fact that it appears in a closed syllable. In a similar vein, Standard French dissociates between the open [ɛ] and the closed [e]. A word such as mère would be pronounced with an open [ɛ] Standard French, but in the phrase ta mère (yo mama), it is pronounced [tameR]. This pronunciation can be heard by Krimo’s friends in the opening scene of L’Esquive, in which they use a variety of expression that includes the words ta mère (i.e., j’vais niquer sa mère, la vie de ma mère contre sa mère). The popularity of these expressions has grown exponentially in the last decades and several websites have been created to list and discuss jokes with the phrase ta mère (http://www.ta-mere.com/).

As far as consonants, two major phenomena have been observed by Armstrong and Jamin. First, the glotalisation of the final [R] found in the phrase ta mère [tameR?] and the affrication of some occlusive consonants such as [p], [d], [k] as in the phrase : J’veux dire que (what I want to say is that). Cerquiglini (2000) further argued that consonants among Arabs immigrants in la banlieue become more explosive, feature exploited by many francophone rap musicians who have picked up this phonological characteristic. He explained that this phenomenon can be associated with the nativization of specific phonological features borrowed from French spoken by second generation immigrants from Maghreb, commonly known as beurs in France. Following a similar argument, Fagyal hypothesized that the Semitic languages of north-west Africa have a tendency towards vowel reduction and consequently language convergence could result in the alteration of the French pronunciation (“Rhythm Types”). The results of her empirical study confirmed substrate influence from the heritage language.

In addition, research has identified a peculiar prosody, which is associated with a shift of the accent to the penultimate and not the final syllable as in Standard French (Billiez; Conein & Gadet, 1998; Cerquiglini, 2001; Mela, 1997). However, Fagyal pointed out that none of these studies used the necessary acoustic data to support their claim (“Prosodic consequences”). In a subsequent investigation, Fagyal claimed that the lengthening of
the penultimate syllable also exists in other varieties of French and that it may be a characteristic of being part of the French working class, which is typically in contact with immigrants or composed of immigrants (“Rhythm Types”).

SYNTACTICAL VARIATIONS

Few differences have been identified at the syntactic level, but Sourdot and later Planchenault pointed out the change of syntactic category of the adjectives grave or direct, which are frequently used as adverbs in a phrase such as “je le kiffe grave” (I like him a lot) or “tu le sais direct” (you know it right away). This syntactic variation rapidly spread and was even made official in the Nouveau Petit Robert 2002 (http://www.ordp.vsnet.ch/fr/resonance/2003/juin/sourdot.htm). Sourdot explained that the success of the switch of these parts of speech is linked to its paradigmatic and syntagmatic economy, as well as its invariability; the same word can be used as an adjective or an adverb by maintaining its syntactic position. Another syntactic specificity observed in L’Esquive is the use of the interjection faire + quotation. In different scenes of Kechiche’s movie such a syntactic phenomenon can be heard. For instance, when Frida confronts Lydia after having found out that Krimo asked her out, she relates the fact to her friend by saying: “i(l) m(e) fait, ouais ta copine Lydia elle est pas clair avec Krimo, lui i(l) devient ouf à cause d’elle.” In this particular example, the verb faire can be translated as the quotative contemporary use of the word ‘like’ in English.

After these linguistic considerations on the structure of le français de la banlieue, it is important to note that it is impossible to exhaustively cover all the systematic complexities of this French variation, since this language is in constant evolution. As Duchène reminds us, the main function of its existence remains being a cryptic way of communicating among a specific speech community. Therefore, when words become ‘transparent’, understood by the rest of the society, banlieusards change their way of communicating, in order to preserve a sub linguistic norm of their own.
STANDARD FRENCH IN L’ESQUIVE
Despite the abundance of vernacular lexical items in *L’Esquive*, there is no doubt that Krimo and his friends are familiar with Standard French. Similarly to other *banlieue* films, paternal authority is mostly absent in Kechiche’s movie. However, Krimo’s mother appears several times during the movie in each of these short scenes transcribed below.

Mother: *Abdelkrim?*
Abdelkrim: *Ouais*
Mother: *Qu’est-ce (que) tu fais là? Faut que tu te prépares, on va y aller.*
Abdelkrim: *On va aller où ?*
Mother: *On va voir ton père.*
Abdelkrim: *Je crois pas que je vais venir aujourd’hui.*
Mother: *Pourquoi? Qu’est-ce qu’il y a?*
Abdelkrim: *bein rien, je veux juste sortir, j’irai la semaine prochaine.*
Mother: *Tu vas faire quoi?*
Abdelkrim: *‘chais’ pas, je vais rester avec les copains.*
Mother: *tes copains? Copines . . .*
Abdelkrim: *non copains.*
Mother: *ouais*
Abdelkrim: *comme ça, ça vous laissera un peu d’intimité aujourd’hui.*
Mother: *oh tu parles, intimité au parloir . . . bein écoute, je t’ai fait à manger, donc tu te réchaufferas quand tu rentres.*
Abdelkrim: *t’as fait quoi?*

A few elisions, typically associated with oral French, can be identified; the omission of *que* in the question “qu’est-ce tu fais là” or when Krimo says “chais pas” instead of the formal phrase *je ne sais pas* (I don’t know). These types of abbreviations are commonly uttered in informal spoken French (Van Compernolle & Williams).

In addition, in the few scenes in the classroom, the interactions among students and with the French teacher are further illustrations that these suburban teenagers can understand and use Standard French correctly. Finally, when Krimo and his friends encounter aggressive policemen, they also attempt to explain themselves in Standard French to avoid any miscommunication with these authoritative figures and ‘outsiders’.
Therefore, even though there are only a few specific instances where Standard French is used by the suburban teenagers, it illustrates that their bi-dialectalism (knowledge of vernacular and formal varieties of French) is simply a choice to use one or the other with certain interlocutors. Not surprisingly, they favor ‘their’ language when interacting with ‘their’ friends but are able to switch to a more formal variety when they converse with people who do not belong to their speech community.

Conclusion
One of the main reasons for *le langage de la banlieue* to exist is to allow the members of this community to dissociate themselves from the rest of the society and to define their multi-ethnic background and identities. Despite the condemnations of French prescriptivism, this suburban vernacular has fascinated many linguists and will continue to be the focus of cultural studies in the future, as this vernacular is spreading and becoming more prominent in quotidian speech. Some *banlieue* words are now used across socially and geographically diverse groups. This phenomenon is associated with the popularity of hip hop music and *banlieue* films, which are extremely appreciated among French youth, and in which verlanized and borrowed words, metaphors and new expressions are present, as illustrated above with Kechiche’s movie. These art forms (music and film industry) provide a voice for the multi-ethnic population of France, where the heterogeneous melting pot conceptualization of society is not usually promoted (Orlando 396). Orlando further argued that: “this new vernacular is extremely problematic within the French republican system, known for its rigidity and reticence in recognizing difference” (402). In addition, screenwriters and rap artists have the power of using their productions to open the eyes of many French speakers who do not necessarily live in the suburbs, and present the playfulness and richness of *le langage de la banlieue*. The script of *L’Esquive* is a worthy illustration of how suburban youths speak and project themselves in the French society. Krimo and his friends use a variation of Standard French that contains all the typical linguistics
characteristics of this vernacular. Many prescriptivists believe that knowing such a French variety prevents the banlieue youth from developing adequate knowledge of Standard French and also argue that this linguistic separation reinforces the existing social fracture between the French middle class and the lower immigrants’ class. On the other hand, low-income suburban residents believe that the language they use, and which partially defines their identity is empowering them, even though it also marginalizes them even more from mainstream French society (Messili & Aziza). For these bi-dialectal speakers, the key issue is to be able to determine in which circumstances and with which interlocutors one variation is most appropriate, rather than focusing on declaring ones’ affiliation with a particular speech community unvaryingly. Ultimately, it’s a question of choice, weighing whether the sense of belonging to a local multiethnic community with multicultural values is essential to the banlieusards, or whether they want to be recognized as members of the dominant French culture and its language. The decision to use a standard dialect over a less formal variety has more social consequences than linguistic ones, as both varieties present systematic and interesting features for linguists.

Notes

2. According to Lave and Wenger, a community of practice refers to a group of people who share an interest, a craft, and/or a profession. The group can evolve naturally because of the members’ common interest in a particular domain or area, or it can be created specifically with the goal of gaining knowledge related to their field. It is through the process of sharing information and experiences with the group that the members learn from each other, and have an opportunity to develop themselves personally and professionally (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Community_of_practice)
3. Toledano reported that Miterrand was asked the question during an interview on the national television: “Vous savez ce que c’est le ‘chébran’?” (do you know what ‘chébran’ means). He responded: “Vous savez, quand j’étais enfant, on renversait l’ordre des syllabes dans les mots ; ce n’est pas nouveau ça ! ça veut dire branché, bien entendu.”
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Sarkozy versus the banlieues: Deconstructing Urban Legend

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In 2005, the deaths of two young people in the Parisian suburb of Villiers-le-Bel sparked three weeks of rioting on an unprecedented scale. Politically, the response to the riots revolved around the interpretation of the then Minister of the Interior Nicolas Sarkozy. Sarkozy branded the rioters ‘thugs’ and ‘delinquents’, dismissing the riots as a purely nihilistic expression of violence, a rejection of the Republic and of French society at large. Given Sarkozy’s political position and the sensationalist appeal of his discourse, this interpretation was rapidly imposed as the dominant interpretation of the violence in the media. Of course, Sarkozy’s interpretation of the violence was nothing new. Since his appointment as Minister of the Interior in 2002, Sarkozy has strongly advocated a hard-line response to crime and delinquency. More than this, he has consistently used the theme of security to evoke fear in the electorate, positioning himself as the solution to a deep-rooted problem in French society. In this way, Sarkozy has successfully used the theme of security to advance his political career. Throughout his rise to the peak of French politics, the banlieues have represented both the source and the target of Sarkozy’s politics of security. These underprivileged areas represent a concentration of all the challenges facing the Republic: immigration, social and economic exclusion and violence. This chapter will explore Sarkozy’s
relationship with the *banlieues* and problematise the security-oriented image that has emerged from this relationship

**Introduction**

In autumn 2005, the deaths of two young people in the Parisian suburb of Clichy-sous-Bois sparked rioting on an unprecedented scale. Over a period of three weeks, young *banlieusards* burned cars, damaged buildings and clashed with police. And the riots were not limited to the suburbs of Paris, but spread to *banlieues* across the nation as the events of Clichy-sous-Bois ignited a profound underlying malaise amongst the youth of the suburbs. The scale of the violence was such that it resulted in the decision by the French government to implement emergency laws dating from the Algerian war of independence. Both during and after these events social commentators offered a range of interpretations of the violence. One of the principal interpretations voiced after the riots was ethnic-oriented with advocates viewing the violence in terms of communitarianism and a fragmentation of the Republic along ethnocultural lines. Alain Finkielkraut, the former left-wing philosopher, was a strong advocate of this perspective. In an interview with *Haaretz* on 18 November 2005, for example, Finkielkraut evoked an ethnocultural fragmentation of the Republic. Finkielkraut made an analogy between the French Republic and Europe, both under attack from parts of the Muslim-Arab world, thereby explicitly linking the Muslim population of the suburbs to the menacing image of the inhabitants of the suburbs manifesting a religiously-motivated hate for the Republic. But the facts of the violence told a different story. Throughout the course of the 2005 events, a significant Muslim presence on the streets was recorded by journalists. However, journalists also recorded the fact that the majority of these inhabitants actively engaged in discouraging the violence, in some cases even attempting to form barriers between youths and police (*Le Monde*, 2 November 2005). Moreover, a confidential report by the Renseignements Généraux, published in *Le Parisien* explicitly stated that Muslim fundamentalists had
‘aucun rôle dans le déclenchement des violences et dans leur expansion’ (*Le Monde*, 7 December 2005).

At the other end of the spectrum, commentators placed emphasis not on the perceived cultural or ethnic element underlying the violence, but rather focused solely on the social issues at stake. This interpretation viewed the riots of 2005, and indeed views urban violence in more general terms, as a direct result of the social processes in operation in these areas. Stéphane Beaud and Michel Pialoux laid the groundwork for this social-oriented interpretation in 2003 when they claimed that the ‘émeute urbaine’ selon l’expression consacrée, peut être comprise, dans un premier temps, comme le révélateur d’une lente dégradation des relations sociales dans la ZUP [Zones à urbaniser en priorité]’ (10). In other words, the riots in French suburbs must be understood in the context of the long-term social mechanisms that have impacted upon the social situation of inhabitants of the banlieues. In 2005, sociologist Laurent Bonelli adopted a similar approach, claiming that ‘cette crise des milieux populaires est [ . . . ] profondément sociale’ (*Le Monde diplomatique*, December 2005). The sociologist emphasized the role played by the destructuring of the working classes in the post-industrial period in the emergence of urban violence, and specifically the events of 2005. However, if the ethnocultural interpretation fails to provide an adequate explanation for the riots, so too does the interpretation that views the violence as the reflection of a purely social crisis. Undoubtedly, the social interpretation touches on fundamental issues that are at the heart of the malaise des banlieues, unemployment and education being two of the most important. However, the problem with this approach is that the point of view is limited; the social interpretation fails to give adequate consideration to other elements having an equally important impact on the production of violence in the suburbs such as ethnicity, identity and belonging, for example.

In any case, these different interpretations took a backseat to the ‘official’ interpretation. In the political sphere, the riots were described as the actions of thugs, hardened delinquents expressing a hate for the Republic and French society at large. This perspective
stemmed, in large part, from the then Minister of the Interior, Nicolas Sarkozy. Moreover, Sarkozy’s position of authority, combined with the sensationalist appeal of his discourse, gave legitimacy to this interpretation. Other competing interpretations were rendered inaudible by this ‘official’ view which was quickly imposed in the media as the dominant view of the riots. This chapter will offer an in-depth analysis of this ‘official’ view of the riots and assess its validity as a legitimate interpretation of the events of 2005. On a larger scale, the chapter will situate Sarkozy’s security-oriented interpretation of the 2005 riots in terms of the relationship between Sarkozy and the banlieues in more general terms. For the now President’s interpretation of the violence was nothing new. Since his appointment as Minister of the Interior in 2002, Sarkozy has strongly advocated a hard-line response to crime and delinquency. More than this, he has consistently used the theme of security to evoke fear in the electorate, positioning himself as the solution to a deep-rooted problem in French society. In this way, Sarkozy has successfully used the theme of security to advance his political career. Throughout his rise to the peak of French politics, the banlieues have represented both the source and the target of Sarkozy’s politics of security. This chapter will thus explore Sarkozy’s relationship with the banlieues and problematise the security-oriented image that has emerged from this relationship.

**Autumn 2005: Genesis of a National Phenomenon**

As mentioned in the introduction, the riots were sparked by the deaths of two young banlieusards in Clichy-sous-bois. On 27 October 2005, Traoré and Benna died by electrocution at the site of an EDF electrical transformer in the Parisian suburb of Seine-Saint-Denis. Another teenager, Muhittin Altun, sustained serious injuries. The youths were fleeing police, despite the fact that none of them had done anything wrong. The tragedy produced an emotional and angry response among the teenagers’ peers and that evening saw a number of violent incidents in Clichy-sous-Bois. For the friends of the dead youths, Zyed Benna and Bouna Traoré were
the innocent victims of the police discrimination that forms part of life in the suburbs; ‘Morts Pour Rien’ was the slogan branded upon t-shirts as the families led protest marches in front of the media. However, for those living in similar suburban communities, while these deaths lacked a personal link, the tragedy constituted yet another example of the discrimination and humiliation that form primary factors in the social equation of these areas. The violence quickly spread to the neighbouring suburbs of Montfermeil and Aulnay-sous-Bois. Up to this point, the violence was limited to the suburb at the source of the tragedy and its immediate neighbours. Crucially however, the first statement made by government representatives regarding the tragedy claimed that the victims had been in the wrong and attempted to absolve the police of any blame in the matter (Kokoreff and Moran 35–51). This move would prove to be a significant factor in terms of the escalation of the violence. The day after the tragedy, before any comprehensive enquiry had been carried out, the then Minister of the Interior made the following statement to the media:

Lors d’une tentative de cambriolage, lorsque la police est arrivée, un certain nombre de jeunes sont partis en courant. Trois d’entre eux, qui n’étaient pas poursuivis physiquement par la police, sont allés se cacher en escaladant un mur d’enceinte de trois mètres de haut qui abritait un transformateur. Il s’en est suivi une nuit d’émeute, une de plus à Clichy-sous-Bois (AFP, 28 October 2005).

This statement, spread via the media, was rapidly imposed as the dominant interpretation of the causes of the tragedy. The statement held particular weight given Sarkozy’s position of authority as a government representative. However, subsequent information proved this statement factually incorrect. A report published by the Inspection générale des services (IGS) after the riots revealed that the police had indeed pursued the youths, thus negating the official version voiced so hastily after the tragedy occurred (Le Monde, 7 December 2006). Moreover, no crime had been committed and, in any case, attempted break-in does not constitute an infraction under French law. In this context, a number
of questions are raised. With no clear knowledge of the situation and before a detailed enquiry had been made, why did Sarkozy, acting in his official capacity, point the finger of blame at the young *banlieusards*? Was Sarkozy being deliberately provocative, acting the *pompier-pyromane*? For despite the attempt to absolve the forces of order from blame, thus potentially defusing the violence, the riots continued to spread. Over the following days, violence and destruction was recorded in suburban areas across the country. And while previous events, such as the violence of *Les Minguettes* in 1981 or that of Vaulx-en-Velin in 1990, had developed under similar immediate conditions, that is, within a context where the police were perceived as having committed an injustice against local inhabitants, these instances of violence were largely contained within the city of origin (*Silverstein and Tetreault*). In the case of the 2005 violence however, this format was altered as the riots transcended all city and regional borders, developing as a national phenomenon that posed a serious and legitimate threat to what Nicolas Sarkozy termed ‘Republican Order’ (*The Times*, 8 November 2005).

Analysis of the beginnings of the 2005 riots reveals that, although the deaths of the two youths served as the primary catalyst for the violence that followed, there was in fact another factor that also played a decisive role in the outbreak and escalation of the violence. Chronologically, this incident took place a number of days before the start of the civil unrest, on 25 October, when the then Minister of the Interior visited the Parisian suburb of Argenteuil. During a speech to local residents, Sarkozy adopted his usual hard line stance on crime and delinquency, promising inhabitants that he would ‘les débarrasser des voyous [...] de la racaille’, and using the metaphor of a ‘Kärcher’ or high powered cleaning hose when speaking of his intentions to clean the suburbs of the ‘scum’ inhabiting these areas (*Libération*, 31 October 2005). These controversial comments were, at the time, immediately denounced by the Minister for the Promotion of Equality at the time, Azouz Begag, himself a former inhabitant of the *banlieues* (*Libération*, 31 October 2005). Sarkozy’s description of certain inhabitants of the suburbs was received as a
direct insult by many residents, compounding the discrimination that forms part of daily life in the suburbs by publicly verbalising the stigma that has been attached to the suburbs by mainstream society. Although Sarkozy’s statements did not directly result in rioting, his claims compounded the frustration of the inhabitants of these areas, effectively helping to move the situation in the suburbs towards a context where the potential for civil unrest was markedly increased. Throughout the riots Sarkozy’s statements were frequently cited by those directly involved in the riots as being a primary reason for their personal involvement; comments such as ‘Sarko has declared war so its war he’s going to get’, ‘we won’t stop until Sarkozy resigns’, and ‘the main person responsible for this situation is [. . .] Sarkozy’, were recorded by journalists throughout the violence (The Times, 3 November 2005; The Times, 7 November 2005; Le Monde, 17 October 2006). Numerous internet blogs registered similar comments, however the internet based blogs were not initially subjected to any form of censorship and were created by the youths themselves, perhaps resulting in a more accurate reflection of the intensity of the emotions evoked by the words of the then Minister of the Interior: ‘France should be ashamed of its incompetent government. Sarkozy is the one who should be cleaned with a Karcher’, ‘I say yes to the riots, yes to Sarkozy’s resignation’, ‘We will f**k this bastard Sarkozy and his policemen’ (The Times, 8 November 2005).

A Rejection of the Republic?
If Sarkozy’s statements before and during the riots had succeeded in arousing the anger of those inhabiting the banlieues, thereby contributing to the potent mix of factors underlying the violence, it was his statements after the riots that held most effect in terms of interpreting the riots for a public struggling to understand the reasons for such widespread destruction and violence. Sarkozy’s security-oriented interpretation of events viewed the riots as the actions of ‘voyous’ and ‘racaille’; experienced delinquents expressing a hate for French society and the Republic. The picture painted by Sarkozy was that of a social space dominated by a
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‘peur des bandes, des caïds’, areas ruled by mafia-like organisations where even the police are afraid to go (Le Monde, 11 November 2005). Moreover, the now President of the Republic downplayed the importance of a number of social issues, as he cited the activities of criminal gangs as the principal cause of the violence:

La première cause du chômage, de la désespérance, de la violence dans les banlieues, ce ne sont pas les discriminations, ce n’est pas l’échec de l’école. La première cause du désespoir dans les quartiers, c’est le trafic de drogue, la loi des bandes, la dictature de la peur et la démission de la République (Le Monde, 22 November 2005).

Sarkozy’s interpretation of the violence found support among a number of politicians. On 5 November 2005 for example, Gérard Gaudron, Mayor of Aulnay-sous-Bois, led a protest march against the violence, telling media reporters that the march was ‘neither a provocation nor a demonstration of force, but a republican response to acts of delinquency’ (The Guardian, 6 November 2005). Claude Pernes, Mayor of Rosny-sous-Bois denounced a ‘veritable guerrilla situation, urban insurrection’ (Al Jazeera, 6 November 2005). Elsewhere, the then Prime Minister, Dominique de Villepin voiced his opinion that those involved in the riots were ‘delinquents’ during an interview on the French television station, TF1 (BBC News, 3 November 2005). Statements issued by various police bodies and unions in the wake of the 2005 violence also supported this interpretation. Jean-Claude Delage, for example, General Secretary of Alliance Police Nationale (the right-wing majority union of police officers), presented the striking image of ‘la canaille [des banlieues] en guerre contre l’état’ at the union’s fifth National Conference in November 2005 (Alliance Police Nationale, 17 November 2005). The warlike discourse of Alliance Police Nationale was compounded by Frédéric Lagache, national secretary of the union, who called for ‘l’éradication de ceux qui pourrissent la vie des habitants des cités et instrumentalisent les jeunes contre les forces de l’ordre’ (Libération, 21 October 2006). The minority right-wing union Action Police CFTC was another voice much quoted by the media during the 2005 violence due to its sensationalist interpretation of events.
Michel Thooris, general secretary of the union, claimed that France was seeing a civil war unfolding in her suburbs: ‘there is a civil war under way in Clichy-sous-Bois at the moment’ (The Guardian, 30 October 2005). On a larger scale, these declarations all took their place in an established trend evoking the menace of the quartiers sensibles, the threat of these areas to the prospect of a cohesive French society, and asserting the need for repressive police action against the ‘army’ of delinquents who threaten social order. In all of these cases, the comments published rejected any link between the violent events and the social, economic and cultural problems facing the quartiers sensibles. The riots were primarily viewed as an excuse for delinquents to engage in acts of large-scale destruction. Once again, this discourse implied the need for increased repressive action in order to deal with the threat posed by gangs of delinquents to social order and unity.

However, the supposition that is implicit in this discourse—that of a core of hardened delinquents, directing their destructive tendencies at French society and the Republic at large—was called into question as the facts surrounding these episodes of violence emerged. In relation to the 2005 violence, for example, as time elapsed, allowing the events to be studied with a greater degree of critical objectivity, it emerged that the facts behind the events did not support this rhetoric. In fact, the opposite was true. A study undertaken by two prominent French sociologists revealed that, contrary to Sarkozy’s claim that ‘80% des jeunes déférés au parquet seraient bien connus des services de police’, the immediate appearances of the ‘rioters’ before the court at Bobigny showed that the majority ‘n’ont pas d’antécédents judiciaires et ne peuvent donc être étiquetés comme “délinquants”’ (Beaud and Pialoux, “La ‘racaille’ et les ‘vrais jeunes’” 19). Furthermore, in the case of those minors brought before the Bobigny children’s court for their actions during the violence, Judge Jean-Pierre Rosenczveig revealed that out of 95 minors brought before the court ‘seuls 17 d’entre eux étaient connus de la justice’ (20). Moreover, extensive qualitative research conducted in the suburbs by the author further undermines the claim that those involved in the riots were hardened
and experienced delinquents intent on causing destruction (Moran 276). These revelations call into question the rhetoric of insecurity that dominates popular discourse regarding the suburbs. For Beaud and Pialoux, this reductive discourse regarding urban violence effectively imposes a simplistic, binary view of the situation in the \textit{quartiers sensibles} that fails to acknowledge the underlying social issues at stake:

Ce discours sécuritaire [. . .] se nourrit d’une étiologie sommaire du phénomène de violence qui repose, au fond, sur une dichotomie rassurante: il y aurait, d’un côté, un noyau de “violents”, d’hui “irréductibles”, de “sauvages”, dont on n’ose pas dire qu’ils sont irrécupérables et non rééducables [. . .] et de l’autre, les jeunes “non violents”, qui se laisseraient entraîner et qu’il conviendrait de protéger contre la contamination des premiers’ (Beaud and Pialoux, “La ‘racaille’ et les ‘vrais jeunes’” 18).

The security-oriented interpretation thus challenged, an obvious question remains. Did Sarkozy’s interpretation of the riots reflect the reality of the situation, the reality of the banlieues? Or, rather, did this viewpoint simply represent the reformulation of a well-established dialogue? To answer these questions it is necessary to briefly examine the development and evolution of the banlieues as ‘problematic’ areas of French society.

\textbf{On the Margins of Society}

Since the 1950s and 1960s, when the newly constructed \textit{grands ensembles} were hailed as the zenith of urban living, the \textit{banlieues} have been in long-term decline. Originally envisaged as a context where social difference could be surmounted—a ‘classless’ society—today’s \textit{banlieues} represent a concentration of society’s poorest and most underprivileged members. In demographic terms, the population of the \textit{banlieues} is generally characterised by high numbers of immigrants or those of immigrant origins, a situation stemming from the migratory movements that occurred during \textit{les Trente glorieuses}. Since the 1980s and the emergence of the question of integration as a salient political issue, the \textit{banlieues}, with their strong immigrant presence, have come to be
viewed as areas resting at the limits of the Republic, both literally and metaphorically. Alec Hargreaves has shown how powerful stereotypes were attached to the term ‘immigration’ throughout the 1970s and 1980s that saw this term being progressively, and then almost exclusively, associated with unskilled, European workers, or people of colour (Hargreaves 36). Maxim Silverman states that ‘the reformulation of immigration […] transformed the term “immigration” into a euphemism for non-Europeans (particularly North-Africans) and delegitimised it’. The non-European immigrant population came to be regarded as a threat to national unity and identity at a time when these themes were fast regaining popularity (72). More importantly, in the context of this chapter, the threat posed by immigration was inextricably linked to the banlieues, given the high representation of immigrant populations. François Dubet’s work illustrates how perceptions relating to populations of immigrant origins became interwoven with the stigmatization of a particular geographical area: ‘La stigmatisation d’une cité se nourrit de la présence immigrée, rendue responsable de la dégradation: logements surpeuplés, difficultés de voisinage, inquiétudes face aux jeunes qui occupent les espaces publics’ (Dubet and Lapeyronnie 84). Consequently, the suburbs became places of exclusion, marginalised by mainstream society.

Of course the state took measures to try and reverse the spiral of social and economic degeneration that enveloped the banlieues. At the beginning of the 1980s, prompted to some extent by the riots that took place in the Lyon suburb of Les Minguettes in 1981, the state engaged in a series of policy measures collectively known as the politique de la ville. This would serve as the blueprint for urban policy in France, a product of the efforts of the state to manage the problems and difficulties engendered by urban development. However, the politique de la ville ultimately failed to reverse the destructive trajectory of the banlieues.

Linked to the issues of immigration, exclusion and socioeconomic relegation, the question of the banlieues also found itself at the heart of a debate on security during the 1990s. Sophie Body-Gendrot states that ‘au cour des années ponctuées par des désordres dans les
banlieues et par la montée en puissance des victimes, le sentiment d’insécurité épargne peu de catégories sociales’ (Body-Gendrot and Wihtol de Wenden 60). Thus from 1991 onwards, attention was focused on the ‘problem’ of the suburbs. Heavily mediatised instances of urban violence throughout the 1990s contributed to a growth in the idea of ‘insecurity’, an idea that was progressively and almost exclusively associated with the banlieues. Statistical records of the strong growth in crime and delinquency supported the propagation of this theme in the popular imagination (Body-Gendrot and Wihtol de Wenden 61). Sylvie Tissot states that ‘les émeutes, progressivement détachées de leurs événements déclencheurs, sont rapportées au problème général des “banlieues” ou des “quartiers sensibles,” décrit comme un problème social nouveau’ (Tissot 19).

The evolution of this generalised discourse linking immigration, insecurity and the banlieues was also influenced heavily by the emergence and growth of the Front National on the political stage. The emergence of the Front National as a player in the political stakes throughout the 1980s constituted an important political development; the party campaigned on a strong anti-immigrant platform and contributed significantly to the ethnicisation of the French political scene. This anti-immigrant position was linked, throughout the 1990s to the question of insecurity, as the Front National attempted to capitalise on the sporadic instances of large-scale urban violence occurring in the banlieues. The growth in the popularity of the FN brought about a crucial change in the French political landscape as mainstream parties were forced to engage with these questions of immigration and insecurity. On the left, for example, the Socialists embraced a more security-oriented direction, represented most notably by the Villepinte Conference of 1997. The Villepinte conference held particular significance in that the speeches by prominent political figures such as Jean-Pierre Chevènement and Lionel Jospin took their place in the more general rhetoric of insecurity that was developing as a central societal and political concern. In his closing speech, for example, Prime Minister Jospin succumbed to emotive evocations of the ‘frontière de la délinquence’, the ‘petits groupes menaçants, mendians
agressifs, dégradations diverses de l'espace public’ (Jospin 8). The acquiescence of the left to the rhetoric of insecurity took its place in a circular process that saw the theme of insecurity gaining increasing momentum in the political sphere.

The success of the National Front in garnering support through this discourse linking immigration, insecurity and the threat to national unity was most evident during the 2002 presidential elections. Throughout 2001, in the run up to the 2002 elections, the National Front promoted a programme that posited immigration as ‘a mortal threat to civil peace in France’ (Shields 312). This situation was compounded by the priority given to security issues by the other candidates, namely the Socialist candidate, Lionel Jospin, and the RPR candidate Jacques Chirac (Dikeç 118). Jospin, ‘playing to middle-class fears, claimed he had been naïve about crime and now supported zero impunity policing’ (Schneider 147). The year had seen a 10% increase in recorded crime and ‘the government’s record on law and order [was placed] under the spotlight’ (Shields 282). However, Schneider affirms that ‘by embracing zero tolerance, Jospin legitimated the discourse of the hard right. And it did not help him’ (Schneider 147). In the first round of the elections, Le Pen caused widespread political shock in overtaking the Socialist candidate and progressing to the second round. Shields reveals that ‘the shock [...] was all the greater since no polling agency had considered this a serious prospect’ (Shields 281). This success represented the first time a candidate of the extreme right wing had progressed to the second round of the presidential elections, a fact that highlights not only the achievements of the National Front as a political party, but also the degree to which the linked themes of immigration and insecurity had progressed as salient issues in both the public and political spheres. In this respect, Shields adds that ‘in the aftermath of the attacks of 11 September 2001 on the World Trade Centre in New York [...] equations between insécurité, illegal immigration and Islamic fundamentalism found a louder resonance’ (284). Ultimately, Chirac was elected as President amid strong anti-FN protests on the part of associations and activist groups, however
his ‘new cabinet reflected the harsh punitive policing tone of the campaign’ (Schneider 147). And it is in this general context that Nicolas Sarkozy emerged as a leading player on the French political scene, using the question of insecurity and the banlieues as a means of propelling himself up the French political hierarchy.

**Political Success and the Rhetoric of Fear**

From the moment of his appointment as Minister of the Interior in 2002, Nicolas Sarkozy’s political agenda has been characterised by the theme of insecurity. A shrewd tactician, Sarkozy has played on the fears of the electorate, thus catapulting himself to the pinnacle of French political power. In his first term as Minister of the Interior (2002–2004), Sarkozy successfully manoeuvred the question of insecurity into the political spotlight. Through a series of policy decisions Sarkozy made law and order the focus of his political agenda. The Perben Laws serve as a good example of this focus. The first law of 2002 strengthened penal responses to acts of minor delinquency. This was accompanied by the 2004 law which ‘increased police custody to four days, and extended the scope of the notion of “organized gang” (Diçek 119). This development was followed by the 2003 ‘loi pour la sécurité intérieure’, a law that

renforce les moyens juridiques de la police judiciaire par l’extension de la compétence territoriale des officiers de police judiciaire, incrimine un certain nombre de comportements qui troublent au quotidien la sécurité et la tranquillité des personnes (racolage, mendicité agressive, rassemblements dans les halls d’immeubles . . .)’ (27).

Paradoxically, while these measures did indeed achieve their goal of providing the forces of order additional tools to aid their task, the increase in police powers has, to a certain extent, helped inflame the situation in the banlieues where police-public relations are characterized by hostility and tension. The abolishment of the community police in 2003 in favour of a more repressive style of policing, based on a culture of results and defined by a clear commitment to zero tolerance regarding delinquency, provides
another example of Sarkozy’s security-oriented approach. Nassar Demiati claims that ‘depuis qu’il est revenu au ministère de l’Intérieur, Nicolas Sarkozy a délibérément choisi de jouer le jeu de la provocation des jeunes des quartiers populaires et d’y faire monter la tension’ (Demiati 61). Sarkozy has played a central role in the construction of a security-oriented image of the suburbs, an image that represents these areas as veritable ‘zones de non-droit’ at the limits of the Republic.

During the violence of 2005, Sarkozy’s repressive approach cemented his image as the “premier flic de France,” the man to restore order to lawless areas of society. In this respect, Robert Castel claims that the “essentiel de la problématique de l’insécurité” is inextricably linked to the population of the suburbs, “de sorte que l’éradication de la dangérosité qu’elles portent vaudrait à la limite pour une victoire sur l’insécurité en général” (Castel 66). Sarkozy’s position of authority has, through the media, allowed his voice and, consequently, his representation of the suburbs to dominate in the public sphere. The problem here is that this representation has effectively contributed to the construction of an artificial ‘reality’ of the banlieues, a reality that is imposed on the inhabitants of these areas and dictates how they are perceived in the public sphere. In this context, Pierre Bourdieu’s work explores the concept of ‘reality effects’, that is to say, the specific cultural effect achieved by the processes governing media production in the public sphere:

The power to show is also a power to mobilize. It can give life to ideas or images, but also to groups. The news, the incidents and accidents of everyday life, can be loaded with political or ethnic significance liable to unleash strong, often negative feelings, such as racism, chauvinism, the fear-hatred of the foreigner or, xenophobia. The […] very fact of reporting, of putting on record as a reporter, always implies a social construction of reality that can mobilize (or demobilize) individuals or groups (Bourdieu 21).

The media thus “produce ‘reality effects’ by creating a ‘media vision’ of reality which, in turn, tends to create the reality which
the media claim to describe” (Marlière 221). This is not to suggest that the media fabricate events, however it does show that the vision presented by the media can distort the reality of a given event; the emphasis given by the media to certain aspects of an event or situation inevitably requires the omission of other aspects that might be considered equally, or indeed more, important, in another context.

Crucially, in terms of the social identities of social actors or groups, the reality effects produced by the media can result in a specific form of symbolic violence. Bourdieu defines symbolic violence as ‘violence wielded with tacit complicity between its victims and its agents, insofar as both remain unconscious of submitting to or wielding it’ (Bourdieu 17). In other words, the reality produced by journalists, by the media, under the visible and invisible structural influences acting upon and within the journalistic field, and absorbed by the public sphere which accepts it as such, unaware of those same influences, can result in the symbolic oppression of a particular social actor or group. This symbolic oppression can have negative implications for those concerned in terms of marginalization, stigmatization and exclusion if the reality effects of the media are left unchallenged. Philippe Marlière goes on to link this notion of symbolic violence explicitly to the suburbs:

The media tend to create an image of social problems for the public consumption which emphasizes the ‘extraordinary’, that is, violent actions, fights between youngsters and the police, acts of vandalism, juvenile delinquency, the overconcentration of immigrant populations, etc. Media portrayal of these suburban areas “stigmatizes” the people living there in all aspects of their everyday lives, thereby extending the bad reputation of a place to its inhabitants (Marlière 221).

Sarkozy’s representation of the banlieues, both magnified and compounded by the media, has become ingrained in the popular imagination; the suburbs are associated with crime, delinquency and, most importantly, fear. Moreover, the strength of this artificial representation is not easily challenged, the representation of the
In mainstream society is fixed within a circular process of reinforcement. The negative image of the suburbs nourishes the theme of insecurity reinforcing the image of the suburbs. In this context, Kokoreff argues that in 2005, Nicolas Sarkozy ‘a su trouver un intérêt politique dans la propagation des violences en vue d’une relégitimation d’une politique d’ordre’ (Kokoreff 132). In electoral terms, the riots of 2005 served to reinvigorate the politics of insecurity through the creation of a climate of tension permeating mainstream society. Sarkozy’s security-oriented politics appeared reassuring to mainstream voters, while also appearing seductive to those voters tempted by the politics of the Front National. This strategy proved successful in 2007, when the question of insecurity was at the heart of Sarkozy’s presidential campaign. Indeed, perhaps the most telling recognition of Sarkozy’s success with the politics of security was the failed attempt by the Socialist candidate, Ségolène Royale, to triangulate his politics and draw on the theme of insecurity for her own campaign. Now President, Sarkozy has undoubtedly reaped significant political benefits from his politics of security, but at what price?

Beyond the Looking Glass: Life in the banlieues
The 2005 riots were remarkable both for their scale and their intensity. And while the riots failed to produce a clearly articulated set of demands, there was undoubtedly a message in the violence. In contemporary society, French banlieues are populated, to a large extent, by French citizens of immigrant origins who regard themselves as French in terms of identity and belonging. However, French society has failed, or refused, to fully recognize and accept the progression from immigrant to citizen of immigrant origins and the distinction that this progression entails in terms of belonging to the national community. Physical and cultural differences marking these youths as having ancestral roots in other nations continue to form a cultural barrier in terms of how these young people are perceived by mainstream society. These developments have formed a background to the already present social and economic malaise that dominates many suburban areas, all combining to
produce a potent social mix that exploded into violence during the events of 2005 and 2007. Ultimately, what was at stake in these riots was the question of access. Inhabitants of these areas feel isolated, physically and metaphorically, from the state that is failing to address the problems of the suburbs; excluded from the Republic whose values and ideals do not appear to extend to these areas. To this end, Castel claims that ‘en plus de se trouver dans une situation sociale souvent désastreuse, les émeutiers voulaient aussi régler des comptes avec la société française accusée d’avoir failli à ses promesses [. . .] C’est ainsi qu’on peut trouver une signification politique à ces événements, même s’ils n’ont revêtu aucune des formes classiques du répertoire politique’ (Castel 53). Viewed from this perspective, the 2005 riots constituted a primitive political event charged with a symbolic meaning which, while not clearly articulated, was nonetheless emphatic. For his part, Kokoreff states that the riots ‘ont marqué une entrée en politique des jeunes non seulement animés par le désir de détruire mais par une volonté de confrontation’ (Kokoreff, “Sociologie de l’émeute” 528). The populations of the banlieues are marginalized and excluded from mainstream society. Socially and economically disadvantaged, the difficulties of these populations are compounded by a profound sense of injustice. Danièle Joly sums up this position in saying: ‘le désavantage de ces jeunes est découplé par l’échec scolaire, le chômage, la pauvreté, un avenir sans issue, ainsi que par le racisme et la discrimination avec leurs cortèges d’humiliations quotidiennes et les injustices qui en découlent’ (Joly 293). The situation here, perceived as beyond their control, induces a profound malaise among the inhabitants of the banlieues, particularly the young. This malaise is compounded by the quasi-impossibility of making their voices heard in the public and political spheres. In this context, violence appears to be the only means of making their voices heard, of becoming visible. Violence provides a means of focusing media attention on the suburbs which, in turn, brings the problems of the banlieues to the attention of public and politicians alike.

The politics of security has had an important negative impact on the banlieues. The important social and economic problems
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facing the underprivileged populations of the suburbs are ignored, rendered inaudible by the force of Sarkozy’s rhetoric of insecurity. At the same time, the stigma attached to the banlieues and their inhabitants in mainstream society is augmented, compounding the already-present social, economic and cultural problems facing these areas. Castel sums up the situation in saying that “la logique qui se met ainsi en place au nom de la défense de l’ordre républicain peut alors se retourner en logique de ghettoïsation, ces jeunes n’ayant plus d’autres ressources que de se refermer sur eux-mêmes dans un entre-soi communautaire et de retourner le stigmate en revendiquant la dignité de la race contre les promesses fallacieuses de la démocratie” (Castel 75). It is in this context that the events of 2005 must be understood. The riots of 2005 crossed a threshold in terms of their scale, affecting suburban areas across the nation. This spread of violence is representative of the widespread nature of the anger and frustration among the populations of the French banlieues. In the popular imagination, the banlieues and their inhabitants evoke powerful negative connotations. The image of the French suburbs is the stuff of urban legend and Sarkozy has contributed significantly to the narrative in recent years. French society sees the suburbs as the reflection of Sarkozy’s security-oriented discourse. However, the narrative does not tally with reality; life in the banlieues is much more colourful than Sarkozy’s monochromatic outlook would have the public believe. Yet paradoxically, the strength of the narrative is overwhelming the reality of the situation, the imagined is taking the place of the real. Didier Lapeyronnie sums up the situation: ‘l’image rend homogène des expériences hétérogènes et diversifiées. Elle simplifie et unifie une réalité complexe et souvent contradictoire. Les habitants souffrent d’une sorte de survisibilité qui leur apparait comme la contrepartie de leur sous-visibilité. Ils sont trop vus pour ce qu’ils ne sont pas, ce qui, pour eux, empêche de les voir pour ce qu’ils sont’ (Lapeyronnie 144). An identity is being imposed on the inhabitants of the suburbs, an identity that reinforces the destructive forces that hold sway in the banlieues. Nicolas Sarkozy has inextricably linked his political evolution to the question of the banlieues. However, this link is based on a mirror
image, for as Sarkozy has progressed, armed with his politics of security, the situation in the suburbs has deteriorated. Ultimately, the price of Sarkozy’s success has been to widen the gap separating the suburbs from mainstream society. In the case of the suburbs, urban legend has overtaken reality.

**Works Cited**


Muslim Mothers and French Daughters: Women Caught between Religion and Secularity in a Post-Beur Film Culture

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Recurring again and again in recent Franco-Maghrebi films, young women leave behind their minority Muslim communities for full citizenship in secular France. These films set up a false binary between “Muslim” and “French” through the trope of the traditional Muslim mother and the assimilated French daughter who embody the contemporary sociological and political debate facing France (and Europe). In these films I find an ambivalent critique of women’s roles in mitigating the effects of migration, in transmitting culture and religious values to their families, and in interpreting the alien French culture for their children and shaping responses to that culture. These films rely on narratives and images that construct women as victims of the patriarchal-Islamic family, a common stereotype about Beur culture.

I propose that these victim narratives and images mark the end of the Beur film trend. I suggest the term “post-Beur” to speak specifically about what I see as a change from the original focus in the 1980s on young male protagonists to this current mother-daughter dyad against the backdrop of the patriarchal institutions of religion and government. As discussed later, this narrative and thematic change is due in part to the global rise in anti-Muslim feeling expressed locally in the foulard affair. Additionally, post-Beur film makes much use of the historical drama, a genre
previously unavailable to Beur filmmakers due to budgeting and time restraints. Though the focus on female histories is a welcome development, most post-Beur films use a false binary between “modern France” and “traditional Islam” to create a series of limited choices for their own heroines.

**Post-Beur Film Culture**

An exploration of diverse physical and temporal settings via the historical drama epitomizes the post-Beur trend. Recent films are situated in crucial historical moments of the postcolonial immigrant experience—conscription in the colonial army (*Indigènes* or *Days of Glory*, Rachid Bouchareb, 2006), the Franco-Algerian war (*Cartouches Gauloises* or *French Bullets*, Mehdi Charef, 2007), the first influx of guest workers in France in the 1950s (*Le Gone de Chaaba* or *Shantytown Kid*, Christophe Ruggia, 1997), the Family Reunification Act of 1974 (*Inch’Allah Dimanche* or *God Willing Sunday*, Yamina Benguigui, 2001, and *17 Rue Bleue* or *17 Blue Street*, Chad Chenouga, 2001), and a Europe suffering from the vicissitudes of economic globalization (*Marie-Line*, Mehdi Charef, 2000; *La Graine et le Mulet* or *The Secret of the Grain*, Abdel Kechiche, 2007). Historical dramas are an important development of the post-Beur trend, speaking to audience interest in stories from and of the immigrant North African community. This development signals newly available funding for these projects that eclipse the Beur films’ reliance on microbudget strategies. Historical films also allow for a Maghrebi re-writing of French historiographies concerning its colonial past and postcolonial present.

Post-Beur films still explore community and self in relationship to French assimilation as films in the Beur trend once did, yet these contemporary films focus on the challenges and trials of female protagonists and characters, often in relation to an Algeria-based Islam. This aspect of post-Beur film is possible for a variety of reasons. First, more women have had opportunity to make feature films, like Yamina Benguigu and Zaida Ghorba-Volta. Second, male directors like Mehdi Charef have now turned their attention to the stories of their mothers and sisters. Third, Franco-
French filmmakers like Phillipe Faucon and Coline Serreau are incorporating French-Maghrebi characters into their narratives. This narrative focus has brought about a change in thematic material, most often introducing a critique of the “Arabo-Berber-Islamic sex/gender system,” the only instance where Islam and its influence in the lives of this community are addressed (Tarr 212).

In Beur films, Islam was mostly notable because of its absence. Alec Hargreaves’ assessment about Islam’s absence in narratives from French-Maghrebian novelists applies here, because the production of novelists-turned-filmmakers buoyed Beur cinema. Second generation French-Maghrebis may not be invested in Islam for a variety of social factors. Hargreaves’ interview with Akli Tadjer, author of *Les ANI du Tassili* (*The Unidentified Arabs of Tassili*, 1986), reveals that for many Beur writers, Islam is abstract:

> For our parents, Islam was very concrete. . . . Islam is easily transmissible when you are born in a Muslim cradle, when there’s a mosque, and imam, and all the religious values in a village. Here in France, there aren’t any of these things. . . . If it isn’t on TV or in the newspapers, it becomes abstract. Even the message, if it isn’t in the environment, it doesn’t become internalized (Hargreaves 19, my translation).

Tadjer attributes this loss of transmission to the first generation’s widespread illiteracy, explaining that many parents could not read the Koran themselves, so their own knowledge of Islam was reduced to a list of dos and don’ts (19).

Also, authors restrain from critiquing Islam because of their strong affective ties to the community and a wish to protect parents from offense (19). As well, authorial desire to remain unperturbed by what Hargreaves terms “ideological harassment” from the burgeoning fundamentalist groups in European city centers may lead to silence regarding a critique or engagement with religious questions (19). Lastly, many second-generation citizens in the North African immigrant community may have wanted to distance themselves from the growing civil war in Algeria between the army-backed government and the Islamic Salvation Front; laying claim to French secularism may have been one way of dismissing
an Algeria now characterized as increasingly fundamentalist in the international press.

I argue that one way to understand the increasing discussion of Islam within French films from North African filmmakers is to contextualize these filmmakers within their religious community of origin. This is not to claim that these filmmakers are or are not practicing Muslims, but instead to locate the impetus for this development in the narrative content of the films. Due to globalization, migration, and the technological ease of film production and distribution, international filmmakers affiliated with reterritorialized religious communities have also begun to produce films that discuss similar issues as those found in post-Beur films.

**Religious Affiliated Film in a Global Context**

Films produced by religious communities embody and negotiate the anxieties facing these communities, brought on by globalization and the changing structure of the nation-state, through representations of religious women. Yet, religious communities engage in multiple ways with forces of modernity, globalization, nationalism, and cultural change and so the cultural representations of women will vary from community to community. Immigrant and ethnic populations in the North African community in France must assimilate to French normative cultural practices for economic, social, and physical security. The French state perceives the French-Maghrebi as Muslim first, French second, if at all. For many Franco-French, who see themselves as secular in spite of their Catholic heritage, Islam typifies the alien status of the immigrant North African community. “Muslims today are seen as challenging basic tenets of French republican culture and identity [secular education being one of the most important aspects of this culture]” (Laurence and Vaisse 55) because of their demands to be recognized as a religious community in the public sphere (54). Thus, “becoming French” has been interpreted by both Franco-French and members of the North African immigrant community as leaving behind Islam and its attendant religious markers, like the foulard
(or headscarf) worn by North African women, a flashpoint in French politics and useful to our discussion here.

France has recently made efforts to accommodate Muslim populations. One of the most visible is the creation of the French Council of the Muslim Religion (FCMR), with federal hopes that the council would “encourage development of local sources of authority,” minimizing foreign manipulation and extremism of Muslim communities in France (138). The FCMR treats the presence of Islam in France similar to Judaism, Buddhism, and Christianity in order to domesticate them, to create French versions of each of these that would not disturb the state and public order. As Laurence and Vaisse report, former President Jacques Chirac argued in 2003 that state secularism was “the last protection against the encroachment of religious communities on the state in a transnational and global world” (140). At the same time, the European Union’s formation via nation-states exacerbates the citizenship issues that those nations already struggle to solve (Balibar 44). In fact, national and supranational policies and laws work to keep the migrant in a constant state of instability in relation to governmental agencies.

These instabilities manifest themselves in power relations within migrant communities. Fadela Amara’s autobiographical activist text *Breaking the Silence* documents her vision for renewing France’s high-rise suburbs as neighborhoods. Major factors in the dissolution of these neighborhoods were the recession of the 1980s that led to rampant unemployment, and the federal political upheavals that produced conservative policies regarding immigrants and citizenship. Amara points to the rise of militant Islam at a time “when a significant number of young people from the projects were completely disoriented, facing failure in school, unemployment, and discrimination” (95). Militant Islam offered a new way to envision personal identity, even if its interpretation of Muslim texts disenfranchised women within the community. Within the banlieues, women in public spaces risk policing by gangs of young men who themselves feel disenfranchised in the secular state. On one hand women’s behavior is monitored by
men in their community, on the other hand it is monitored by the state. Women have little room to create their own identities between these two powerful, often violent, forces. This challenge to female subjectivity has become the subject of post-Beur films.

The Mother-Daughter Dyad in Contemporary French Films

Contemporary French films from or about the North African community use the subjectivity of the migrant woman as the locus of debate over French secularism, linked in these films to modernity, and an Algeria-based Islam, linked in these films to traditionalism. Specifically, I argue that contemporary French films about the North African community embody the negotiation of religiosity and secularism in a mother-daughter dyad that must break with each other in order to allow the growth and autonomy of the modern French daughter. These films set up a false binary between “Muslim” and “French” through the trope of the traditional Muslim mother and the assimilated French daughter. This binary pervades popular discourse about integration, assimilation, and generational changes of North African communities.

These films rely on binaries of youth and old age to represent the struggles that women face as they work to negotiate the conflicts between the society around them and their family. Often this binary is embodied in the youthful second-generation adolescent character (usually experiencing a sexual awakening) and the aging first-generation mother. This trend is seen in other transnational films, like Real Women Have Curves (Patricia Cardoso, 2002) and Bend It Like Beckham (Gurinder Chadha, 2002) or played for laughs in My Big Fat Greek Wedding (Joel Zwick, 2002). In the French films I wish to discuss here, the first generation mother is at a loss to deal with the strange mores of the host society, and so clings to religious law and custom to protect both herself and her daughters from unknown forces. The mother is generally dressed in traditional North African costume, made up in tattoos, positioned almost exclusively in the family apartment (most likely obeying purdah), and engaged in rituals and prayers throughout
the narrative. Often times this character is demonized as a witch or an ogre, instrument and agent for Islam. Other times, the mother is simply ignorant and has nothing more to strengthen her than what she knows of religion.

The young woman character must choose between her traditional family and modern France, with Islam often cast by the wayside as casualty of her transition to fully realized French citizenship. The young woman character is articulate, angry, and active, compared to her mother’s submission to enforced domesticity. The daughter is attractive and developing a sexual autonomy. The conflict in these films is between these two female characters; male characters, even those who are threatening, exist only on the periphery of the true drama of the films. These films locate patriarchal domination within the figure of the mother, who herself is vulnerable to the patriarchal norms she is seen inflicting on her daughter. By making the mother the agent of traditional religious patriarchy, the films very often elide the complex network of economic, racial, class, legal, and institutional dynamics that inform these families’ position within French society.

One short from the 1990s provides an early template for this oft-used trope. In Fejria Deliba’s 1991 12-minute short *Le petit chat est mort* (The Kitten is Dead), lycée student Mona (Linda Chaib) practices lines from Molière’s *L’école des Femmes* (The School for Wives) with her traditionally costumed mother (Fatima Chatter) as a stand-in. Her mother’s lack of education and modern orientation are emphasized not only by the woman’s costuming and her placement in the kitchen but also by the woman’s inability to understand the difference between her daughter’s attitudes and the young female character’s attitudes in the play. The daughter then remembers a date and heads out the door, lying to her mother about where she’s headed and applying lipstick as she exits. The short examines confrontations between assimilating daughters and their immigrant parents. The settings involve the family home, a space that the young woman treats as a trap or prison by her clear desire to quickly escape. The young woman is characterized by her facility with mainstream French culture represented by the
Moliere play, and her desire to leave the home for the benefits of French culture, i.e. the sexual freedoms of independent dating. *Le petit chat est mort* creates an ultimatum for its protagonist, an either/or situation that forces the character to choose between the film’s version of French modernity and Algerian/Muslim traditionalism.

This image of daughters fleeing through doorways, staring out of high-rise windows, gazing from balconies, scurrying through streets, is endemic throughout these films. Mise-en-scene and performance situate the daughter as one who desires, who longs for more. The daughter creates her own identity outside the confines of the home, equated with the religious patriarchal order, in the streets and institutions of secular France. She may do so by partnering sexually with a French man, often a blank slate, a peripheral character who stands by as the daughter explains her choices to her sisters. She may disappear altogether, haunting the text with her absence. At the same time, placing mothers strictly within the domestic space of small apartments, kitchens, bedrooms, bathrooms, characterizes her without offering her subjectivity—she will turn her face to the wall rather than look outside her own proscribed sphere.

**Sexual Modernity in 17 Rue Bleue**

The narrative constraints of the short form are one explanation for the rough-hewn characterization in *Le petit chat est mort*. Yet feature length films use these same tropes without much change or development. In Chad Chenougga’s 2001 *17 Rue Bleue*, the central character’s physicality and beauty embodies a valorized sexual modernity, which this film argues defies the religious strictures of Islam. This film uses the mother-daughter dyad to contrast modern France with a traditional Islam. Adda (Lysiane Meis), a fully acculturated French-Maghrebi woman, lives happily with her two sons in 1970s Paris. Her married French lover promises to leave all his wealth to her upon his death; unfortunately he dies too soon to fulfill the legal requirements for such an arrangement. Adda engages in a legal battle with his widow to win the money she needs to maintain her family’s lifestyle.
Adda’s health, beauty, vivacity, and grace are only possible because of her embrace of a French lifestyle, here coded as sexually liberated, urban, and modern. The mise-en-scene uses Art Modern styles to characterize Adda. Adda wears bright pinks and red costumes, with dazzling abstract patterns, and dresses her hair in contemporary wigs. She furnishes the apartment, paid for by her lover’s estate, in slender lamps, elongated vases, and low couches, with paintings decorating the walls. Adda’s two sisters Leila (Saïda Jawad) and Yasmine (Rania Meziani) live with her, and they function as contrasts to her version of modernity. Yasmine, the dour older sister, dresses modestly and plainly. She wears her hair long, which accentuates her narrow, unsmiling face. She becomes a pharmacist, and works hard, only en scene in the evenings after school or work. She also censors Adda and the boys’ behavior as she sees fit. Leila is the youngest sister and Adda’s influence on her is unmistakable. She too dresses in bright colors and wears her effervescent sexuality openly.

The story creates a series of escalating disappointments in Adda’s legal journey, and illustrates how these disappointments impact the transplanted family. The arrival of Adda’s mother (Chafia Boudraa) marks the beginning of the end. Adda’s mother represents visually all that Adda left behind in Algeria, traditional dress, attitudes, and morality. The mother’s costuming, speech, and behavior situate her as foreign and exotic for Chad (Abdel Halis) and Sam (Aimen Ben Ahmed), Adda’s sons who occupy the narrative center. With her arrival, Yasmine’s attitudes take on more prominence, blaming Adda’s example for Leila’s newly discovered pregnancy. On a weekend swimming trip at the beach, Adda’s mother drags Adda into the water, slapping her, tearing off her wig, and dunking her into the water. Yasmine stands by and keeps the two boys from intervening. Adda’s mother calls Adda a whore and admonishes her to repent. The film cuts from this violent exchange to the airport where Leila meekly follows her mother through customs. Adda appears bleak and tired, the first signs of weakness in her previous cheerful demeanor.

The rest of the film chronicles her slow dissolution brought on
by her addiction to prescription medication. As if faced with the stern rebuke of her traditional heritage, Adda admits defeat and destroys herself in response. She attempts suicide at one point. When she returns from the hospital she takes to her bed, never leaving until her death. By the end of the film she becomes the haunting presence that her sons cannot escape, the insistent ghoul that keeps them from fully integrating in friendships, romances, and school. In a sense, she exerts the same influence on her sons that her mother has exerted on her. The film proposes that Adda’s ultimate defeat may be her naïve hope that she can live in both the tightly-knit family, grounded in traditional values, and in the secular openness of the new country. _17 Rue Bleue_ portrays the traditional, here Islam, and the modern, France, as incompatible. French-Maghrebi women must choose one over the other.

**Patriarchal Excess of the Witch in *Inch’Allah Dimanche***

As mentioned earlier, the mother-daughter dyad focuses the narrative drama on the women of the film. The men, who may hold considerable authority within the family or community, are relegated to the periphery. Occasionally the male characters use physical force to re-insert themselves into the narrative, but the female characters wield the true dramatic power. This strategy also displaces patriarchal excesses onto a generation of crones and witches: seemingly husbands would not enforce brutal religious edict if their manipulative mothers did not demand it. In Yamina Benguigui’s 2001 _Inch’Allah Dimanche_, the mother-daughter dyad is configured through Zouina (Fejria Deliba), the wife of Ahmed (Zinedine Soualem), and Ahmed’s mother Aicha (Rabia Mokkedem). Under the Family Reunification Act, Zouina and Aicha, along with Zouina’s three children, join Ahmed in France. He has been working there for ten years, and his relationship to Zouina has been reduced to yearly visits, during which he has taken a second wife. Zouina and Aicha are confined to the row house and each other’s company in an effort to follow purdah requirements. Much of the film documents their power struggle in relation to Ahmed. As the mother, Aicha culturally has more
power than Zouina. Aicha does much to reinforce this power from locking up the food, to controlling Zouina’s interactions with the neighbors, to reporting Zouina’s behavior to Ahmed when he returns home. One of her coups involves Sunday afternoon outings with her son, while Zouina must stay inside with the children.

The film contrasts Zouina and Aicha through their dress, with youthfulness inscribed to Zouina and traditionalism to Aicha. The film uses close-ups on Zouina’s colorful skirts, aprons, and veils to reveal the inner strength and vibrancy Zouina possesses, which may not be immediately evident as she suffers the selfish behavior of her mother-in-law. Aicha’s close-ups focus on her tattoos and rituals, her chants and prayers, locating her solidly within a mystical spirituality unexplored or shared by Zouina. Yet, many cultural behaviors that Aicha insists upon Zouina performs for Aicha’ benefit. For example, when visitors arrive, Aicha demands certain protocol concerning tea and gift exchange be met, yet it is Zouina who prepares and pours the tea while Aicha converses with the guests. This of course emphasizes the hierarchical relationship that Aicha maintains in relation to her daughter-in-law. This same behavior inscribes Islam and related cultural practices from Algeria with a meaninglessness, an empty attempt at domination. And this is the tragedy of Aicha’s character, that she becomes merely a repressive structure that frames Zouina’s daily life, but has little subjectivity within the film. The film even gives Ahmed, with his desire to play electric guitar, more inner life than Aicha.

Zouina’s few outlets involve listening to a French radio program, a program that all her neighbors listen to every afternoon. The film makes a point that even though the neighborhood women may be separated by age, race, religion, class, or colonial history, all the modern women sympathize with the radio program’s stories of female-centered love and tragedy. Aicha, identified here as the fundamentalist crone, often blames the radio for Zouina’s poor behavior, isolating the radio as a modern French influence, in contrast to the proper traditional influences of husband and mother-in-law. Zouina also makes friendships with French people
in the neighborhood; her closest ally is a divorcée factory worker who visits occasionally with small gifts. As Zouina gains greater access to the outside world, she builds friendships with the widow of a military commander killed in Algeria, a French bus driver, and the French grocery owners down the street. These relationships not only signify her growing alignment with French culture and mores, but among them the characters represent power, independence, mobility, and access to capital. At the beginning of the film, Aicha announces her desire to isolate herself in tradition when she declares to the neighbors that her son’s house is the Casbah. By the end of the film the Franco-French characters gather around Zouina as she makes a stand against Aicha. This stand-off happens in the street, the public domain of France, an escape route from Islam, Algeria, Aicha, and oppression. The film ends inexplicably with Ahmed agreeing to Zouina’s request, and turning violently, noisily, against his mother’s demands. Ahmed’s change of heart is completely unmotivated, but the film presents Zouina’s win against her mother-in-law as her remove from traditional, Algerian, Muslim restrictions to modern, French integration.

Maternal Modernity in Samia
In contrast to the above films, Phillipe Faucon’s *Samia* (2001), based on Soraya Nini’s novel and screenplay, advances the mother-daughter dyad in an opposite trajectory, creating a strong mother character that develops a modern sensibility throughout the film. The film juxtaposes the mother figure to her already modern daughter. As Samia (Lynda Benahouda) finishes lycée, she must choose between the insulting expectations of French institutions and her traditional family—unsuccessful scholastically, she can work as a cleaning woman or she can help her mother Halima (Kheira Oualhaci) run the home for her father and brothers. Neither of these options inspires Samia who longs to escape both. She fights with her brother Yacine (Mohamed Chabane-Chaouche), who has taken responsibility for her honor once her father leaves for Algeria for his health. Halima works to mediate
between the two. Halima often must physically separate the two from attacking each other: Samia longing for French independence and her brother Yacine demanding strict adherence to traditional codes regarding female movement and heterosexual relationships.

Yacine is characterized mainly in his capacity to patrol his sisters. He is often shot in extreme long shot waiting outside shopping malls or cruising the streets in desperation to find them. Yacine is insistent to establish gender segregation throughout the film. An oft-repeated composition is of Yacine and his father in the foreground eating on the sofa during dinner with his sisters relegated behind him to the kitchen table. The film provides some motivation for Yacine’s insistence at maintaining traditional order, as he has little success in modern, secular France. He cannot find a job, which the film contributes to his North African name, and at one point he has a run in with the police which seems mostly about his skin color. His father’s repeated advice to him to “Be a man,” begs the question of what masculinity means here in France. Yacine has little to no control over his own life, and so he concentrates on controlling those in his family. This leads to his more desperate attempts at controlling his sisters’ mobility and sexuality. By the end of the film he orders his mother to take his daughters to the gynecologist for virginity checks.

While Yacine and Samia at first appear to be our two main characters, facing off over modernity and religion, Halima becomes Samia’s true counterpart in the narrative. Samia aims her hottest anger at Halima, who represents Samia’s dreaded future. Yet the film characterizes Halima as a practicing Muslim with a developing modernity. Interspersed throughout the film are quiet moments of Halima’s devotions, either in prayer, reflection, or in teaching her younger children about God’s omniscience. The film captures these moments in 3/4 shots, with only ambient sound to punctuate the scene. At her prayers, Halima bends and kneels awkwardly, as age has made her joints inflexible. Yet she continues to perform these prayers. She prays alone, not joined by anyone else in the family at dawn. Even with the younger children, Halima faces a losing battle as they giggle at her religious teaching and question her lack of logic.
Halima herself has little in way of response to her children, facing them only with stubbornness. Yet her religion connects Halima to the community at large through ceremony and ritual. As she participates in Ramadan preparations or wedding celebrations, the film pictures her against a backdrop of other women and families, who have been characterized by their varying responses to French influences, voiced as each attempts to consult with Halima about Samia. The community offers a spectrum of modern responses to Samia's situation, an open exchange and discussion about how to keep the family together in secular France. Halima profits from this intellectual exchange, which brings her to a better understanding of her daughters and their desires.

Thus, Halima proves the most dramatic character that changes throughout the film. The film constructs Halima's subjectivity through her psychic transformation from Samia's enforcer to her supporter. Halima's eventual domination of the visual image, through her prayers, through reaction shots which capture her thinking about the action unfolding in front of her, also contribute to her evolving subjectivity. Eventually, Halima's decision to divest Yacine of his family power by removing his sisters from his presence solidifies her as the true subject of the film. She confronts Yacine at the harbor, a liminal space of coming and going, entering and exiting, interiority and exteriority, public and private. The daughters gather to one side, the open air and blue sky behind them. Halima holds a suitcase in her hand. The imagery is clear: these women will make their own decisions about how to live their lives. It may or may not include religion but it certainly will not include oppression.

Though the film occupies itself with Samia's burgeoning sexuality and physical longing for freedom, she is more of a victim-type than an actual character. Samia knows all the answers about modern French freedoms from the beginning; she never changes or develops a consciousness beyond her opening scenes. And though the film builds audience identification through the pleasure of her rebellious actions, Samia becomes a catalyst for Halima's development. In this film the mother figure develops a
modern consciousness over the course of the narrative, achieved through continual input from the surrounding community, as different neighbors, relatives, and communal leaders offer Halima diverse ideas about appropriate female behavior in modern France. By the end of the film Halima assumes her son’s authority telling him that he will no longer treat his sisters as he has. The film offers a spectrum of ideas on female behavior and modernity is achieved within the traditional community through dialogue and exchange.

Glimpses of communal negotiation are rare. More often the case, as in Le Satin Rouge (Red Satin, Raja Amari, 2002), Chaos, or others, the female protagonist must walk away from home-family-tradition-religion to find happiness. A few films show the female’s return to Algeria to gain understanding of herself—Ghorab-Volta’s Souviens-Toi de Moi (Remember Me, 1996) or La Fille de Keltoum are prime examples. Yet, these returns are a temporary journey of self-discovery, which highlight the protagonist’s differences from the community, and end with a return to modern France (or the Suisse Romande in the case of Keltoum). Rarer still is the permanent return to North Africa, as demonstrated by the minor character Fathi in Mehdi Charef’s Marie-Line (2000). La Graine et le Mulet characterizes the expansive North African family as a source of strength in the face of the globalizing economic and corporate forces that challenge France and its workers. Yet this film foregoes religious iconography for more general North African irreligious codes like couscous, belly-dancing, and particular musical instruments like the tabl to define the cultural affiliations of the complex family at its center.

My attention to the mother-daughter dyad and its accompanying tropes and characterizations reveal that as the post-Beur film culture focuses now on women and their stories, the dyad trope displaces men from a portrayal of nationalism, patriarchy, religion, and hierarchy. Films that use the trope focus their critique of women’s experience on particular women in a particular family and elide the greater institutional forces that influence their lives. The dyad also fails to account for the complex hopes and aspirations of the North African migrant community in France, which very
often includes creating an identity around a French Islam. The continued portrayal of the fleeing daughter, leaving behind the Muslim home, is ultimately an image of death. The vibrant, modern, sexual citizen flees the despotic religious home and takes with her capacities of rejuvenation, renewal, reproduction, and rebirth. The home is left empty, to whither around the crone.

**Conclusion**
The films discussed above present a modern secular French identity to its audience, embodied in the French-Maghrebi woman. This character flees from those religious strictures that would hold her back from fully integrating in republican France, from fully embracing her identity as a modern woman, and controlling her own destiny. The development of this narrative trend has its roots in both growing anti-Muslim sentiment and the continuing secularization of North African youth in France. As a last note, we must realize that this representation does not fully articulate the aims of varying members of the North African immigrant community. Some members hope to present themselves as Muslim citizens in France, as evidenced by the importance of the French Council on the Muslim Religion. Others hope to privatize Islam for personal practice, without irritating French society, as shown by sociological studies. Both groups are developing a French Islam, working from opposite sides of the goal. Ultimately, contemporary hopes center on establishing a viable religious identity in secular France, hand in hand with French citizenship.

**Works Cited**

**FILMS**


In contemporary urban Francophone literature, the theme of “banlieue” has established itself as a subgenre that could be considered part of the “Beur” literary movement, born in the 1980s. Jacomard explains: “Préoccupée en premier chef par les questions identitaires, la littérature beure s’articule toutefois sur une symbolique des lieux tellement puissante qu’une subdivision se dessine au sein de ces écrits, celle de la littérature de banlieue” (Jacomard 105). The socio-economical, political and historical context of “beur” novels is to be found in the urban fabric of the French “banlieues,” from the bidonville to the Grands Ensembles at the outskirts of Paris, Lyon or Strasbourg. From the “beur” literary wave of the 1980s and 1990s until the breakthrough of new talents named “de banlieue” at the dawn of the XXIst century how do novels written by French ethnic novelists reinvent the urban space of the “banlieue”?

In contemporary urban narrative, does the “banlieue”—taken in its geographical sense—determine the fate of its residents, or are the inhabitants modeling new positive forces allowing them to act upon the urban space? To answer this question, light will first be shed on the term “banlieue” in order to articulate the current paradox that distorts its representations in the minds of people. We will then analyze how the “monstruous” banlieues of

Reinventing the *Banlieue* in Contemporary Urban Francophone Literature

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“beur” novels are presented as de-humanizing spaces, and how geographical determinism models the lives and identities of the characters. We will finally focus on the analysis of two recent novels by Faïza Guène (Kiffe Kiffe Demain, 2004) and Mabrouck Rachédi and Habiba Mahany (La Petite Malika, 2010) in which characters are able to act upon territories in order to humanize the space that they inhabit and that also lives in them. We will then take the guided tour of the “banlieue” to see how characters, through social, civic and activist acts, re-invent, re-humanize and re-enchant the urban space of the “banlieue.”

1. Mis-Representations of the “Banlieue”
The ethymological analysis of the substantives “ban” and “lieue,” in French, which form the term “banlieue” reveals a paradox. The term “ban” refers to law and order in feudal times and would also be a law in Francic law “dont le non-respect provoque la sanction une ‘lieue’ à la ronde autour du château (about 4 kilometers)” (Wihtol de Wenden 5). Yet, we can see today that “banlieues” in media representations have lost their original meaning of law and order to be assimilated to spaces of chaos and disorder as shown in Wihtol de Wenden and Body-Gendrot (5). A negative and false image of the “banlieue” has spread in French mentalities through the stereotypical and distorting prism of the media, state institutions and political discourses. If it is the result of a wrong interpretation of the etymological meaning of the term, nevertheless the confusion between “banlieue” and “bannissement” (banishment) is constantly done today.

“Banlieue” no longer refers to the charming little residential village in the city suburbs, composed of mixed social classes (middle and upper classes), as opposed to the American model. On the contrary, it designates the territories that are known to be spaces of exclusion and often called “quartier populaires” (where lower classes would live), as embodied in the “Zones Urbaines Sensibles” (ZUS). Those urban spaces invest the “collective imaginary” of the nation by the gigantism of their architecture, in the shape of high rises and HLM blocks, also known as “Grands Ensembles.” Law
and order are no longer enforced in those spaces. The rules of the Republic have deserted them. Through a sharp manipulation and exaggeration of reality, “banlieues” have all become “lawless urban zones” in French consciousness. In reality, it is impossible to deny the fact that ZUS are, indeed, suffering territories, but they only represent a tiny portion of “banlieues” in France. For instance, amongst the ZUS, only 44 are Zones Franches Urbaines (ZFU) on French territory that is to say among the poorest urban spaces where public institutions are operating (Engelbach).

All “banlieues” therefore are not ZUS but are polymorphous territories, in constant movement and evolution, put forth as fixed and condemned entities in public and political discourses, as well as in the media. Residents of those urban spaces themselves become the victims of preconceived ideas and are “ban-ished” from the rest of society, as Jacomard explains (105).

We must here acknowledge the fact that when it comes to “banlieues” in France, there is extreme confusion. As pointed by Body-Gendrot and Wihtol de Wenden, “quand on parle de la banlieue, on parle en fait de sa population; quand on se réfère aux habitants, on parle des lieux où ils habitent” (6). Yet, after the Second World War, the “Grands Ensembles” were initially conceptualized to improve the living conditions and well being of its residents, and to accommodate them to the comfort of Modernity.

2. Monstruosity of the “Banlieues”?

Urban development projects, at the end of the Second World War, had a gigantic scope but were not monstrous per se. The functionalist architectural mode of development of the 1950s influenced the development of “banlieues” at the periphery of major cities such as Paris, Toulouse, Lyon, Clermont Ferrand, Strasbourg, Marseille, etc. . . They bore the name of “Grands ensembles” and mushroomed all over France. “Banlieues” soon became zones of reclusion in the minds of people, for instance in Toulouse, “la cité Le Mirail”; in Paris, “La Courneuve”; in Marseille, “Les Quartiers Nords,” etc. . . Yet, urban development projects were originally
planned as visionary, and aimed at bringing modernity to French society by providing modern conveniences, ready for the new transportation means at the time of the “Tout Automobile,” under the Presidency of George Pompidou. The “Grands Ensembles” encouraged the well-being of residents in spaces that were neighborly, salubrious and more spacious. Those superstructures were offered to specialized workers, to rural populations attracted to the new jobs generated by the industrial “boom” or else to the middle-classes. It was the time of “Triumphant Urbanism” in France, which was the urbanistic counterpart of the “Trente Glorieuses,” in French industrial development (Wihtol de Wenden 48). By the 1970s, the failure of “mixité sociale” (social mingling) brought to light the monstrous character of some urban spaces: the ghettoization of foreign manpower and their families; the increase of the unemployment rate after the successive oil crises. The socio-economical traumas generated therefore led to the pauperization of “banlieue” residents and revealed the monstrosity of their environment.

This harsh reality is depicted in “Beur” literature, at its origins: monstrous “banlieues” appear as spaces of de-humanization. In Medhi Charef’s *Thé au Harem*, the monstrous characteristics of the architecture in the “banlieue” is personified, and de-humanizes its residents: “[le béton] est partout présent, pesant, dans les gestes, dans la voix, dans le langage, jusqu’au fond des yeux, jusqu’au bout des ongles [. . .] A jamais. Il suit partout comme une ombre” (281). The environment overruns the characters who are unable to act upon it and end up petrified by the concrete. The “banlieue” is personified and like the mythological Medusa, soaks its inhabitants’ living energies into its urban fabric.

Moreover, Charef and Boukhedenna alike present the “banlieue” as a prison, which condemns individuals to wander at the margins of society, victims of their fate. From this space, there is no escape, no way out. Rachédi and Mahany add: “la banlieue c’est plus facile d’y aller que d’en sortir” (46). “Banlieue” therefore symbolizes the total absence of mobility, which can only lead its inhabitants to prison or to commit suicide. According to
Hiddleston, the structure and the geographical space of the “Grands Ensembles” contribute to the social depravation of its residents.

The spatial representation of the “banlieue” is therefore a monstrous territory personified to devour the body and soul of its inhabitants. The stereotypical and problematic vision of the “banlieue” that we know today is exhibited in the corpus of “Beur” novelists through monstrous territories that control the identities and lives of fiction characters. Here, “ce ne sont pas les identités qui créent le territoire mais le territoire qui crée les identités” (Wihtol de Wenden 14). The evolution and development of narratives lead to a form of geographical determinism where territories act upon passive characters.

We can notice that characters play no role in the development of the “banlieue” but are on the contrary overrun and suffocated victims of the superstructures. The “banlieue” acts upon individuals. This is the first portrayal of the “banlieue” that emerges from the “beur” corpus. Yet, more recently, the novels of French ethnic young novelists and more particularly of the members of the association “Qui fait la France ?” are working to “break the stereotypes” and to “re-humanize” the banlieue.

3. Banlieues with Human Dimension
In Kiffe Kiffe demain and La Petite Malika, the characters are no longer victims of their environment. On the contrary, narratives show how they act upon and interact with their territories. In La Petite Malika, the reader follows the evolution of the eponymous character, a genius child educated in the “banlieue” of Paris. As a young adult, Malika studies in the best French universities, works for a senator and gets an executive position in a firm before realizing that her life and true self belong to somewhere else, or rather to the place where she grew up: in the “banlieue.” In Kiffe Kiffe demain, we follow the adventures of Doria, seventeen years old, over the course of one year. In high school, Doria lives “in tempo” with American soap operas, sentimental novels, Maghrebi novels and “poètes maudits,” whom she discovers. She realizes that the men, women and friends with whom she lives in her block in
Transitions

Seine-Saint-Denis are both fulfilling her life and transforming the “banlieue” as well.

A new literary trend shapes contemporary urban spaces. Even though those two novels are a declaration of affection for a territory, the “quartier,” the “banlieue” itself, they do not omit to put forward the positive as well as negative aspects of the urban space. In that way, they allow to break with the binarism of “beur” literature, which was according to Dominic Thomas miserabilist (42). In La Petite Malika more specifically, a new space is invented as the main character re-enchants the “banlieue” around her. In Kiffe Kiffe demain, the actions of the inhabitants who are actors and citizens of their geographical environment allow for the emergence of new spaces in which better social harmony amongst citizens can rise.

In La Petite Malika, fraternity and mutual aid recreate a form of law and order that State institutions would have failed implementing. Each apartment in the novel, for instance, has a small garden, which is not cultivated. When Malika decides to take care of hers, fraternity and encouragements from her community allow her to stop stealing plants in public gardens: the neighbors buy flowers for her and offer her all that she needs to cultivate her own garden. Kindness and solidarity allow for new possibilities of “vivre-ensemble” (living together) in a space no longer characterized by an absence of law and order. Malika also re-enchants the world around her through the affirmation of her deep self. She serves as a guide for her students, and her acts and pedagogical professionalism allow them to realize the existence of a new space, open for future possibilities. The message she sends them is clear: they are not prisoners of “banished” territories; there only exist imaginary barriers.

“Banlieues” are re-humanized in Guène’s novel as well, against the grain of stereotypical representations. Two elements allow us to understand how a new space of civic responsibilities is being created where residents are able to evolve on territories as citizens of France. The novel first focuses on the gigantic superstructure. In drastically downsizing the point of view, a little community appears to the reader, that is a small village at the heart of the
“Grands Ensembles.” The novel then portrays the civil rights struggle and activism of females in the novel.

Through the characters, the neighborhood takes on a human dimension. Humanity is being envisioned in all its complexity and meanings: the best ones (success, kindness, etc.) and the worst ones (failure, violence, cruelty, etc.). Residents give life to a new space where it is possible to live in fraternity: the “Grands Ensembles” here give birth to a small, human-sized village.

We can also note that the female characters in Kiffe Kiffe demain act upon their environment and transform it directly. Their desires and actions nourish the narration. First of all, their actions take the shape of a civil rights struggle. Fatima Konare, a migrant worker of African origin, is successfully bringing to fruition the workers’ strike of the Hotel “Formule 1” in the city of Bagnolet. The civic conscience of female characters in the novel is aroused, and has a direct impact on their environment.

Moreover, Doria’s awakening to civic responsibilities adds a new perspective to the concept of “citizenship” in the novel, which is intertwined with the right to vote and civic duties, that resides at the heart of the novel. Indeed, the narrator says: “Moi, à dix-huit ans, j’irai voter. Ici, on n’a jamais la parole. Alors quand on nous la donne, il faut la prendre” (98). Through the acquisition of civic consciousness, the citizen is capable of creating his/her space of action and to become the actor of political changes: “[i] ci, y’a plein de trucs à changer. . . . Tiens, ça me donne une idée, ça. Pourquoi je ferais pas de la politique ? “Du CAP coiffure à l’élection présidentielle, il n’y a qu’un pas. . . .” C’est le genre de phrase qui reste [. . .] (98)

Conclusion
“Beur” literature and its subgenre, “banlieue” literature, do not exist. They take shape in the imagination and self-interest of the media, and institutional discourses that create a “fashion” phenomenon with lucrative or political goals (Harzoune). Besides, those denominations relegate both texts and authors to the “ban,” to the margins of society. As for novelists, they refuse those categorizations. Rachédi
explains: “On ne fait pas de la littérature de banlieue, parce qu’on ne veut pas être relégués à la périphérie de la littérature.”

Contrary to “beur” literature in the 1980s and 1990s, which described “banlieue” spaces as urban spaces where characters were anti-heros, victims of their environment, the new wave of writers, today, refutes both the “banlieue” and “beur” denominations, and present a new creative touch to literature, by replacing the Human at the heart of the territories. The fiction characters are able to create territories by reversing stereotypical representations of the “banlieues.” Territories no longer act upon characters to determine their fate and dictate their destiny.

In recent texts, we witness the advent of a new urban space: a “banlieue” reinvented by its characters and by its writers, which is a space in constant evolution. *Kiffe Kiffe Demain* and *La Petite Malika* therefore present characters, who stand against the stasis and victimization that were dictated by the “tyranny of territories” (Wihtol de Wenden 7). as it appeared in the first “beur” novels. Characters are citizens in the political sense of the term: they are actors in the “polis,” the Greek city. Those novels break with “beur” and “banlieue” categorizations by presenting characters, who are social actors, impacting change on their local community, being active citizens of France.

Those novels break with the stereotypes by creating citizen-individuals who act upon their environment and re-enchant them by re-drawing the urban map of the territories they inhabit. From this new conception of the “banlieue” emanates a sentiment of hope, a call to civic activism, and literature becomes the space where change may occur. A literature of “combat,” “engagée,” and focused on “political activism.” Literature therefore revisits the “banlieue” to create a dynamical space for a creative discourse on citizenship and on French contemporary society.

**Works Cited**


Voices from the Ghetto? *Banlieue*
Mythmaking in Contemporary French Narratives

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While in November 2005 France experienced the most serious civil unrest since the Algeria war, the world learned the term “banlieue,” a by-word used to describe troubled suburban communities. Isolated from the centre, the huge housing projects built to relieve housing shortage in the 1950s and 1960s have become segregated urban areas containing a dense concentration of minority ethnic populations. Narrative works concerned with the representation of these disadvantaged neighbourhoods suffering from high unemployment and crime rates form today a vibrant part of the rapidly growing field of post-colonial literature in France. Suburban images appearing in these literary texts seem to draw heavily on stigmatizing clichés used in political discourses of the banlieue and their representation in French media, either in order to subvert these stereotypes or to confirm the negative connotations of the peripheral urban areas by anchoring their representations in the powerful myth of the ghetto. To what extent does the substantial mass of literary accounts of the banlieue reflect reality? Are French banlieues to be equated with African-American inner-city neighbourhoods? Can the recurrent civil unrests in French metropolitan areas be rightfully compared to the 1992 Los Angeles riots or the repeated Brixton revolts? And if this is not the case, for what purpose is the myth of the ghetto exploited in
the writers’ discursive strategies? This article will focus on three recent banlieue novels by Rachid Djaïdani (*Viscéral*, 2007), Thomte Ryam (*Banlieue noire*, 2006) and Mabrouck Rachedi (*Le Poids d’une âme*, 2006), with the aim of exploring the use the authors make of recurrent clichés to produce alternate images of the banlieue and their inhabitants.

In *Badlands of the Republic* (2007), Mustafa Dikeç demonstrates the pervasiveness of the negative images of the banlieue and shows how common and accepted these clichés have become recently in France. He argues that since the 1980s negative markers such as crime, terrorism, drugs, exclusion, and immigration have been regularly articulated in political and media discourses with spatial reference to banlieues, thereby consolidating a particular way of imagining French suburban space. Dikeç also explains that the word “banlieue” which originally means suburb, has become gradually associated with very different connotations from the ones relevant to the British or North American suburb:

> Originally an administrative concept, the term *banlieue* geographically denotes peripheral areas of cities in general. [. . .] Now the term mostly evokes an image of a peripheral area with concentration of large-scale, mostly high-rise social housing projects, and problems associated, in the US and the UK, with inner-city area. It no longer serves merely as a geographical reference or an administrative concept, but stands for alterity, insecurity and deprivation. (Dikeç 7–8)

The prevalent perception of banlieues as sites of exclusion and threats to security and social order has been noticed and repeatedly described by scholars since the early 1980s. As Derderian (2004) points out, mental representations of the suburb tend to rely on a series of images which have been present in French culture since the nineteenth century: those of “*banlieues noires, rouges, and roses.*” The oldest and most predominant among the categories, in which banlieues have been imagined, is the “banlieue noire [. . .] grounded in a long history of defining urban space of insiders and outsiders; civilized and uncivilized that can be traced back to the ancient Greek and Roman times” (Derderian 146). It was nevertheless not
before the industrialization, which triggered a massive growth of the urban fringe in the first half of the nineteenth century, that anxious Parisian elites began to formulate a persistent fear of the suburbs. They associated strangers and floating populations living on the city’s outskirts with disease, immorality, and political sedition and stigmatized them collectively as “the dangerous classes” (146).

On the other hand, Rey (1996) and Hargreaves (2007) also note that the fear aroused from the periphery of contemporary French cities is closely interlinked with the population of banlieues often defined in ethnic terms and a fear of immigration in general. Hargreaves shows that a heavy concentration of African and Asian immigrants in HLMs (Habitation à Loyer Modéré) belonging to the public housing sector mostly located in the suburbs of large French cities led to an association of the banlieue with acute social disadvantage and ethnic minority groups. While there are relatively few inner-city districts with dense concentrations of both poverty and immigrant groups in French cities (La Goutte d’Or and Belleville are the best-known of the few Parisian examples), banlieues dominated by high-rise housing estates catering for the poorest sections of the population are increasingly connoted as the sociological equivalents of British and American inner-city areas. Hargreaves calls attention to frequent comparisons with American inner-city areas in French media motivated by the poor facilities and the physical separation of these districts from other parts of the city, combined with high unemployment rates and frequent street disorders perpetrated by youth of mostly non-European origin. This observation is particularly relevant for the media coverage of the recent civil unrests triggered in most cases by examples of aggressive policing and incidents between ethnic minority youth and the police. In drawing a connection between the most disadvantaged French banlieues and the racialized ghettos of major American cities, French politicians and journalists have indeed often referred to the formers as “ghettos.”

Recurrent references to the ghetto in official and media discourses dealing with the banlieue have been widely disapproved
by scholars. As Wacquant (1992), Hargearves (2007) and Dikeç (2007) have shown, this analogy is dubious for several reasons. While African American ghettos in the United States are predominantly mono-ethnic and sufficiently large to contain up to a million inhabitants and a division of labor which enables these neighborhoods to function as economically independent micro-societies, even the largest French banlieues don’t have more than 35,000 inhabitants (Hargreaves 67) and they are generally multi-ethnic, bringing together various ethnic groups such as Maghrebis, sub-Saharan Africans and black people from the French Caribbean. As argued by Hargreaves,

Although living conditions in many HLM estates compare unfavorably with other parts of France, they generally benefit from better welfare provision than disadvantaged areas of American cities. Violent crime is also far less prevalent in the French banlieues. Fire-arms are less widely available than in the US and homicide rates are well below those found in American ghettos. Even the riots of November 2005 which had their epicenter in Seine-Saint-Denis, were far less destructive than the disturbances seen in many American cities during the late 1960’s and in the South Central district of Los Angeles in 1992. (68)

However, the word “ghetto” is used in diverse and often competing ways, referring to various segments of contemporary French society. For instance, Maurin (2004) borrows the term from the alarmist rhetoric of political and media discourses to show that the spatial inequalities of the last three decades concern far less an underclass conglomerated in sordid social housing projects in the metropolitan areas of large French cities than the upper-classes looking for more isolation by settling in the most stable and protected environment available to them. To the “poor ghetto” (ghetto pauvre), Maurin opposes the notion of “posh ghetto” (ghetto chic) and explains that, contrarily to the worst republican fears about the rise of ethnic ghettos and the American model of communitarianism, territorial segregation in France is not a result of the Diaspora members’ desire to settle in ethnic enclaves but that of an accelerated gentrification involving the
fact that an increasingly numerous elite tends to occupy more and more important parts of the urban space, causing a displacement of the middle-classes towards the peripheries. By demonstrating the wish of each fraction of social class to avoid contact with the immediately inferior class, Maurin confirms the failure of republican urban policies based on the ideal of “social mixity,” a notion first introduced during the debates around the so-called anti-ghetto law (Loi d’Orientation pour la Ville, 1991) aimed at preventing the concentrations of ethnic groups in social housing neighbourhoods.

We can conclude that the persistent use since the early 1990s of the term “ghetto” in French urban policies as well as in political and media discourses despite its repeatedly demonstrated inaccuracy and empirically misleading nature is an indicator of the threat that the formation of ethnic communities represents to the cultural and political integrity of France. The enduring popularity of this notion, which doesn’t seem to refer to any social reality, shows the extent to which the nightmare of ethnic separatism is haunting the republic today. The word “ghetto” is used in French official discourses to fulfill a purely ideological purpose: its main function is to cause fear and to confirm or justify exclusion and social control over minorities (Rudder 261). It is precisely its ethnic connotation that makes this term politically significant in the contemporary French context where it “invokes a very precise population: non-European immigrants” (Dikeç 138).

Given the ubiquity of references to ghetto life in French politics and public debates, it is not surprising to observe regular occurrences of the term in contemporary literature. Narratives aiming to show segregated suburban areas from the inside often rely on the association of banlieue housing estates with North-American inner-city areas. References to the ghetto are used at various levels including descriptions of settings and characters, monologues or dialogues in which banlieue dwellers evaluate their own situation, as well as representations of the media coverage of urban violence occurring in segregated areas. Novels by Rachid Djaïdani, Thomte Ryam, and Mabrouck Rachedi are particularly
relevant for examining the use of these references. All three authors have published several narratives set in and dealing with the banlieue. *Viscéral* (2007) by Djaïdani tackles the burden that banlieue youth seem to carry along while attempting to escape the “ghetto.” After his two previous banlieue novels narrated in the first person, *Boumkœur* (1999) and *Mon nerf* (2004), this narrative uses the third person to tell the story of Lies, a talented young boxer who is offered a role in a feature film just when he is about to establish a meaningful relationship with a beautiful Maghrebi woman, Shéhérazade. Despite of the optimistic start of the narrative, Lies is stopped from a successful sport and media career, which would allow him to break out of the “ghetto,” by a group of delinquents from his neighbourhood who accidentally shoot him on the street when he is heading to the filming, wearing a police uniform. In *Banlieue noire* (2006), Thomte Ryam stages a teenage character, Sébastien, who dreams about becoming a professional football player. Although the sixteen-year-old is exceptionally talented, he fails to be selected by a club because he misses the critical game after a night out in Paris with his friends. After visiting various nightclubs near the place de Clichy and consuming a substantial amount of alcohol, the young banlieue dwellers stop an ambulance and provoke a fight with the medical staff. The delay caused by the incident leads to the death of the patient inside the car. When the deceased patient turns out to be the mother of a member of the group, Christophe, her son, commits suicide on the spot. Sébastien is sentenced to one year in prison after the incident which puts an early end to his football career: no team wants to hire him anymore and the epilogue leaves him unemployed and still living with his mother at the age of twenty one. Author of two banlieue narratives, *Le Poids d’une âme* (2006) and *Le petit Malik* (2008), Mabrouck Rachedi also focuses on the social stigmatisation linked with certain suburban areas in France. The main character of his first novel, Lounès, is a high-school student, who is given a three-day suspension from school for a twenty-minute delay. Spending his day on the street, Lounès accidentally meets two felons from his neighbourhood, who ask him to accompany them
to a friend. To the student’s misfortune, the police choose exactly that moment to stop the friend, a drug dealer. Lounès is arrested simply for being at the wrong place at the wrong time but the fact that his elder brother is in prison precisely for selling drugs, makes him suspect. Soon he is accused of being a dealer himself, and even a member of an international network of terrorists. When the police realise their error, they try to get rid of Lounès by expulsing him to Algeria, where his parents are originally from, under the pretext that he doesn’t have a French identity card. While his siblings, teachers, friends and neighbours organise a campaign to set him free, Lounès attempts suicide in his cell, but he is luckily saved by the failure of the cord.

The common feature that links the three novels is the impossibility of the main characters’ to escape from their stigmatised suburban neighbourhoods. Although they are talented, their belonging to the banlieue prevents them from realising their potential. Playing in a feature film for Lies, becoming professional footballer for Sébastien and going to university for Lounès are career perspectives that eventually do not come to fruition because of the social disadvantage that being from a banlieue represents. In order to convince the reader of the inexorability of the social segregation affecting banlieue dwellers, the three authors seem to develop similar strategies in which the banlieue appears as a sort of ghetto.

In his groundbreaking study on ghetto culture and community, Ulf Hannerz (1969, 2004) suggests a definition of the ghetto as an enclave “resided by people who share a social characteristic of outstanding salience which results in their living together.” Hannerz notes that in the North-American context, ghetto dwellers share two main salient features: pigmentation and low income. In France, where the word “ghetto” has been currently used as a term of social rhetoric, banlieue residents are not predominantly black and are from various origins which among others include French ethnic majority background. Therefore, shared ethnic identity doesn’t constitute a basis for the membership of suburban communities. Rather, the opposite is true: despite their differing
ethnic background, banlieue residents are drawn together by their shared socio-economic status: their living together results less from a personal choice than from a lack of choice. Therefore, if banlieue dwellers have a common identity, it is rather based on their shared experience of spatial discrimination. Hannerz, who uses an anthropological approach to describing the everyday life of Winston Street, an African-American ghetto in Washington D.C., affirms that novels and autobiographies of black writers tend to give a much more accurate image of the ghetto lifestyle and ghetto culture than accounts produced by economists, social and political scientists, and news media. While he defines ghetto culture as a series of “ways of thinking and acting evolved and maintained which are communicated between ghetto dwellers” (Hannerz 14), he reckons that despite its clearly determined population and territory, the ghetto is not entirely a community since its economical and political self-sufficiency is severely limited by numerous relationships of the inhabitants with outsiders. Nevertheless, even if their working life puts many ghetto dwellers in touch with people from outside their territory, they have a common understanding of who belongs to the community and who is an outsider. This also seems to be the case in French literary representations of the banlieue culture. Like the inhabitants of Winston Street, the suburban characters in the novels of Rachid Djaïdani, Thomté Ryam and Mabrouck Rachedi share a position with regard to the outside and experiences with it and they are potential or actual participants in close personal relationships with one another.

Concerned with the ghetto’s small-scale social structures and the ghetto dwellers’ social interaction with each other, Hannerz’s approach focuses on eight main points: (1) a visual description of the setting and a portrayal of the ghetto dwellers themselves; (2) a description of predominant lifestyles; (3) a discussion of how these lifestyles relate to each other and possible influences that decide ghetto dwellers to choose which one of these they adopt; (4) male and female gender roles in the ghetto; (5) an analysis of ways in which ghetto men work together towards establishing
a satisfying collective definition of manliness; (6) an examination of sex role socialization for boys; (7) a repertoire of common experiences which contribute to the residents' integration into the ghetto community despite their diversity and; (8) an analysis of how ghetto dwellers voice their discontent with their relationships with the outside world. In the following analysis, I will investigate the pertinence of these aspects of ghetto culture in the proposed corpus of literary accounts by establishing a systematic comparison of the authors’ way of describing suburban housing estates with the observations recorded by Hannerz in the North-American ghetto.

1. Visual description
Although the physical layout of Winston Street—a narrow, one-way street lined by two or three stories high brick houses—has relatively little to do with the high-rise housing estates of the French banlieue, the descriptions provided in the three novels show a number of similarities with Hannerz’s observations of the North-American ghetto. The three novels’ protagonists, Sébastien, aged 16 in Banlieue noire, Lounès, 18 in Le Poids d’une âme, and Lies, 23, in Viscéral, live in various banlieues in the Greater Paris area: the first one at the estate “Louis Armand,” the second in an area of Évry called “Les Pyramides,” and the last in an undetermined Paris suburb. The writers provide unanimous descriptions of the banlieue as a site of striking ugliness marked by monumental architecture and dirty, run-down social housing projects where missing doors are replaced with bed sheets and dirty walls are abundantly covered with graffiti. They mention the notorious insecurity of the described neighbourhoods which are marked by the isolation from central Paris as well as by the residents’ miserable life conditions. Ryam notes that the state, disgusted, has turned its back on this suburb, where 15,000 people live in barely human conditions, suffering from hunger. The inhabitants of the “Louis Armand” estate are mostly of African, Arab, Chinese, Turkish and Pakistani origin, however, there are also a few majority ethnic residents described as “français perturbés” (Ryam 15).
In spite of the ethnic diversity of the represented neighbourhoods, the residents consider themselves as a united community: “Certes, il y a des clans mais nous sommes soudés [. . .] Les grands ensembles font qu’on réfléchit ensemble” (15). Like Ryam, Rachedi also complains about the greyness of the banlieue and the prevalence of monotonous architectural forms: “Aspect massif, couleurs ternes, l’architecture des cités se ressemble” (Rachedi 28). Ryam and Djaïdani both mention the presence of rats and cockroaches in the high-rise blocks (“cafards sur nos repas,” Ryam 15; “Ici les rats portes des combinaisons Téflon. Les cafards font du smurf sur le dos des mollards,” Djaïdani 22) and use a series of metaphors evoking infections such as herpes or AIDS, insalubrities, an atmosphere of civil war or concentration camp and a notorious non-respect of human rights. Although the housing facilities are far from being satisfying and the lack of comfort that reigns in the described neighbourhoods seems obvious, the residents have developed important affective ties to their habitat and are united in their common hatred directed against the inhabitants of the neighbouring estates: “nous les haïssons [. . .] Pourquoi nous conduisons-nous comme ça avec des gens qui nous ressemblent? [. . .] Entre nous et les Mermoz, c’est un derby” (Ryam 146) or “La Grande Borne est à quelques kilomètres des Pyramides [. . .]. Les gens là-bas sont les ennemis jurés des gens d’ici, allez savoir pourquoi” (Rachedi 20). Like in the Winston Street ghetto, much of the leisurely interaction between inhabitants take place on the street itself, all the more so as most of the hangouts described by Hannerz (shoeshine shops, carry-outs and barber shops) are generally missing in the French banlieue. Unlike in North-America, the participants of street sociability here are not men but teenage boys standing or sitting in front of the tower-blocks or hanging out at the nearby shopping centre, waiting for an opportunity to fight with the opposite gang.

(2) Predominant lifestyle
Ulf Hannerz notes that, since overarching structures under community control are missing in the ghetto, social life is primarily made up by personal networks connecting peers, kinsmen and
neighbours. Therefore, the most important differentiations between ghetto dwellers are particular sets of modes of action, social relationships, and contexts that Hannerz refers to as “lifestyles.” He distinguishes between several lifestyles which he classifies into two main categories: the “respectable” model citizens who differentiate themselves from what they conceive as their opposites: the “undesirables.”

The “undesirables” [. . .] are felt by the self-named “respectables” to be characterized collectively by drinking and drunkenness in public, spontaneous brawls, unwillingness to work, sexual licence, and occasional trouble with the police. The “respectables”, then, impute to themselves an absence of such character blemishes, or stated in more positive terms, an allegiance to American mainstream morality. (Hannerz 24)

An obvious particularity of French banlieues novel is the focus on the experience of teenage characters that are predominantly males of immigrant origin. For this reason, only lifestyles that somehow relate to the everyday experience of teenage boys are described in the narratives: the characters’ own lifestyle and those of their parents and brothers. The parents of the protagonists are generally shown as marginal. Most fathers are alcoholics like in Banlieue noire and Viscéral. They regularly harass their wives and children and hold jobs of little social prestige such as a street cleaner or a garbage man like the protagonist’s father in Le Poids d’une âme. In Djaïdani’s and Ryam’s novels, the protagonist’s mother leaves her husband, tired of his regular drunkenness. In Le Poids d’une âme Lounès’ mother chooses to live a life of martyrdom, trying to protect her children from domestic violence. Most of the described families are of Maghrebi descent and follow strongly patriarchal models, which involve that wives don’t work and have little contact with the outside world. Their relative isolation is aggravated by the fact that some of them only have a poor command of the French language. The white French middle-class family, who adopted Sébastien from Benin in Banlieue noire, constitutes initially an exception yet they undergo a rapid change due to the father’s unemployment and subsequent
alcoholism. After the parents’ divorce, the mother moves to the banlieue with her three children. Despite the household’s modest living conditions, she manages to maintain a relatively high level of cultural practices, which differentiates her from most other housewives at the housing estate, who, like Lounès’ mother, spend their days at home, cleaning and watching romantic TV-series. At the end of the novel, the narrator mentions that his mother eventually leaves Louis Armand to live in a smaller and nicer block of flats in a different suburb which suits her much better.

As opposed to the parents’ seemingly uniform lifestyles, the teenage characters have the choice between two different options: mainstream aspirations and delinquency. Aspiring to escape from the banlieue and gain access to expensive consummation goods such as designer clothing and sunglasses, the boys can either follow in their elder brothers’ footsteps who, like Lounès’ brother Hafid, have been involved in the commerce of drugs, or they can try to earn their living as professional sportsmen. This is Sébastien’s aspiration, who eventually misses out on the momentous opportunity of being selected into a professional team. Lies, a qualified boxing champion works as a coach in a prison, in addition to training some of the youths in his suburb. He encourages his trainees to believe in their dreams by following the example of their idols, the African-American boxers Sugar Ray Leonard and Marvelous Marvin Hagler and insists that these were originally ghetto dwellers similarly to them.

(3) Possible influences
In Chapter 3, Hannerz explores the ways in which the different ghetto lifestyles relate to each other and how ghetto dwellers decide which one of these to adopt at a particular time of their life. It is by drifting between these lifestyles throughout their lives that the residents of the Winston Street neighbourhood interact with one another and take note of each other in ordering their actions. We can observe similar changes in most French banlieue narratives. In the epilogue of Banlieue noire, Sébastien mentions that after the year he spent in prison, he abandons all hope of
playing in a professional football team and leads a dull, vegetative life, pretending that he is looking for a job. Other, mostly secondary characters of the novels, such as some elder boys from the housing estates, become more “serious” after a prison sentence: they give up the drugs, stop hanging out with their former friends and return to school to complete their previously abandoned studies.

In *Viscéral*, Lies is described as a positive role model for younger banlieue dwellers such as Samir and Teddy and the prisoners he trains. Earlier in his life, he receives a similar encouragement from his Cuban trainer Monsieur Mendoza, who has helped him become a champion. In *Banlieue noire*, this role is held by the old Paul, Sébastien’s football coach, who keeps reminding his young pupils of the importance of discipline and provides them with new opportunities which they repeatedly miss out on. In this novel, Sébastien, a rather weak character, stands alternately under the influence of his “undesirable” buddies, Christophe, Farid and Djamel and his “respectable” friends such as the disciplined football mate Jean or the African guest student Mobi. Nevertheless, the failure of these more disciplined and serious characters shows that success is rather scarce in the banlieue, where only a few exceptionally talented young people are given the chance to accomplish their dreams.

(4) Male and female gender roles and (6) and the male peer group

“Divorces and separations, female-headed households, and shifting unions are [...] more common in the ghetto than they are among Americans of the white mainstream,” notes Hannerz (71). While the marital instability that he describes in the black ghetto can be interpreted as a natural consequence of slavery, which annihilated pervious African family structures, this kind of simplistic explanation doesn’t apply to the French banlieue because of its greater ethnic diversity. Although some foreign models of marriage can be observed here too, especially in Maghrebi and sub-Saharan African families, the relatively high number of husbandless households can be linked to various social
factors in the novels. Most of the banlieue inhabitants described in the novels are families with insufficient income, numerous offspring and only one jobholder or no jobholder at all. Therefore, the broken relationship between Sébastien’s parents In Banlieue noire is to be seen less as a consequence of banlieue lifestyle than the very cause that results in the installation of the mother and her children in the segregated social housing estate “Louis Armand.”

Since the novels' main characters are generally young men, their sex role socialization occupies a central place in each text. Male bonding seems a recurrent element in the narratives while romantic relationships between teenage characters remain rare exceptions. Boys tend to conglomerate in exclusively male bands where sexual exploits are overtly discussed but the need to belong to the all-male peer group is much stronger at this age than the desire to form couples. Like in the ghetto observed by Hannerz, the peer group is a highly influential phenomenon in the novels where none of the main characters seems to find valid male role models in their family. Absent, dead or seen as a failure, the fathers of Sébastien, Lies and Lounès are not at all considered as role models by their sons who prefer to turn towards their elder siblings of the same sex or to the somewhat older members of their respective peer groups.

While no main character in the novels is represented as a seducer, in Banlieue Noire Sébastien’s handsome mixed-race friend Christophe is described as a womaniser. He has a stable girlfriend, Claire, whom he regularly cheats on. He proposes a date to a beautiful African girl he meets in the metro, a feat that earns him the admiration of his shy friends. When the group is refused access to a Parisian nightclub at Place de Clichy, Christophe is the one who convinces a group of young English girls to accompany them to another club where only couples are admitted. On the other hand, Sébastien who is described as a rather attractive young man, affirms that he is “nul avec les filles.” He confesses that although he is obsessed with sexuality, he is too timid and has, therefore, never managed to see a girl naked. All members of the male-only group tend to boast and lie about their sexual exploits, even Christophe.
In *Le Poids d’une âme*, Lounès, “les épaules tombantes, les cheveux hirsutes, [. . .] yeux intelligents [. . .] des airs de dandy [. . .] le nez aquilin” (17), flirts with two girls while watching a football game in Grigny, but captured by the police, he is unable to have further encounters with women. His beautiful elder sister is the only character in the novel who manages to establish a romantic relationship with an outsider of the neighbourhood: the bus driver who collaborates in the campaign aimed at the liberation of Lounès. In *Viscéral*, Lies is initially shown as a solitary and shy character, who aspires to female company in vain despite his good looks (the text mentions not only his “reflet de prince de désert,” “regard persan,” and “biceps de bûcheron” (Djaïdani 14) but also his “corps d’étalon” which has “l’harmonie d’une partition de Mozart” and his circumcised penis which has “a une belle allonge” (41–42). Since he is a few years older than most teenage heroes in the novels, his interest in the other sex is not purely physical. His encounter with one of the boxing pupils’ elder sister is an occasion for Djaïdani to create the prototype of an elite ethnic couple. Shéhérazade, whose name refers to the *Thousand and One Nights*, is described under the features of a sensual oriental princess, who is not only mesmerising but is also considered as “la crème de la crème épicée de soleil, une graine du ghetto” (74). Although the match between the two beautiful ethnic youths is obvious since the first time they meet, their relationship appears problematic because of the rigid rules of sociability in the banlieue which prohibit both showing feelings and approaching a friends’ sister, the latter being considered as a serious offense to male honour: “il y a une règle d’or dans la loi de la tess, ne jamais au grand jamais serrer la soeur d’un pote et malheur à toi sit tu t’y aventures” (90).

Described as a “sista” and repeatedly associated to the ghetto, Shéhérazade, has been raped as a young girl by her elder brother, Ouasine, and is repeatedly called a whore by the younger, Samir. She denunciates the unequal gender roles in the banlieue, where men use Islam as a pretext to stop women from living a fulfilling life (109). Her view of men as useless members of the community who waste their time playing computer games and smoking weed,
is strikingly similar in this respect to the ones expressed by the ghetto women observed by Hannerz. For these, a “good man” is someone who conforms to the mainstream model of “holding a steady job, providing for the family, staying home, and getting into no trouble” and who tend to emphasize the “no-good” side of men—the facts that men do not work, [. . .] that they drink, and that they get into trouble with one another and sometimes with the law” (Hannerz 97). Lies who prepares Shéhérazade a romantic dinner on the rooftop of a 17-storey building, makes love to her in the moonlight, and is not afraid of opening up about his feelings, transgresses all the typical gender roles of the banlieue: “avec toi, je veux construire , grandir, nous faire un bel avenir. Et te chuchoter que je t’aime” (Djaïdani 173).

(5) Collective definition of manliness
In the chapter entitled “Streetcorner mythmaking,” Hannerz analyses the interaction of grown-up men, who tend to spend a great part of their time in gatherings with other men in the public space of the ghetto, commenting on the daily news, recounting their memories and unique individual experiences, and boasting about their sexual exploits. These experiences of common interest, notes Hannerz, are “variations on themes relating to the typical traits of the ghetto-specific model of masculinity—hunting women, drinking, getting into trouble or somehow getting out of it” (Hannerz 111). This so-called “streetcorner sociability” contributes to produce positive definitions and evaluations of self, others, and the world and help participants find satisfying understandings of the world and support for some reasonably high degree of self-esteem. Like men in the Winston Street ghetto, the teenage boys or young male adults described in banlieue narratives seem to be

“[. . .] preoccupied with creating and maintaining a definition of natural masculinity which they can all share [. . .] and they [. . .] construct the social reality of the typical Ghetto Man, a fact of ghetto life larger than any of them. This Ghetto Man is a bit of a hero, a bit of a villain and a bit of a fool, yet none of them all the way” (112)
As opposed to the North-American ghetto, where the streetcorner mythmaking is not a generational phenomenon, in banlieue novels it is only young men and teenagers that are admitted to participate in this specific form of interaction. Considered as failures, the boys’ fathers are excluded from the “ghetto-specific” male role elaborated in these male-only gatherings. However, the themes discussed in the narratives are very similar to the ones listed by Hannerz in the ghetto: sexual exploits, small-scale crime, trouble with the police, and consumption of alcohol and drugs. In addition to the scenes where the novels’ main or secondary characters recount their experience in these fields, boast and tease each other, regular commentaries are made on the specific rules of the interaction between the male-only participants of this sociability. In order to gain respect, to testify their belonging to the group and to bond with other males, boys are required to adopt a tough attitude, insult each other, hit each other and transgress mainstream society rules. In *Viscéral*, Djaïdani shows that in the banlieue showing tenderness to others is not recommended: teenagers knock each other about instead, out of decency: “Dans la tess, pudeur oblige, quand on s’aime on se brutalise sans finesse” (Djaïdani 16). A dialogue between two teenage friends, Samir and Teddy, hanging out together in the dark entry of a high-rise building exemplifies how mythmaking works. Teddy uses a speech crammed with back slang to describe his most recent sexual exploits, which his friend immediately identifies as fictive since he recognises elements of the porn movie diffused on the previous night at the channel Canal+. When Teddy teases him about being a solitary masturbator, he confronts his boasting friend and adds that he heard rumours in the banlieue about Teddy being a Jew. Samir’s verbal peak is compared by the narrator to a knockout: Teddy who is left speechless, is unable to fight back within a ten second count (53–54).

In *Banlieue noire*, Sébastien and his best friend Farid become targets of mockery in their neighbourhood because they are inseparable and always ready to help each other. The other members of the group who keep teasing them are described as
unable to recognise and value real friendship and solidarity: “Les autres gars disent qu’on est amoureux, qu’on est deux pédés. [. . .] Ils ne connaissent rien aux relations humaines” (Ryam 78–79).

Group interaction is founded on specific rules that often contradict the mainstream model. For instance, to be accepted by the group, Sébastien has to avoid reading books in front of his friends or becoming a model student. He explains that in his banlieue, three fourth of the boys like getting in trouble and are actively looking for it, since “Le droit chemin, on s’en moque: pour le prendre, faut donner son derrière et [. . .] c’est très mal vu ces temps-ci” (77). Streetcorner mythmaking in the novel includes the discussion of specific themes such as the exclusion of banlieue youth, the failure of the education system to give them an alternative to poverty and segregation and the limited number of options available to those who want to succeed: “pour nous il n’y a que le vol, le foot et le rap” (79). In Le Poids d’une âme streetcorner discussions take place near a bench where Hocine, a friend of the protagonist, spends his days, hanging out with various friends. The fact that some members of the group leave after a certain time while new members keep arriving, allows him to come back endlessly to the same topics: football, banlieue gossip and video games. Lounès dismisses this form of sociability in which partners are interchangeable and the same questions are debated incessantly. When feeling uncomfortable, he decides to leave, deploring that Hocine hardly notices his departure. The self-image that young male characters keep creating and re-validating in the three novels is very similar: approved by the members of the men-only group, boys see themselves as tough and resourceful men, who are successful with women (at least in producing an impressive and believable account of their imaginary exploits) and able to earn the general respect of the group by their ability to fight. Group interaction allows them to blame their failure on the spatial and social divide between the banlieue and the inner city and the poorness of the institutions implemented to help them by a hypocrite society in which equality is just an empty word.
In chapters 7 and 8, Hannerz notes that although like all communities, ghetto is also differentiated along lines of sex and age and structured by peer group and family alignments and economic relationships to the wider society, there are certain things that most ghetto dwellers witness. These shared experiences are discussed about and a common view is established. Since this perspective is not shared with the world outside the community, it marks ghetto dwellers off from the surrounding society in their self-definition. Ghetto dwellers have much to resent about the ways the outside world treats them and therefore, a common pattern in their conversations is the sharing of discontent about poor jobs, unemployment, unfair practices on the part of many employers, high rents for unsatisfactory housing, inadequate schools and health and welfare services, arbitrary, inefficient and sometimes brutal police work [. . .] as well as the host of major or minor expressions of prejudice and discrimination (Hannerz 159)

Shared experiences of discrimination and discontent expressed in relation to segregation also seem to constitute constant key features in all French banlieue narratives. Although these have the particularity to privilege a predominant male teenage perspective and exclude most other views, common experiences are articulated along the same lines: worries about the lack of future perspectives, dissatisfaction with the limited number of options available to make money, social stigmatization which makes the fulfilment of ambitions outside the suburb difficult if not impossible. All the novels mention discontent with the institutions representing the state in the everyday experience of banlieue youth: the school, the police and the court. Streetcorner conversations teenage boys often turn around these forms of institutionalised segregation and comments made on this subject are strikingly bitter and disillusioned. For instance, the school’s is role regularly denounced in the systematic exclusion of suburban youth by
orientating them towards manual jobs rather than studies leading to white collar jobs. Sébastien mentions a neighbourhood situated near his suburb whose teenage inhabitants had to attend a school in central Paris since the local school had no more places for them. The results of these pupils are so much superior that they are admitted to general high-schools while the pupils who attend the local school are sent to technical schools: “nous sommes la plupart de temps réorientés dans une filière technique ou dans descentres de formation d’apprentis de merde. Ce n’est pas de l’injustice, ça?” (Ryam 16) Rachedi uses Lounès’ bad experience at the school, the police, the court and the prison to show how institutional discrimination leads to his suicide attempt. All novels seem to equally insist on the negative role of the media in perpetrating negative clichés through the fabrication of fake and sensationalist and news.

However, urban segregation appears not only in the dialogues but also at the level of the plot. Tackling the impossibility of any break-out of the banlieue, the novels are almost exclusively set in suburban locations, indicating that the teenage characters rarely venture to central Paris and have thereby little contact with mainstream French society. While the bourgeois neighbourhoods remain most of the time out of their reach, conflict situation leading to the eventual abortion of their dreams always occur as a result of their intrusion to the Parisian city space. Lies dies in central Paris, in front of the Opera house, after he is mistaken for a police officer and shot by a robber. Sébastien is sentenced to prison after a turbulent night out in various Parisian nightclubs, some of which refuse to admit clients from the banlieue. Lounès is imprisoned in central Paris before his trial and attempts suicide there after a cellmate tries to rape him. The Parisian city space which seems to remain prohibited to banlieue youths constitutes both a symbol of their unfulfilled ambitions and their status as outsiders of French society.

Paradoxically, there are more exchange and communication between Hannerz’ ghetto dwellers and the members of the American mainstream society than between the novels’ teenage
characters and the inhabitants of the French “beaux quartiers.” As it appears from the comparison of the banlieue narratives with the description of the Winston street neighborhood, the novels by Djaïdani, Ryam and Rachedi are reminiscent of the North-American ghetto not only because they focus on similar experiences of exclusion and segregation but also because they represent strikingly similar structures regarding the social interaction such as male bonding, streetcorner mythmaking and rigid and limited gender roles. The narratives seem to emphasize these similarities by exaggerating the desolation of the built environment, the poverty of cultural practices, and the entrapment of the characters in a social milieu that holds them back from successful integration into the mainstream society. Furthermore, the analogy with North-American context is made explicit in most of the novels through the occasional use of the word “ghetto,” mostly used in the description of the characters represented as marginal and via the focus on their admiration of African-American subculture, which is used as an important basis for the creation of a positive self-definition and the creation of a collective identity independent from the recognition of French mainstream society.

By anchoring their representations of the banlieue and its inhabitants in the powerful myth of the ghetto, the authors of banlieue narratives seem to distance themselves from the depreciative clichés circulated in the media, political discourses and public debates. Instead of denying the unjustified parallels drawn between the North-American inner-city ghettos and the French banlieue, they find copious material for their literary creativity in this analogy and use it to conceive a positive identity of banlieue residents to whom they attempt to empower. Intimidated characters like Lounès, who are constantly silenced by public institutions including the school, the police, the tribunal or the prison, are finally given a pride founded in the myth of the ghetto which enables them to see themselves from a different perspective and gain greater independence from the patronizing political and social elite’s viewpoint. Stigmatized by media and politicians and feared by the average Frenchman, banlieue teenagers are shown
in the novels as being part of a parallel society which has its own rules of sociability, codes of conduct and system of values. At the same time, the term “ghetto” maintains some of its original meaning which is reminiscent of the alarmist official discourses. Therefore it continues to play a role of alerting the public opinion of the imminent danger of the extreme impoverishment and definitive segregation that an important fraction of French society is currently facing. Showing the striking resemblance between the North-American ghettos, generally considered as the exact opposite of the aim of French urban and immigration policies, and the suburban housing estates in France, whose inhabitants have little access to the city space and social justice, has the ultimate aim to sound the alarm in a republic that takes an increasingly unjustifiable pride in its democratic institutions based on the principles of “liberté, égalité, fraternité.”

Works Cited

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