

# 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 arousing 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), Hargreaves (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 Djaidani, 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 Djaidani 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, *Boumkæur* (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 expelling 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 Djaidani’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 consumption 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 previous 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 épiciée 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 friend's 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 denounces 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.

**(7) The ghetto dwellers' common experiences and  
(8) their discontent with their relationships with the  
outside world**

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 role is 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 Djäidani, 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.”

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