

## 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 creolité 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:

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| “Ma banlieue, ma banlieue               | My suburb, my suburb                   |
| A des charmes que rien ne remplace      | Has irreplaceable charms               |
| Pas bien loin, y a des coins            | Not very far, there are corners        |
| Où chaque dimanche on se délasse        | Where we go relax on sundays           |
| Ma banlieue, ma banlieue                | My suburb, my suburb                   |
| Grâce à toi, tous les ennuis s’effacent | Thanks to you all my sorrows disappear |
| On devient très fleur bleue             | I become very romantic                 |
| C’est pourquoi j’aime tant ma banlieue  | 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 “pavillon 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 *L'esquive*, 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

Tarr, Carrie. *Reframing Difference: Beur and Banlieue filmmaking in France*. Manchester: Manchester UP, 2005. Print.