

**A Study of French Suburban Discourse from Sociolinguistic and  
Literary Perspectives**

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## **Abstract**

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This work seeks to investigate French suburban discourse from both sociolinguistic and literary perspectives. As part of a wider negative discourse pertaining to the *banlieue*, these areas have come under criticism from some parts of the media, as well as a number of scholars, for being sites of perceived linguistic impoverishment where the French language is being corrupted. This work aims to challenge these perceptions of the linguistic capital of *les cités*. This will be achieved through the in-depth study of two salient elements of French suburban discourse: *verlan* and Beur literature. Firstly, it will be shown that *verlan* is a positive lexical product of the *banlieue* as it acts as a unifying linguistic code for the Beur community. It has positive implications for this demographic as it aids in the affirmation of a unique Beur identity. Secondly, a selected corpus of Beur literature will be studied, in order to reveal the literary capital of the *banlieue*. It will be advanced that this literature is a positive literary product of the French suburbs as it lends a voice to the Beur and wider *banlieue* community, thereby empowering them. It will be argued thus that the suburbs are domains in which the French language is used as part of a cathartic and creative process by the *banlieue* community. This work will advance that both *verlan* and Beur literature are instrumental in transforming the negative aspects of *banlieue* life into positives using the medium of the French language. Thus, the *banlieue* can be argued to be a site of much linguistic and creative capital.

## **Declaration**

I hereby declare that the work presented in this thesis is my original research, except where acknowledged in the customary manner. This thesis does not contain research previously published or written by another person, except where due reference is made.

Signed: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

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## Glossary

The following are key terms that appear frequently throughout this work, which require clarification to avoid any misunderstanding:

*Banlieue*: The term *banlieue* refers to socially and economically disadvantaged *cités* (vast networks of tower blocks, now synonymous with poverty and crime), home to large immigrant communities and found on the peripheries of France's major cities. This work does not discuss one particular *banlieue*, but rather seeks to examine the *cités* of France's major conurbations, namely Paris, Lyon and Marseilles.

*Beur*: The term *Beur* denotes an individual of North African descent born or residing in France. *Beur* is the *verlan*-ised form of the word *Arabe*. While there is some objection to the use of the term among the *Beurs* themselves, due to its appropriation by the French media, it is still the most widely used term to describe the members of this community, and therefore will also be used in this work.

## Table of Contents

Abstract.....	i
Declaration.....	ii
Acknowledgements.....	iii
Glossary.....	iv
Introduction.....	1
1: The Politics of Language in the Fifth Republic; Ideology of the Standard and Criticism of Linguistic Diversity.....	7
1.1: Power and Purification.....	7
1.2: Standard French and National Identity.....	12
1.3: Defence of the French Language.....	16
1.4: The Emergence of <i>le français contemporain des cités</i> ; Criticism and Detractors.....	21
2: <i>Verlan</i> as a Supra-National Linguistic Code.....	33
2.1: Unbelonging; the Predicament of the Beurs.....	34
2.2: The Formation of a New Identity.....	47
2.3: <i>Verlan</i> as a Supra-National Linguistic Code.....	52
2.4: <i>Verlan</i> : A New Definition?.....	56
3: Creative Forces within the French <i>banlieue</i> : Beur Literature and the Voice of the Subaltern.....	64
3.1: <i>Béton</i> as a Symbol of Despair in the Beur Novel.....	65
3.2: Escapism in the Beur Novel.....	72
3.3: Shame and Identity in Azouz Begag's <i>Le gone du Chaâba</i> .....	80
Conclusion.....	88
Bibliography.....	90

## Introduction

*La meilleur moyen de s'affirmer c'est de s'exprimer, de parler. Les médias nous en ont longtemps dénié le droit [...] Maintenant, la condamnation au silence, c'est fini. Les jeunes veulent parler, dire ce qu'ils ont sur le cœur, dialoguer.*<sup>1</sup>

*Mehdi Charef, cited in Hargreaves.*

In November 2005 the French *banlieue* became the site of the state's worst civil unrest since the student protests of 1968.<sup>2</sup> A state of emergency was imposed on the 8<sup>th</sup> of November and remained in place for three consecutive weeks, as the Parisian *banlieue* and gradually the *quartiers sensibles* of France's other large cities were set alight.<sup>3</sup> Those responsible for the rioting were the ethnic minority youths residing in the *banlieue*, whose frustration at being excluded from numerous facets of French society boiled over into aggression and violence. When the state of emergency was stepped down on the 17<sup>th</sup> of November the French public had been exposed to three weeks of images of burning cars, violence and general delinquency. The events of November 2005 helped to reinforce negative attitudes among the public towards the *banlieue*, perhaps precipitated by then Minister of the Interior, Nicolas Sarkozy, who branded the rioters as 'racaille' (scum).<sup>4</sup> Such attitudes towards this demographic still persist today. A 2012 survey appearing in the newspaper *Le Parisien* showed that 57% of the 1,000 French citizens questioned held a

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<sup>1</sup> Alec G. Hargreaves, *Immigration and Identity in Beur Fiction; Voices from the North African Community in France* (New York and Oxford: Berg, 1997), p. 27.

<sup>2</sup> Alec G. Hargreaves, *Multi-Ethnic France; Immigration, Politics, Culture and Society*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn (London and New York: Routledge, 2007), p. 1.

<sup>3</sup> *Quartier sensibles* is one of the terms given to France's socially and economically disadvantaged suburbs.

<sup>4</sup> Sheila Pulham, 'Inflammatory Language', *Guardian*, 08 November 2005, in 'guardian.co.uk', <<http://www.guardian.co.uk/news/blog/2005/nov/08/inflammatoryla>>, [accessed 04 June 2012].

negative perception of the *banlieue* youth, accusing them of ‘de ne pas respecter les règles et les autres, d’avoir des comportements violents et d’être paresseux’.<sup>5</sup>

The media have, to a certain degree, helped to augment and perpetuate these mind-sets. Grégory Derville notes that ‘en cristallisant un certain nombre de stéréotypes dévalorisants, les médias contribuent en effet à entretenir l’image négative des « jeunes de banlieue » et à accentuer le processus de stigmatisation et la marginalisation dont ils sont souvent victimes’.<sup>6</sup> Indeed, as Meredith Doran points out, they are routinely portrayed by journalists as:

Members of a delinquent street culture (la culture de la racaille) that wears “ghetto” fashions (baggy jeans, Adidas, Nike, etc.), engages in criminal activities like vandalism, graffiti, shoplifting, and drug dealing, and shows resistance to assimilating to mainstream French cultural values.<sup>7</sup>

While these youths have come to symbolise the elements of violence and delinquency present in the *banlieue*, the media have also been intent on criticising the type of French spoken by this demographic within *les cités*. This heavily argotic French is symptomatic of the perceived linguistic malaise gripping the *banlieue*. Cited as a ‘ghetto des mots’ by one journalist, it is often portrayed as a site of illiteracy and lexical impoverishment, where the standard French language is diluted and corrupted.<sup>8</sup> Certain scholars have also added to this criticism, including eminent figures from the world of academia such as Alain Bentolila, professor of linguistics at the Sorbonne.<sup>9</sup> The readiness of individuals like Bentolila, as well as the media, to depict the linguistic status of *les cités*

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<sup>5</sup> ‘57% des Français ont une mauvaise image des jeunes de banlieue’, *Le Parisien*, 27 March 2012, in ‘leparisien.fr’, <<http://www.leparisien.fr/societe/57-des-francais-ont-une-mauvaise-image-des-jeunes-de-banlieue-27-03-2012-1926469.php>>, [accessed 04 June 2012].

<sup>6</sup> Grégory Derville, ‘La stigmatisation des «jeunes de banlieues»’, *Communication et langages*, 113 (1997), 104-117 (p.105).

<sup>7</sup> Meredith Doran, ‘Alternative French, Alternative Identities; Situating Language in «la banlieue»’, *Contemporary French and Francophone Studies*, 11.4 (2007), 497-508 (pp.498-499).

<sup>8</sup> Anne Vidalie, ‘Le ghetto des mots’, *L’Express*, 22 January 2008, in ‘l’express.fr’, <[http://www.lexpress.fr/actualite/societe/le-ghetto-des-mots\\_473711.html](http://www.lexpress.fr/actualite/societe/le-ghetto-des-mots_473711.html)>, [accessed 03 May 2012].

<sup>9</sup> Alain Bentolila, ‘Il existe en France une inégalité linguistique’, *L’Express*, 17 October 2002, in ‘l’express.fr’, <[http://www.lexpress.fr/actualite/societe/education/il-existe-en-france-une-inegalite-linguistique\\_497804.html](http://www.lexpress.fr/actualite/societe/education/il-existe-en-france-une-inegalite-linguistique_497804.html)>, [accessed 10 October 2010].



in negative terms, combined with the almost constant criticisms of these areas and their inhabitants by the broader media community, has led to the creation and elaboration of a purely negative discourse which presents the *banlieue* as a linguistic ghetto, completely devoid of any discernible lexical attributes. The analysis that follows seeks to challenge this negative image by demonstrating that the French suburbs are in fact domains of both lexical and literary wealth. This will be achieved through an analysis of French suburban discourse from sociolinguistic and literary perspectives. This work will not focus on one *banlieue* in particular but rather a selection of France's *quartiers sensibles*. This project will, however, place particular emphasis on the Beur community, the main inhabitants of these areas.

In order to understand the negative discourse used to describe the French spoken in the *banlieue*, it is necessary to recognise the complex relationship that exists between the French Republic and the French language. The first chapter is concerned with an examination of this relationship, in order to ascertain the esteem in which the standard French language is held by the French population. It will be argued that *le français standard* is inextricably linked with notions of prestige, as well as national identity, and that deviations from this standard are often viewed as subversive. Taking this into account, the chapter will then move to contrast this standard form of French with the argotic variety which emerges from and is spoken in *les cités*. It will be shown that this form of French has come under much criticism due to its deviation from *le français standard*. Ultimately, with a view to challenging the prevailing negative discourse surrounding the linguistic authenticity of the French spoken in the *banlieues*, the criticisms launched by various detractors of this suburban discourse will be analysed.

Chapter two seeks to reveal further the linguistic capital of the *banlieue* and the positive aspects of French suburban discourse through an analysis of one of the most

salient elements of this discourse, namely *verlan*. This chapter will demonstrate that *verlan* has transcended its status as a type of slang and is in fact a unifying linguistic code for the Beur community, as well as other ethnic minority residents of the *banlieue*. This will be achieved through an examination of the Beurs' alienation from both their parental culture and French society. It will be shown that this adversity acts as inspiration for creativity; Beurs use the medium of the French language, in the guise of *verlan*, to create a positive linguistic code which allows them to affirm their unique identity. Thus, *verlan*, rather than being a mere type of subversive argot, will be revealed as a positive lexical product of the *banlieue* which adds to the linguistic and creative capital of the suburbs.

The manner in which members of the *banlieue* communities capitalise on the adversity with which they are faced is also reflected in the production of Beur literature, and this literary capital is the focus of the third and final chapter of this work. Four novels have been chosen for analysis, ranging from Mehdi Charef's *Le thé au harem d'Archy Ahmed* of 1983 to Faïza Guène's *Kiffe kiffe demain*, published in 2004. Also included are *Zeida de nulle part*, by Leïla Houari and Azouz Begag's *Le gone du Chaâba*. These novels consist of literary representations of the hardships of life in *les cités* for the Beurs and the wider *banlieue* community. While the subject matter expressed in these novels often has a negative undertone, for example, marginalisation, despondency and the banality of the *banlieue*, it will be argued that the novels themselves are positive entities. It will be demonstrated that, as in the case of *verlan*, the difficulties of double-marginalisation, as well as the struggles of *banlieue* life, often act as catalysts for Beur creativity. This creativity, in the form of literary production, lends a voice to the subaltern, serving as a method of empowerment. Thus, it will be shown that Beur literature is a positive literary product of the *banlieue*, and thereby serves to affirm the area's artistic and linguistic capital.

In order to undertake this project the works of prominent scholars in the areas of Beur literature, sociolinguistics and contemporary French urban studies will be consulted. One of the most prolific of these academics is Alec G. Hargreaves. Having published extensively on the subject of immigration in France, Hargreaves is an expert in the field, with publications ranging from the politics of immigration to the complexities of Beur fiction. Hargreaves's *Immigration and Identity in Beur Fiction: Voices from the Beur Community* is arguably the most cited and accomplished work to date on Beur literature published in either English or French, while his 2007 work *Multi-Ethnic France: Immigration, Politics, Culture and Society* also remains an invaluable source for any analysis of Maghrebi immigrants and their status within the French Republic. Consequently, the analysis which follows will draw extensively on Hargreaves research.

If Hargreaves provides an invaluable critical framework for the analysis of Beur literature in this work, it is equally important to acknowledge the relevance and influence of the pioneering research of French sociolinguist, Vivienne Méla. Méla has published extensively on the subject of *verlan*, with detailed works such as *Verlan 2000*, published in 1997. Albert Valdman's 2000 article *La langue des faubourgs et des banlieues: de l'argot au français populaire* also provides an insightful account of the evolution of French urban slang, as does Jean-Pierre Goudaillier's *De l'argot traditionnel au français contemporain des cités*, published in 2002. Another key scholar in the field of contemporary French sociolinguistics is Meredith Doran. Doran's 2007 article *Alternative French, Alternative Identities: Situating Language in 'la banlieue'* is an essential resource for a linguistic examination of the French emanating from *les cités*, as well as its sociological functions.

For an analysis of the suburbs that goes beyond the parameters of sociolinguistics, Jean-Marc Stébé's 2007 work *La crise des banlieues* provides an important documentation of the spatial and social exclusion of *banlieue* residents from mainstream French society.

Similarly, Robert Castel's 2006 *La discrimination négative: le déficit de citoyenneté des jeunes de banlieue* is a valuable source for any analysis of the alienation of the youth residing in these areas. In addition, Grégory Derville's *La stigmatisation des « jeunes de banlieue »*, published in 1997, provides a similarly enlightening account of the marginalisation of this youth.

Ultimately, this work will not only draw on the analyses, arguments and conclusions offered by various researchers and leading-scholars such as Hargreaves and Méla. Rather, it will seek also to build upon this existing body of research by questioning some of the preconceived and widely accepted negative images associated with the *banlieues* and highlighting the linguistic and literary capital offered by French suburban discourse.

The aim of this work therefore, is to affirm the linguistic capital of *les cités* by illustrating the positive lexical creativity and literary production to be found there. It will challenge the prevailing negative discourse surrounding language in the *banlieue*, and indeed the *banlieue* in general. It will advance that the *banlieue* is not a domain of wanton destruction but rather creative construction, where the French language is used as a medium for catharsis and empowerment.

## **1: The Politics of Language in the Fifth Republic; Ideology of the Standard and Criticism of Linguistic Diversity**

This chapter aims to provide a context in which to place the type of French emanating from the *banlieue* by exploring the relationship between the French state and the French language. The first section of the chapter will reveal the complexity of this relationship and the ‘ideology of the standard’ which has punctuated the language’s history.<sup>10</sup> In the second section this standard French language will be contrasted with the argotic variety which has developed in the *banlieue*. The *banlieue* has come under much negative scrutiny in the recent past, particularly since the riots of the winter of 2005. The type of French produced there has thus tended to be criticised as part of this wider negative discourse, due to its deviation from the standard. Examples of this criticism will be analysed and contested in order to show that the *banlieue* is misrepresented as a linguistic ghetto and is in fact a site of linguistic innovation and cultural production. This argument will provide the basis for the research of chapters two and three, in which it will be shown that lexical creativity and literary production affirm the linguistic and creative capital of *les cités*.

### **1.1: Power and Purification**

In order to ascertain the reasons behind the negativity aimed at the French favoured by those residing in the *banlieue*, it is necessary to examine the esteem in which the standard French language is held. The first section of the chapter will endeavour to underline the development and role of the French language, highlighting the use of

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<sup>10</sup> R. Anthony Lodge, *French: From Dialect to Standard* (London: Routledge, 1993), p. 6.

standard French as a means to social inclusion in the upper strata of society.<sup>11</sup> It will be argued that standard French is more than a means of communication and rather like a social code, without mastery of which one is at a disadvantage in French society. Furthermore, the analysis will highlight the French language's function as a means of establishing a national identity for the French nation. It will be shown thus, that deviance from the standard French language is perceived as not only linguistic deviation but also a possible deviation from the values of the French state. A frame of reference will be provided in which to place the type of French favoured by those residing in the *banlieue*, a type of French which deviates from the standard, rendering it a crude and subversive threat to the cohesion of the Republic. In order to provide this context it is necessary to present a history of the French language, underlining the development of standard French and its links with prestige and national identity.

The French language as recognised today had its inception in Francien, a dialect of *Langue d'Oil*, in the thirteenth century. Though unexceptional in terms of its linguistic attributes, Francien was spoken in the vicinity of Paris, then, as now, a site of commercial activity and prosperity.<sup>12</sup> The monarchy was located there, as were educational institutes such as the Sorbonne, founded in 1252.<sup>13</sup> These attributes rendered the *Île-de-France* region prosperous and influential. Consequently, the language that originated there shared this prestige. Indeed, it is noted by Battye et al. that 'by the end of the thirteenth century, Francien had become a dialect with a special status, the desirable norm for speech'.<sup>14</sup> Thus, it is evident that even in its infancy the French language was associated with prestige and the acquisition of power.

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<sup>11</sup> This historical account of the evolution of the French language is greatly indebted to the work of scholars Battye et al., Anthony Lodge and Claude Hagège.

<sup>12</sup> Battye et al., *The French Language Today; A Linguistic Introduction*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn (London and New York: Routledge, 2000), p. 15.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 16.

The middle French period, from the middle of the fourteenth century to the beginning of the seventeenth saw the political unification of the country and a growing sense of nationhood. With this political unity came a certain degree of linguistic union, with François I's *Edict de Villiers-Cotterêts* in 1539 encouraging the replacement of Latin with *langaige maternel françois*.<sup>15</sup> Thus, the type of French spoken in Paris and its environs gradually began to take over the prestigious functions of Latin, for example in legal, administrative and technical documents.<sup>16</sup> Once more, prestige was associated with the language of the Parisian region, an area in which the seemingly most desirable French was spoken.

While the sixteenth century was a time of lexical creativity for the French language, the seventeenth century was a period concerned with codification and standardisation. The heavily Italian-influenced French which had been spoken in the court of Henri IV in the sixteenth century was criticised due to its foreign lexical roots.<sup>17</sup> Moreover there was a push to rid the language of the court of 'provincial *gasconismes*'.<sup>18</sup> These *gasconismes* stemmed from Gascon, a variant of the regional language of Occitan, spoken in the southern half of France. In reaction to the perceived tainting of the language of the court, the seventeenth century was a period of lexical refinement and restriction. Figures such as François de Malherbe and Claude Favre de Vaugelas were crucial in the dissemination of this doctrine. Malherbe, a court poet during the reign of Henri IV, was one of the first individuals to lay out a set of rules in reference to the standardisation of the French language, promoting the achievement of '*clarté, pureté, and précision*' and the ousting of foreign terms and variances.<sup>19</sup> Achieving a level of linguistic competence equivalent with

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<sup>15</sup> Claude Hagège, *Le français; Histoire d'un combat* (Paris: Éditions Michel Hagège, 1996), p. 52.

<sup>16</sup> Battye et al., p. 19.

<sup>17</sup> Hilary Wise, *The Vocabulary of Modern French; Origins, Structure and Function* (London and New York: Routledge, 1997), p. 220.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 220.

<sup>19</sup> Battye et al., p. 22.

what was named *Le bon Usage* became the aim of the *honnêtes hommes* of the French court.<sup>20</sup> *Le bon Usage* was highlighted by Claude Favre de Vaugelas in his work *Remarques sur la langue française, utiles à ceux qui veulent bien parler et bien écrire*. Published in 1647, it is essentially a collection of Vaugelas's observations and instructions pertaining to the correct usage of the French language within the circles of the court, namely polite and refined speech and writing. Within the work Vaugelas makes reference to what he considered the opposite of *le bon Usage*- *le mauvais Usage*. According to Vaugelas, cited by Battye et al., such language used by *le peuple* is vulgar and distasteful 'Le peuple n'est le maistre que du mauvais Usage, et le bon Usage est le maistre de nostre langue'.<sup>21</sup> Thus, it is again evident that the variety of French practised within the court by the nobility was viewed as the most desirable. There was an increasing awareness that to move upwards in society, it was necessary to speak the language of the ruling elite. Battye et al. note that:

Those willing to adopt the linguistic usage of this elite could thereby gain access to it. In sociolinguistic terms, in the seventeenth century, the usage of the ruling elite, held up as a model to be followed, was both a vehicle of social promotion and (those who spoke it could hope to get on in life) and, at the same time, a vehicle of social exclusion (for those who didn't master this usage, the road to social promotion was barred.)<sup>22</sup>

Once more, the French used by the elite was equated with power and thus deviations from this were considered '*bas*' and the language of peasantry.<sup>23</sup>

Deviations were closely monitored by *l'Académie française*, an institution formed in 1635 by Cardinal Richelieu. Politician and clergyman, Richelieu knew that the French language could be utilised to provide a united identity to the people of France.<sup>24</sup> An official body of the state, *l'Académie*'s main aim was, and still is, to give 'des règles certaines à la

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<sup>20</sup> The *honnêtes hommes* were individuals who appeared to display the social graces and intelligence deemed representative of the aristocracy in seventeenth century France.

<sup>21</sup> Battye et al., p. 25.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 20.

<sup>23</sup> Wise, p. 221.

<sup>24</sup> Battye et al., p. 22.



langue française, de la rendre pure, éloquente et capable de traiter les arts et les sciences'.<sup>25</sup> Presiding over and regulating the French language, *l'Académie* aimed to maintain standard French, erasing neologisms, argotic words and terms pertaining to technical pursuits.<sup>26</sup> In addition to this, *l'Académie* also produces dictionaries, the ninth of which is still being prepared, though work began on it in 1986.<sup>27</sup> *L'Académie française* is symbolic of the lexical policy in seventeenth century France. In comparison to the rather lexically creative and inclusive sixteenth century, the 1600s was a period of intense linguistic pruning and codification. The development of these norms, through the work of figures such as Vaugelas and Malherbe, as well as institutions like *l'Académie française* set the standard for the French language, a standard which in many quarters is still adhered to and venerated in the twenty-first century. It must be reiterated that *le bon Usage* was cultivated by members of the court and the nobility. Therefore it holds to this day a certain type of prestige through its links to the upper echelons of society, over the regional languages of France, for example, as they were more likely to have been used by the peasantry.<sup>28</sup>

The codification of standard French extended into the eighteenth century. *L'Académie française* and members of the nobility, considering the previous century to be a 'linguistic golden age' for the French language, sought to crystallise the French language in order to maintain its clarity and precision.<sup>29</sup> Even more stringent rules were applied to the language, pertaining to grammar and vocabulary usage, with *l'Académie* eager to distance standard French from the varieties spoken by the 'petit peuple'.<sup>30</sup> This epoch also saw the positing of standard French's superiority over other European languages, as well

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<sup>25</sup> Hagège, p. 66.

<sup>26</sup> Battye et al., p. 23.

<sup>27</sup> In truth, the *Académie's* function has more or less remained the same throughout the centuries, a point which will be referred to later in this chapter.

<sup>28</sup> These regional languages include Breton, Occitan, Basque and Catalan, as well as dialects such as Corse and Alsacien.

<sup>29</sup> Battye et al., p. 31.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 32.

domestic dialects. Essayist and Jesuit priest Dominique Bouhours extolled the virtues of the syntax of standard French, claiming that the subject-verb-object formation of sentences, also known as *l'ordre direct*, rendered the standard French language superior to others. Bouhours, cited by Wise, claims that 'La langue française est peut-être la seule qui suive exactement l'ordre naturel, et qui exprime les pensées en la manière qu'elles naissent dans l'esprit'.<sup>31</sup> Bouhours's claims pertaining to the clarity of French syntax were echoed by Antoine de Rivarol. Rivarol sought to emphasise the supremacy of French over other languages in proclaiming 'Ce qui n'est pas clair n'est pas français: ce qui n'est pas clair est encore anglais, italien, grec ou latin'.<sup>32</sup> While Rivarol's assertion, which appeared in his 1784 work *Discours sur l'universalité de la langue française*, may be conceived as disproportionate, it is true that French was adopted by the aristocracy in many countries within Europe, as it was perceived as the language of culture and refinement.<sup>33</sup> Reflecting upon this, it is once more clear that standard French had strong links to nobility and was considered prestigious, not only within France itself but also in other territories.

## **1.2: Standard French and National Identity**

While the role of standard French language was to provide a badge of identity for the French nobility, its function as an identity marker was extended as a result of the Revolution in 1789. The majority of the French population before the Revolution spoke regional languages and dialects of French, as the standard was used mostly by the aristocracy and the upwardly mobile, as previously argued.<sup>34</sup> A sea-change came about with the Revolution however, and standard French came to represent the unity of the Republic. Through the use of this one language it was hoped to reflect and project the

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<sup>31</sup> Wise, p. 229.

<sup>32</sup> Battye et al., p. 35.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 34.

<sup>34</sup> Wise, p. 233.

indivisibility of the nation and republican values. Thus, those who spoke languages and dialects such as Breton or Occitan which deviated from the standard were perceived as potential threats to the cohesion of the Republic. According to the *Rapport Barère* of 1794, cited by Hagège, ‘Le fédéralisme et la superstition parlent bas-breton, l’émigration et la haine de la république parlent allemande, la contre-révolution parle italien et le fanatisme parle basque’.<sup>35</sup> The eminent Abbé Grégoire published a report in the same year with the intention of erasing all *patois* from the Republic, stating in a passage cited by Hagège, ‘Notre langue et nos coeurs doivent être à l’unisson [...] Pour extriper tous les préjugés, développer toutes les vérités, tous les talents, toutes les vertus, fondre tous les citoyens dans la masse nationale...il faut identité de langage’.<sup>36</sup> It is evident therefore that for the consolidation of the Republic ‘la langue de liberté’ would be employed throughout France, with regional languages perceived as posing a threat to the unity of the state. This point will be revisited later in the chapter.

This often dogmatic policy of linguistic homogenisation extended beyond metropolitan France to the Republic’s colonial empire in the Maghreb, established in the nineteenth century, and which is of particular importance in the context of this work. As part of the French state’s *mission civilisatrice* was the positing of standard French as more than a language, but rather a representation of the Republic’s cultural superiority over the natives of the North African colonies. For example, Kashani-Sabet cites a worker of French descent living in Algeria during the nineteenth century, who claimed that ‘beyond Arabic, there is nothing other than language; beyond French there is all that human knowledge, all that the progress of the intellect have accumulated for many years’.<sup>37</sup> This notion of linguistic, and therefore cultural superiority, meant that French was imposed as

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<sup>35</sup> Hagège, pp. 82-83.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 85.

<sup>37</sup> Firoozeh Kashani-Sabet, ‘The Swinging Pendulum: Linguistic Controversy in Post-Colonial Algeria’, *Middle Eastern Studies*, 32.4 (1996), 264-280 (p.266).

the official language of its North African colonies, with Madeleine Dobie noting that ‘the process of linguistic deculturation was most pronounced in Algeria, where from 1938 to 1961 Arabic was classified by law as a foreign language’.<sup>38</sup> Thus, in order for the natives of the Maghrebi colonies to progress in colonial society, it was necessary to assimilate by abandoning their mother tongues in public discourse and adopting the French language. Thus, the Republic’s ideology of linguistic standardisation and homogeneity spread from within *l’Hexagone* to its colonial empire in North Africa.

One of the most important media for the diffusion of standard French in the nineteenth century was the education system. For example, in metropolitan France the *lois Ferry* of the 1880s dictated that education in public schools become free and compulsory.<sup>39</sup> As decreed after the Revolution, standard French became the language of instruction in these schools. Once more, standard French became less of a means of communication and more a medium for the dissemination of republican ideology. Battye et al highlight a key quotation from the 1882 *Dictionnaire de pédagogie* which states:

On peut dire sans exagération de la langue maternelle qu’elle est le fond même de l’enseignement à l’école primaire. Elle domine et pénètre toutes les autres études. Par là (l’élève) devient, même s’il reste dans la sphère la plus humble, un élément de valeur pour la société, une forme utile mise par l’école au service du pays.<sup>40</sup>

It is proposed here that standard French appears to have a pervasive quality, instilling the values necessary for good citizenship in the children of France.<sup>41</sup> More evidence of this is found in *Le Bulletin officiel*, a publication issued by the French education ministry. In its 1921 edition, it states that instruction through French not only awakens pupils to the apparent beauty of the French language, but helps to ‘fortifier l’unité nationale’.<sup>42</sup> In the same edition of *Le Bulletin officiel* is a warning to teachers about the dangers of *patois*,

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<sup>38</sup> Madeleine Dobie, ‘Francophone Studies and the Linguistic Diversity of the Maghreb’, *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East*, 23.1&2 (2003), 32-40 (p.33).

<sup>39</sup> Battye et al., p. 41.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 41.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 42.

argot and regional dialects, with *Le Bulletin* instead instructing teachers to encourage their students to write ‘en langage correct’.<sup>43</sup> Once more, regional languages and non-standard forms are chastised, as they break with the concept of a monolingual and therefore indivisible nation. This endorsement of standard French and censure of France’s dialects and regional languages echoes the sentiments of the Abbé Grégoire and the *Rapport Barère* of the eighteenth century post-revolutionary era. Standard French is once again promoted as a tool for republicanism rather than purely a means for communication. Conversely, the regional languages are conceived as threats to the identity and cohesion of the Republic.

Further into the twentieth century, the French nation was weakened in the aftermath of the two world wars. The economic depression of the 1930s was compounded by the fall of the Third Republic, and the German Occupation from 1940 to 1944. Not only did the occupation damage the morale of the nation, the memory of collaboration served to create fissures in French society.<sup>44</sup> In times of crisis and change, as is common with many nations, France turns to its language to provide a sense of unity and stability. Following the losses and traumas of the Second World War, it was necessary once again to unite the nation through its language. French linguist Albert Dauzat, cited by Wise, noted that ‘Après nos désastres, nous nous efforçons de nous retremper aux sources de notre vie nationale, de reprendre conscience de nos traditions. La langue est une de ces traditions, un de ces éléments primordiaux de la patrie’.<sup>45</sup>

This attitude is reflected today in the twenty-first century. The recent and polemic *Débat sur l’identité nationale* launched by immigration minister Eric Besson in 2009

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<sup>43</sup> Battye et al., p. 42.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid., p. 43.

<sup>45</sup> Wise, p. 233.

sought to reveal ‘ce qu'est être Français aujourd'hui’.<sup>46</sup> Meetings were held in town halls across the nation and a website was set up to serve as a forum in which French citizens could express their views on national identity and attempt to define the concept of *francité*. A survey conducted by newspaper *Le Parisien* briefly after the announcement of the debate revealed that 80% of the 1,006 respondents defined the French language as the salient element in French national identity.<sup>47</sup> A survey conducted by *TNS Sofres* concurrently to the debate in February of 2010 reflected these results; for 94% of the 1,000 participants the French language is the most important facet of French national identity.<sup>48</sup> It could be conceived thus that the French language has steadfastly remained a marker of national identity and a paragon of Frenchness since its invocation as the salient element of French unity and identity during the Revolution.

### **1.3: Defence of the French Language**

Reflecting on the role of French in fostering of a sense of national unity, as well as the prestige attached to the language due to its origins in aristocratic spheres, it is perhaps unsurprising that the French people are at pains to safeguard their language. Perceived potential threats to the quality and survival of standard French include the growing popularity of English, the proliferation of syntactical and grammatical errors and regional languages and dialects within France itself. The twentieth century proved to be a period of particular concern for those perturbed by slipping standards in regards to the French language. With the infiltration of Anglo-American or ‘Coca-Cola’ culture into French

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<sup>46</sup> ‘Besson relance le débat sur l’identité nationale’, *Le Monde*, 25 October 2009, in ‘lemonde.fr’, <[http://www.lemonde.fr/politique/article/2009/10/25/besson-relance-le-debat-sur-l-identite-nationale\\_1258628\\_823448.html](http://www.lemonde.fr/politique/article/2009/10/25/besson-relance-le-debat-sur-l-identite-nationale_1258628_823448.html)>, [accessed 03 February 2012].

<sup>47</sup> Géraldine Enjelvin and Nada Korac-Kakabadse, ‘France and the Memories of “Others”; The Case of the Harkis’, *History and Memory*, 24.1 (2012), 152-177 (p.152).

<sup>48</sup> ‘L’identité nationale française existe pour 82% des sondés’, *L’Express*, 05 February 2010, in ‘l’express.fr’, <[http://www.lexpress.fr/actualite/politique/l-identite-nationale-francaise-existe-pour-82-pourcent-de-sondes\\_846941.html](http://www.lexpress.fr/actualite/politique/l-identite-nationale-francaise-existe-pour-82-pourcent-de-sondes_846941.html)>, [accessed 03 February 2012].

society in the late 1940s and 1950s came a wave of neologisms. Hagège notes that ‘la France découvre, éblouie, une nouvelle culture et de nouveaux modes de vie, présentés comme un idéal : l’*American way of life*, avec ses voitures luxueuses, ses appareils électroménagers futuristes, son *rock and roll* et son Coca-Cola’.<sup>49</sup> Naturally, this cultural influence would have an inevitable effect on the French language. Hagège goes on to note that:

De plus, les mots anglais sont souvent courts, et donc moins coûteux à produire (à condition que leur prononciation soit assez francisée) ce qui a favorisé, par exemple, boomer, CD ou tweeter, au lieu de haut-parleur de graves, disque compact, ou haut-parleur d’aigus.<sup>50</sup>

These borrowings were treated with repugnance by many French scholars at the time, however. René Etiemble, author of the 1964 work *Parlez-vous français?*, reserved much vitriol for Anglo-American linguistic borrowings, proclaiming that ‘un sabir atlantique’ had been created by the use of English words in the French language.<sup>51</sup> It could be argued that Etiemble’s sentiments were symptomatic of the linguistic insecurity felt amongst French academics at the time. The decade preceding Etiemble’s work saw the creation of the *Office du vocabulaire français*, a private organisation involving linguists and writers, with the aim of replacing Anglicisms with alternative terms in French. In 1959 the *Défense de la langue française* was founded, an association linked to *l’Académie française*, concerned with maintenance of the standard and with its own journal. The 1960s saw the intervention of the government in the protection of the French language, in addition to the work already being carried out by private organisations. *Le Haut Comité pour la défense et l’expansion de la langue française*, was established in 1966 with the aim of expanding the use of French while protecting it from perceived threats, such as the use of Anglicisms. The push to safeguard the French language against the apparent threat of English

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<sup>49</sup> Hagège, p. 110.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid., p. 111.

<sup>51</sup> René Etiemble, *Parlez-vous français?* (Paris: Gallimard, 1973), p. 33.

intensified in the 1970s, with the introduction of legislation under the guise of the *loi Bas-Lauriol* in 1975. Under the law, the use of French in the domains of advertising, work contracts and consumer information was made compulsory.<sup>52</sup> However, though non-compliance was punishable by prosecution, the amount of companies and individuals taken to court was low and penalties were usually minor.<sup>53</sup> As a remedy to this the *loi Toubon* was enacted in 1994 by *ministre de la culture et de la francophonie*, Jacques Toubon. It consisted of heavier fines than the *loi Bas-Lauriol* and required French to be used in teaching, international conferences taking place in France and advertising.<sup>54</sup> The *loi Toubon* is another indication of the deep-rooted linguistic insecurity present in France, as well as the belief in the superiority of French over other languages.

While English is an apparent cause for concern, it is not the sole threat to the prestige of the French language or its defining role in French national identity. In recent years there has been somewhat of a hardening of attitudes among certain factions of French society toward regional languages and dialects. These include for example the languages of Breton, Basque and Catalan and the dialects of Corse, Alsacien and Occitan. Sharif Gemie notes that in ‘June 1992 the French constitution was revised to include a reference to French as *the* language of the Republic’.<sup>55</sup> While the regional languages were written into article 75 of the constitution in 2008 as part of France’s *patrimoine*, it is noteworthy that it took until the twenty-first century to do so. Moreover, the recognition of regional languages in the constitution was met with great disdain from members of *l’Académie française*. In a declaration issued after a meeting in July 2008, *l’Académie* claimed that mentioning the regional languages in the first article of the constitution, as was agreed by members of the parliament, was illogical. The declaration stated:

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<sup>52</sup> Battye et al., p. 45.

<sup>53</sup> Wise, p. 236.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid.

<sup>55</sup> Sharif Gemie, ‘The Politics of Language: Debates and Identities in Contemporary Brittany’, *French Cultural Studies*, 13.145 (2002), 145-164 (pp. 146-147).



Il nous paraît que placer les langues régionales de France avant la langue de la République est un défi à la simple logique, un déni de la République, une confusion du principe constitutif de la Nation et de l'objet d'une politique.<sup>56</sup>

*L'Académie* makes it very clear that the mention of the regional languages in the first article of the constitution before standard French (which appears in the second article) is considered unpatriotic and an insult to the great unifying force of the French language. *L'Académie* member Max Gallo conveyed his dismay at the possible recognition of the regional languages in an interview with newspaper *L'Express*. According to Gallo, their recognition would 'conduirait un peu plus encore à l'émiettement d'une nation déjà touchée par les communautarismes de toutes sortes. Et je ne souhaite pas que nous prenions le risque de la division nationale.'<sup>57</sup> Indeed, such is the influence of *l'Académie* that while the regional languages and dialects were written into the constitution in August of 2008, they were given a far less prominent position and appeared under article 75, rather than the first article. Indeed, France's failure to ratify the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages in 1999 points to a certain resistance to acknowledge France's regional languages on a European level. In February of 2012, then President Nicolas Sarkozy declared that 'Quand on aime la France, on ne propose pas de ratifier la charte des langues régionales', implying that the ratification would be disrespectful and a threat to the unity of the *patrie*.<sup>58</sup> Moreover, on a non-governmental level, it should be noted that discrimination against speakers of regional languages and dialects has been a feature of private employment in recent times. In the 2007 report by the HALDE (*Haute Autorité de lutte contre les discriminations et pour l'égalité*) it was noted that, particularly in the area of

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<sup>56</sup> 'Actualités 2008', in 'academie-francaise.fr', <<http://www.academie-francaise.fr/actualites/index.html>>, 12 June 2008, [accessed 17 February 2012].

<sup>57</sup> Olivier Le Naire, 'Pour ou contre les langues régionales dans la Constitution?', *L'Express*, 17 June 2008, in 'l'express.fr', <[http://www.lexpress.fr/actualite/politique/pour-ou-contre-les-langues-regionales-dans-la-constitution\\_512991.html](http://www.lexpress.fr/actualite/politique/pour-ou-contre-les-langues-regionales-dans-la-constitution_512991.html) date accessed 02/03/2011>, [accessed 11 February 2012].

<sup>58</sup> Michel Feltin-Pelas, 'Onze idées reçues sur les langues régionales', *L'Express*, 31 March 2012, in 'l'express.fr', <[http://www.lexpress.fr/region/onze-idees-recues-sur-les-langues-regionales\\_1099691.html](http://www.lexpress.fr/region/onze-idees-recues-sur-les-langues-regionales_1099691.html)>, [accessed 10 March 2012].

retail, those with regional accents had been discriminated against.<sup>59</sup> Of course, the situation for the regional languages and dialects within France is not completely negative, with sociolinguists such as Claude Hagège coming to their defence. However, there are voices within France today which echo the sentiments of the Abbé Grégoire in the eighteenth century, perceiving these languages and dialects to be sources of division and threats to the cohesion of the Fifth Republic.

It becomes clear, given the evidence thus far that France is a nation engaged in a profound and passionate relationship with its language. Praised for both its precision and its unifying function, standard French continues to be fiercely defended and perceived in quasi-mythical terms by some parts of French society. For example, the late Maurice Druon of *l'Académie française* expressed his dismay at the proposed introduction of feminine terms for professions and trades in an impassioned open letter to then prime-minister Lionel Jospin in 1998, which appeared in newspaper *Le Figaro*. Druon, cited by Battye et al., states:

Ah! Ma chère langue française, que l'on admirait tant pour ses vertus de clarté, de précision et d'élégance, ma bonne et loyale langue que toutes les nations ont choisie pour rédiger leurs traités, régler leurs différends, conclure leurs accords, comment va-t-il falloir l'écrire maintenant ? [...] Où sont-ils passés, tous les grands défenseurs du sacro-saint Usage ? [...] Quelle terreur soudaine...<sup>60</sup>

Druon's ardent language and use of the possessive adjective 'ma' in reference to the language are indicative of the strong emotions felt by many towards standard French. More recently, Battye et al. cite the author of an article in *Le Nouvel Observateur*, who referred to the French language's clarity in a Rivarol-style comparison to other languages, stating that 'Notre langue est un patrimoine culturel, une richesse que l'on nous envie à travers le

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<sup>59</sup> 'Discrimination - Trop gros ou trop moche pour travailler', *France Soir*, 22 May 2008, in 'francesoir.fr', <<http://www.francesoir.fr/actualite/societe/discrimination-trop-gros-ou-trop-moche-pour-travailler-26602.html>>, [accessed 15 June 2012].

<sup>60</sup> Battye et al., p. 47.

monde et qui reste une exception, et même le symbole d'une certaine noblesse qui permet l'expression des idées les plus subtiles'.<sup>61</sup>

In consideration of these statements, in addition to the evidence presented earlier in the chapter, it emerges that the French are extremely protective of their language and hold it in high esteem. It is against the backdrop of these statements and findings therefore that we must place the French favoured by the residents of France's *quartier sensibles*. The next section of this chapter will be concerned with the negative perceptions in the media and elsewhere of what has been dubbed *le français contemporain des cités* by sociolinguist Jean-Pierre Goudaillier.<sup>62</sup>

#### **1.4: The Emergence of *le français contemporain des cités*; Criticism and Detractors**

As established in the previous section, standard French is held in extremely high regard by much of the French population. The language of choice for France's former aristocracy and court, it has retained its sense of prestige garnered through its inception in the upper strata of society. Moreover, in the eighteenth century it became symbol of the newly formed Republic, a tool used effectively by revolutionaries to foster a sense of national unity and identity. When it is considered how deeply the standard French language is embedded in the national psyche it is perhaps unsurprising that attempts to deviate from it are frowned upon. This aversion to difference is noted by Martinet, cited by Wise, who notes that 'Les français n'osent plus parler leur langue parce que des générations de grammairiens, professionnels et amateurs, en ont fait un domaine parsemé d'embûches et d'interdits'.<sup>63</sup> Attempts to deviate from the standard are even more complex in the context

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<sup>61</sup> Yves Delahaie, 'La langue française est-elle en voie de disparition?', *Le Nouvel Observateur*, in 'nouvelobs.com', 05 July 2011, <<http://leplus.nouvelobs.com/contribution/164169-la-langue-francaise-est-elle-en-voie-de-disparition.html>>, [accessed 10 January 2012].

<sup>62</sup> Jean-Pierre Goudaillier, 'De l'argot traditionnel au français contemporain des cités', *La Linguistique*, 38.1 (2002), 5-23 (p.8).

<sup>63</sup> Wise, p. 238.

of the *banlieue* as they are reserved for use by immigrants and their descendants. Thus, two pertinent issues in French society collide; the defence of its language and the impact of immigration.

It can be advanced that the criticism aimed at *le français contemporain des cités* is part of a wider negative discourse pertaining to the *banlieue*. Often portrayed in the media as a site of delinquency and disorder, the *banlieue* has come under particularly intense scrutiny in the aftermath of the 2005 riots. The perceived unwillingness of the ethnic minorities residing there to adapt and assimilate into French society renders it a place of apparent obstinacy and deviance. However, as Hargreaves and Tribalat have proved, this theory is untrue.<sup>64</sup> Nonetheless, this purported refusal to assimilate is in turn represented on a sociolinguistic plane by the residents of the alleged *quartiers chauds* through their manipulation of the standard. As previously established, the standard French language is the paragon of *francité*, a representation of France and its culture; monolingual, secular and indivisible. The type of French spoken in the *banlieue* however is a patchwork of French mixed with various other languages, and is often spoken by those who originate from an immigrant, Muslim background. Thus, their appropriation of the French language for the creation of an alternate identity could be perceived by some as tantamount to the defacement of a national monument, an attack on French values and identity. It could also be argued that the desire of certain *banlieue* communities to resist the standard French language may be a reaction to the colonial past of their ancestors in the Maghreb. As previously established, the Republic imposed the standard French language on its North African colonies during the nineteenth century, as part of its assimilationist ideology. Thus, it could be advanced that those of Maghrebi descent manipulate the standard French

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<sup>64</sup> Hargreaves, *Multi-Ethnic France*, p. 3.

language as a post-colonial method of linguistic empowerment, using the very medium employed to disempower their ancestors.

Moreover, there is evidence to suggest that the relatively low level of economic capital brought with these ethnic minorities to France is an important factor in the harbouring of discriminatory attitudes towards them.<sup>65</sup> As established in the previous section, the standard French language grew out of a type of French which was the preserve of the aristocracy. The language of the court from the sixteenth century onwards, it garnered a high prestige value and became inextricably linked with the acquisition of power. In contrast, *le français contemporain des cités* is spoken mostly by socially and economically disadvantaged groups in the *banlieues défavorisées*. Its association thus with a mostly working-class demographic could perhaps contribute to an unconscious negativity towards it.

The vast, concrete *cités* of the *banlieue* first became home to North African immigrants in the 1960s and 1970s. Following the steady flow of emigration from the Maghreb to France in the second half of the twentieth century, the majority of Maghrebis settled with their families in so-called *bidonvilles*. These *bidonvilles* were tantamount to shantytowns on the edges of France's cities, consisting of dilapidated huts, with only rudimentary facilities for their occupants. In the 1960s and 70s the HLM (*Habitation à loyer modéré*) tower blocks were constructed and the *grands ensembles* of the *banlieue* recognised today were created. Immigrants living in the *bidonvilles* moved into the apartments of these *immeubles*, along with many *français de souche* attracted by the comforts of the buildings, including running water and central heating. However, it became quickly apparent that the apartment blocks had been cheaply constructed. Complaints about the 'absence quasi totale d'isolation phonique et thermique, dégradation rapide des

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<sup>65</sup> Hargreaves, *Multi-Ethnic France*, p. 74.

matériaux’, as well as only tenuous links to the city centre, meant that the majority of the middle-class inhabitants of the *banlieue* left in favour of more central housing.<sup>66</sup> However, the mostly economically disadvantaged North African immigrants, along with immigrants from other ethnic backgrounds, were forced to stay, due to the affordability of the rent. Thus, ethnically and consequently linguistically heterogeneous communities developed, with the influence of standard French weakening. A new form of French began to emerge from these areas, one filled with argot and tinged by the various languages in the *banlieue* community.

Various labels have been given to the variety of French spoken within the *banlieue*. Estelle Liogier notes that some scholars have a tendency to demean the variety and label it a *langue de jeunes* while others consider it an argot and an alternative variation of French to the standard.<sup>67</sup> In this work this variety of French will be given the label of *le français contemporain des cités*, as proposed, by Jean-Pierre Goudaillier. This variety of French, which deviates in many ways from the lexis and pronunciation of standard French, has become synonymous in recent times with *la culture de racaille*,<sup>68</sup> or street culture within the *banlieue*.<sup>69</sup> In contrast to standard French, which is often considered the quintessence of *francité*, users of this form of French often fall outside of the brackets of mainstream French society. In general, they tend to be younger members of the *banlieue* community, seeking an original identity which differs from that of mainstream France.

*Le français contemporain des cités* (FCC) is a highly argotic variation of standard French. In order to gain an understanding of the differences between standard French and FCC it is necessary to study the main characteristics of the latter. Its interlocutors

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<sup>66</sup> Jean-Marc Stébé, *La crise des banlieues*, 3rd edn (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 2007), p. 43.

<sup>67</sup> Estelle Liogier, ‘Quelles approches théoriques pour la description du français parlé par les jeunes des cités?’, *La Linguistique*, 38.1 (2002), 41-52 (p.41).

<sup>68</sup> The term ‘racaille’ was used by former President Nicolas Sarkozy to describe the rioters within the Parisian *banlieue* during the *emeutes* of 2005.

<sup>69</sup> Doran, p. 498.

manipulate the standard French language in numerous ways, creating a variety of French which is often difficult to understand for those unfamiliar with it. Perhaps the most famous element of FCC is *verlan*. Originally a word-game consisting of inverting the order of syllables in a word, it dates back to the sixteenth century, yet has been renewed with vigour by the youth residing in the *banlieue*, particularly by those of North African origin.<sup>70</sup> Some examples of *verlan*-ised words include *meuf* stemming from *femme* and *keum* stemming from *mec*.<sup>71</sup> In addition to the phenomenon of *verlan*, Meredith Doran notes that ‘strategies such as truncation, reduplication, and suffixation are also used to alter terms from the standard language: e.g. *artiche* (from *artichaut*, a slang term for money); *zonzon* (from *prison*); *pourave* (from *pourri*, ‘rotten’).<sup>72</sup> Furthermore, Goudaillier notes that the vocabulary of the *argot de banlieues* originates ‘d'une part dans le vieux français et ses variétés régionales, d'autre part dans le vieil argot, celui de Mimile, mais aussi dans les multiples langues des communautés liées à l'immigration’.<sup>73</sup> Given the fact that the *banlieue* is home to a multitude of speech communities from many different nations, it includes words from various other tongues. Goudaillier notes that in the study *Paroles des banlieues* by Jean-Michel Décugis and Aziz Zemouri a young *banlieue* dweller states that in the *les cités* ‘on parle en français, avec des mots rebeus, créoles, africains, portugais, ritáis ou yougoslaves », puisque « blacks, gaulois, Chinois et Arabes ». <sup>74</sup> As noted above, even old French argot makes an appearance in the lexicon of FCC, with words such as *daron* (father) and *daronne* (mother) used by its interlocutors.<sup>75</sup>

Not only is the lexicon used in this variety of *banlieue* French different to that of standard French, its sound system also differs. Henri Boyer notes that speakers of *le*

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<sup>70</sup> Wise, p. 213.

<sup>71</sup> It should be noted that *verlan* will be discussed in more detail in the next chapter.

<sup>72</sup> Doran, p. 500.

<sup>73</sup> Goudaillier, p. 10.

<sup>74</sup> Ibid.

<sup>75</sup> Doran, p. 500.

*français contemporain des cités* employ a ‘style speedé’, speaking hastily so that words blend and blur.<sup>76</sup> Doran claims that this style of speech is used to render it incomprehensible to speakers of standard French.<sup>77</sup> Furthermore, she goes on to note that speakers of FCC also have a tendency to engage in ‘glottal fricativisation (that is, a throaty rasp) that Méla and others have attributed to the influence of Arabic phonology.’<sup>78</sup> Moreover, Mikaël Jamin observes, in a study conducted in the Parisian *banlieue* of *La Courneuve*, the phenomenon of affrication (a hushing pronunciation after consonants *t, d, k* and *g* and vowels *e* and *i*) amongst speakers of FCC.<sup>79</sup> Jamin points out that affrication is a common feature in North African French.<sup>80</sup>

This variety of French, a linguistic representation of a multi-ethnic counter-culture in opposition to the homogenising discourse of France’s assimilationist policies, has long attracted much negative media attention.<sup>81</sup> According to Doran this *argot de banlieue* is continually represented in the media, both in France and abroad, as a ‘stereotypical element of this reputedly tough minority youth culture, treated as a form of “bad language”’.<sup>82</sup> Indeed, one of the most fervent critics of this *banlieue* variety of French, teacher and author Cécile Ladjali, tellingly named her book on the malaise of *banlieue* speech *Mauvaise Langue*. Arditty and Blanchet cite the case of particularly irked viewer of Abelatif Kechiche’s 2005 film *L’Esquive*<sup>83</sup>, who describes the language in the film thus:

Mon Dieu ce ton! Ces hurlements permanents! Cette pauvreté de vocabulaire! Ces éructations! La grossièreté sexuelle de ces injures! Ah comme la langue française a souffert en lui pendant ce film! Comme il a eu mal à son français! Comme il l’a senti menacé dans ses fondements mêmes! Que dis-je menacé, condamné ! Irrémédiablement condamné par

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<sup>76</sup> Henri Boyer, ‘«Nouveau français», «parler jeune» ou «langue des cités»? Remarques sur un objet linguistique médiatiquement identifié’, *Langue française*, 114 (1997), 6-15 (p.11).

<sup>77</sup> Doran, p. 501.

<sup>78</sup> Ibid.

<sup>79</sup> Mikaël Jamin, “‘Beurs” and *accent des cités*: A Case Study of Linguistic Diffusion in La Courneuve’, *Contemporary French and Francophone Studies*, 8.2 (2004), 169-176 (p. 171).

<sup>80</sup> Ibid.

<sup>81</sup> Boyer, p. 8.

<sup>82</sup> Doran, p. 499.

<sup>83</sup> *L’Esquive* is a 2003 film about the life of a young man, Abdelkrim, set in a Parisian *banlieue*.



cette haine langagière! Qu'allait devenir la langue française ? Qu'allait-elle devenir, face à ces hordes de cancrs hurleurs?<sup>84</sup>

While this particular viewer's reaction is rather extreme, Arditty and Blanchet suggest that it is indicative of the views of many 'bons bourgeois' towards *le français contemporain des cités*.<sup>85</sup> It should be noted that while the overall portrayal of FCC in the media is negative, a number of scholars have been eager to highlight some positive aspects of this type of French. The arguments of these academics will be used in chapters two and three to highlight the linguistic legitimacy of FCC in order to present a challenge to the prevailing negative discourse.

It becomes clear upon analysing articles criticising the language of the *banlieue* that the trait of FCC considered the most reprehensible is its perceived imprecision. For example, linguist Alain Bentolila is particularly critical of the form of French used in *les cités*. Bentolila's exasperation at the apparent imprecision of practitioners of FCC surfaced in a 2002 article in the newspaper *L'Express*. According to Bentolila:

Tout est «cool», tout est «grave», tout est «niqué», et plus rien n'a de sens. Ces mots sont des baudruches sémantiques: ils ont gonflé au point de dire tout et son contraire. «C'est grave» peut signifier «c'est merveilleux» comme «c'est épouvantable.»<sup>86</sup>

These sentiments were reiterated in a 2007 article in *Le Monde*, in which Bentolila compared the *cités* to 'ghetto linguistiques'.<sup>87</sup> While he admits that the French government and society are somewhat to blame having 'accepté- et parfois aveuglement encouragé' the segregation of socially and economically disadvantaged immigrant communities from the rest of the French population, he accentuates the apparent 'imprécision et pénurie des

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<sup>84</sup> Jo Arditty and Philippe Blanchet, 'La «mauvaise langue» des «ghettos linguistiques»: la glottophobie française, une xénophobie qui s'ignore', in 'reseau-terra.com', <<http://www.reseau-terra.eu/article748.html>>, May 2008, [accessed 29 November 2010].

<sup>85</sup> Ibid.

<sup>86</sup> Bentolila, 'Il existe en France une inégalité linguistique'.

<sup>87</sup> Bentolila, 'Contre les ghettos linguistiques', *Le monde*, 21 December 2007, in 'lemonde.fr', <<http://www.lemonde.fr/cgi-bin/ACHATS/ARCHIVES/archives.cgi?ID=ccc41c0d33d37f32355ca85ea190f32fa2e3128c173b7ab1>>, [accessed 19 September 2010].

mots' of this community.<sup>88</sup> Further into the article he once more highlights the seemingly imprecise nature of FCC, claiming:

Ils n'ont pas besoin de mettre en mots précis et soigneusement organisés leur pensée parce que, partageant tellement de choses, subissant tellement de contraintes et de frustrations identiques, l'imprécision est devenue la règle d'un jeu linguistique socialement perverti. Les mots qu'ils utilisent sont toujours porteurs d'un sens exagérément élargi et par conséquent d'une information d'autant plus imprécise.<sup>89</sup>

Perhaps Bentolila's opposition to these apparent inaccuracies is due to the fact that they are in direct contrast to the oft-cited *clarté* of standard French, as discussed in the previous section of the chapter. While the concept of *clarté* emerged in the seventeenth century, there is evidence to suggest that there is a belief among some parts of French society today that standard French expresses concepts and thoughts with the utmost clarity and precision, perhaps better than other languages. For example, the author of a 1984 article in *L'Express* wrote that 'La langue française est si bien adaptée à l'expression des pensées les plus complexes, des nuances les plus subtiles que, depuis trois siècles- depuis Molière- rien n'a pu réellement l'entamer'.<sup>90</sup> Thus, the deliberate alteration of meaning regarding certain phrases and words by users of FCC directly opposes this *clarté*, perturbing and excluding those who speak the standard. However, this is precisely the motivation of FCC interlocutors. Doran underlines this, stating:

On a symbolic level, then, these semantic innovations and shifts within suburban youth language point to the construction of what Halliday (following Peirce) has called an alternative universe of discourse, in which it is  *cité*  youths, rather than dominant society, who hold the power to name and to categorize their local social reality.<sup>91</sup>

Another sticking point for those who deem the *banlieue* to be a site of lexical impoverishment is the lack of vocabulary held by speakers of FCC. Bentolila once more underlines his concern at this trend, noting that 'l'insécurité linguistique engendre une sorte d'autisme social. Quand les gamins de banlieue ne maîtrisent que 800 mots, alors que les

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<sup>88</sup> Bentolila, 'Contre les ghettos linguistiques'.

<sup>89</sup> Ibid.

<sup>90</sup> Battye et al., p. 31.

<sup>91</sup> Doran, p. 502.

autres enfants français en possèdent plus de 2 500, il y a un déséquilibre énorme'.<sup>92</sup> This argument is countered by others, however. For example, scholars Arditty and Blanchet refute figures like those which Bentolila cites, branding them a 'manipulation alarmiste' and stating that children as young as three have a rich vocabulary of at least one thousand words, no matter what their language.<sup>93</sup> Boyer supports this claim, noting that in contrast to Bentolila's concerns pertaining to the 'vocabulaire exsangue'<sup>94</sup> present in the *banlieue*, it has in fact been found that there is a vocabulary 'riche en synonymes' in these areas.<sup>95</sup> In addition, Pierre-Adolphe et al., cited by Boyer, state that 'la langue des banlieues est loin d'être aussi pauvre que certains se plaisent à le croire ; elle est au contraire étonnamment fertile'.<sup>96</sup> Indeed, this innovative vocabulary of the *banlieue* has been dismissed by Bentolila who poses the question:

Mais ces créations contribuent-elles à enrichir un trésor linguistique disponible pour tous ? Non ! Cette vision idyllique est celle des faiseurs de dictionnaires à la mode qui voudraient nous faire croire à une langue française quotidiennement renouvelée et équitablement redistribuée.<sup>97</sup>

According to Philippe Marchal, president of the *Syndicat de la presse sociale*, there is a trend among 'gens cultivés, bien informés, urbains' to perceive the *banlieue* as a site of much illiteracy.<sup>98</sup> While there is evidence to suggest that illiteracy does reach relatively high levels in the *banlieue*, it is far from the only region in France to experience this phenomenon. It is noteworthy that a 2009 government report on illiteracy cited the highest levels of difficulty with reading and writing occur in the rural *département* of Aisne,

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<sup>92</sup> Bentolila, 'Il existe en France une inégalité linguistique'.

<sup>93</sup> Arditty and Blanchet, 'La «mauvaise langue» des «ghettos linguistiques»: la glottophobie française, une xénophobie qui s'ignore'.

<sup>94</sup> Bentolila, 'Contre les ghettos linguistiques'.

<sup>95</sup> Boyer, p. 11.

<sup>96</sup> Ibid.

<sup>97</sup> Bentolila, 'Contre les ghettos linguistiques'.

<sup>98</sup> Philippe Marchal, 'L'illettrisme, mise au point', *Le Monde*, 19 October 2010, in 'lemonde.fr', <[http://www.lemonde.fr/idees/article/2010/10/19/illettrisme-mise-au-point\\_1426925\\_3232.html](http://www.lemonde.fr/idees/article/2010/10/19/illettrisme-mise-au-point_1426925_3232.html)>, [accessed 12 February 2012].

located far away from immigrant-populated *banlieues*.<sup>99</sup> Indeed, the same report indicated that illiteracy was indeed most likely to occur in isolated areas stating ‘la moitié des personnes en situation d'illettrisme vit dans des zones faiblement peuplées (zones rurales, villes de moins de 20,000 habitants)’.<sup>100</sup> Thus, illiteracy is a phenomenon by no means exclusive to the *banlieue*.

In contrast to the notion of the *banlieue* as a domain of illiteracy, it is in fact a site of literary production in the form of Beur narratives. These literary representations of life in the *banlieue* serve to affirm the creative and lexical capital of these areas. The Beur fiction genre first emerged as a sub-section of post-colonial literature in the 1980s.<sup>101</sup> The publication of these novels contributed to formation of the Beur identity, coinciding with the *Marche pour l'égalité et contre le racisme* or *Marche des Beurs* in 1983. The authors of this literature are young French men and women from immigrant backgrounds, living and writing in the *banlieue*. Since the publication of the first Beur novel in 1981, dozens of other Beur authors have added to the corpus. Beur narratives most often recount tales of life within the *banlieue*, highlighting the predicament of those on the periphery of France's cities and society.<sup>102</sup>

These narratives are particularly important in the context of this work due to the fact that they are written in mostly standard French, yet are often peppered with *verlan* and Arabic. Writing in standard French enables Beur authors to open up the *banlieue* to the mainstream French readership, permitting these readers to gain an insight into the reality of the *cités*. These Beur authors are acutely aware of the fact that standard French is the language of the majority in France. Thus, writing in this form of French increases their

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<sup>99</sup> ‘L'Illettrisme en France’, Délégation générale à la langue française et aux langues de France, in ‘dglflf.culture.gouv.fr’, <<http://www.dglflf.culture.gouv.fr/recherche/illettrisme-France/illettrisme-en-france.html>>, October 2009, [accessed 13 April 2012].

<sup>100</sup> Ibid.

<sup>101</sup> Hargreaves, *Immigration and Identity in Beur Fiction*, p. 4.

<sup>102</sup> Or Belgium, as is true in the case of author Leïla Houari.

chances of permeating the conscious of the French public and allows the subaltern to engage with the rest of the French population on an equal footing. Furthermore, while standard French is a means of forging a path into mainstream discourse, the presence of *verlan*, Arabic and argot in the narratives signify the assertion of the right to lexical difference within the staunchly monolingual Republic.

The literary representations of the reality of *les cités* in Beur narratives result in a literary product with positive outcomes for the *banlieue*. This literature challenges the status quo by contesting negative perceptions of the lexical legitimacy of the *les cités*. Firstly, the fact that literature is being produced in these areas contests the notion that the *banlieue* is a site of illiteracy and lexical impoverishment. Secondly, it empowers the author and the communities they represent by giving them a voice. Thirdly, it affirms the artistic capital of the *banlieue*. Finally, it brings together standard French and *verlan* in an opportunity for compromise and communication rather than mutual exclusion and opposition. Thus, Beur literature is an essential element in the legitimising of suburban discourse and consequently warrants further analysis, which will be carried out in chapter three.

Indeed, this chapter has been concerned primarily with introducing a counter-discourse to the prevailing negative perceptions of the *banlieue*'s linguistic capital. The remainder of this work will be concerned with investigation of suburban discourse in more detail, with the aim of revealing the positive lexical and literary potential to be found within the *banlieue*. This will be achieved in two ways. In chapter two the phenomenon of *verlan* will be explored. It will be shown that *verlan* allows its practitioners to convert the negative aspects of *banlieue* life into positives through the cathartic process of lexical creativity. In chapter three the same will be shown of Beur literature. It will be presented that through the creation of these narratives the authors can capitalise on their marginalised

position in French society to create a positive literary product for the *banlieue*. This in turn empowers them and the wider *banlieue* community. Thus, the remaining chapters aim to build upon the themes discussed in this section of the work; that *les cités* are domains of lexical creativity and insightful literary production which affirm the area's linguistic and creative capital.

## 2: *Verlan* as a Supra-National Linguistic Code

This chapter seeks to challenge the negative discourse surrounding the French language in the *banlieue* by building upon the argument presented in the previous chapter. This will be achieved through an analysis of *verlan* as a positive lexical product of the creativity to be found in the *banlieue*. This chapter shall explore the extent to which *verlan* has transcended its status as a type of slang. Long considered to be a word-game by scholars such as Lefkowitz, this chapter will deliberate whether *verlan* can in fact be considered a linguistic medium through which marginalised second and third generation Maghrebis can create a supra-national identity.<sup>103</sup>

This chapter will deal firstly with the quandary of second and third-generation Maghrebis, who find themselves lodged between two cultures; their parental culture and that of France.<sup>104</sup> This double-marginalisation will be observed in two ways; firstly the Beurs' sense of isolation from their parental culture and secondly the institutionalisation of discrimination and alienation of Maghrebi descendants in French society. The second section will seek to investigate a possible escape from this double-isolation, in the form of *verlan*. To surmount the contentious issue of ethnicity and nationality, second and third-generation Maghrebis of the *banlieue* have appropriated *verlan* with great enthusiasm. The use of *verlan* as a supra-national linguistic code will be explored. It will be shown that it is a medium through which the Beurs can affirm their own bi-cultural identities, legitimising a form of French which is often considered a mere type of slang. Ultimately, this chapter is concerned with developing the themes presented in chapter one by highlighting the constructive and creative elements of French suburban discourse. To this end, it will show

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<sup>103</sup> Natalie J. Lefkowitz, 'Verlan: Talking Backwards in French', *The French Review*, 63.2 (1989), 312-322 (p.322).

that the Beurs often use the negative aspects of their lives as a springboard for positive creativity. This, in turn, affirms the linguistic capital of the *banlieue*.

## **2.1: Unbelonging; the Predicament of the Beurs**

This section of the chapter explores the marginalisation of the Beur community in France. To be examined firstly is the Beurs' experience of isolation from the values and customs of their parental culture. Secondly, the factors which lead to the alienation of the Beurs within French society will be explored. Thus, the sense of isolation and displacement encountered by this demographic will be highlighted, in order to underline their need for a coherent sense of identity.

First-generation immigrants in France from the Maghreb are slow to consider France as their home place and are keen to remain connected to their place of birth on cultural and linguistic levels. Hargreaves remarks that 'While living in France, immigrant parents continue to speak of their country or village of origin as "home", and encourage their children to think in the same terms'.<sup>105</sup> In addition to this is the 'mythe du retour', as described by Begag, in which France is considered as a temporary living space, with the ultimate aim being to return to the Maghreb.<sup>106</sup> Begag notes that despite living in France, first-generation North African immigrants live 'au rythme de là-bas'.<sup>107</sup> Until the 1990s associations such as the *Amicale des Algériens en Europe* helped to bolster Algerian national identity amongst Algerian immigrants living in France.<sup>108</sup> Media aided this too; television programmes including *Mosaïques* and recordings of Maghrebi music groups such as *Idir* temporarily transported the diaspora back to North Africa.<sup>109</sup> Remaining

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<sup>105</sup> Hargreaves, *Multi-Ethnic France*, p. 120.

<sup>106</sup> Azouz Begag, 'Les relations France-Algérie vues de la diaspora algérienne', *Modern and Contemporary France*, 10.4 (2002), 475-482 (p.476).

<sup>107</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 477.

<sup>108</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>109</sup> *Ibid.*



attached to their homelands means that in general, these immigrants are committed to transmitting the values and customs of their native country to their progeny. It could be argued that the tendency of this demographic to often reject French culture is linked to the legacy of French colonialism and domination in the Maghreb. However, second and third-generation immigrants have been raised in a French society often at odds with the values of the Maghreb and thus do not engage in the same rejection of French culture as their older relatives.

The most salient of these values for first-generation immigrants is religion. It is also one of the main issues of contention between these immigrants and their children.<sup>110</sup> The vast majority of North African immigrants are Muslims, eager to convey their religion, an unwavering symbol of their homeland, to their offspring.<sup>111</sup> These children have been for the most part brought up in a French society imbued with, according to Giry, an ‘aggressive state secularism’ known as *laïcité*.<sup>112</sup> As Hargreaves mentions, for first-generation Muslims Islam is not a kind of abstract belief, but rather should be displayed and transmitted through very concrete signs such as prayers, observation of Ramadan, strict dietary regulations and in the organisation of other major aspects of family life.<sup>113</sup> Furthermore, the traditional role of the patriarch within the family is reaffirmed by most first-generation Muslim immigrants.<sup>114</sup>

However, the transmission of traditional Islamic values to the descendants of immigrants has been largely unsuccessful. This is due in part to a high level of illiteracy among first-generation immigrants, leaving them unable to translate passages from the Koran for their children.<sup>115</sup> Thus, these children were left with only ‘rudimentary

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<sup>110</sup> Hargreaves, *Immigration and Identity in Beur Fiction*, p. 18.

<sup>111</sup> Hargreaves, *Multi-Ethnic France*, p. 104.

<sup>112</sup> Stéphanie Giry, ‘France and its Muslims’, *Foreign Affairs*, 85.5 (2006), 87-104 (p.88).

<sup>113</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 18.

<sup>114</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>115</sup> Hargreaves, *Multi-Ethnic France*, p. 106.

knowledge of Islamic values and practices'.<sup>116</sup> This, coupled with poor organisational infrastructure, has meant that religious observation among second and third-generation Maghrebis in France is declining.<sup>117</sup> Many of those assumed to be Muslim due to their ethnic background, such as the Beur community, do not in fact practice Islam at all. Hargreaves and Stenhouse, cited by Hargreaves, state that:

In numerous surveys, between a fifth and a third of young people from Muslim backgrounds regularly say they are not Islamic believers, and many of the others profess only a weak allegiance to the religion of their parents.'<sup>118</sup>

What emerges thus is a pattern indicating that many young Beurs profess to be Muslim for the sole purpose of appeasing their devout parents and older relatives. It becomes clear that for these young 'Muslim' non-believers, much like the case with other religions, Islam is, as an entity itself, unimportant and altogether restrictive and outdated. Symbolically however, Islam is inextricably linked to their relatives and roots.<sup>119</sup> To be seen to shun Islam would cause profound distress and anguish for their Muslim parents and relatives. Therefore, many of these self-professed 'Muslim atheists' purport to be believers as they do not wish to rupture familial relations and be seen to spurn what is for their elder relatives a salient element of their cultural heritage.<sup>120</sup> An example of this is author Azouz Begag, who Hargreaves notes does not consider himself Muslim.<sup>121</sup> Yet for Begag to admit this to his father would be 'too painful for him to hear'.<sup>122</sup>

Such a mark of respect towards their relatives, which could be argued is a salient feature of Islamic cultures, does not necessarily mean that Beurs are always at ease with their Islamic roots. Through the French education system they have been acculturated to

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<sup>116</sup> Hargreaves, *Multi-Ethnic France*, p. 106.

<sup>117</sup> Ibid.

<sup>118</sup> Ibid., p. 104.

<sup>119</sup> Ibid., p. 105.

<sup>120</sup> Ibid.

<sup>121</sup> Hargreaves, *Immigration and Identity in Beur Fiction*, p. 26.

<sup>122</sup> Ibid.

the principals of *laïcité*, in direct opposition to the values of their Muslim parents. *Laïcité* occupies a pivotal position in French society, as Giry affirms:

The real particularity of *laïcité* is the place it occupies in the French collective imagination. It is featured in the constitution-an honour bestowed on state secularism by no other European state and by only a couple of other democracies. For some French citizens, it has even become a sort of civil religion.<sup>123</sup>

State secularism is aimed at removing religious idolatry and paraphernalia from the public space, thereby neutralising it and upholding the government's secular ideology. Such is the pervasive effect of *laïcité* that those who are instructed in France's schools inevitably 'internalise the cultural codes of the dominant population'.<sup>124</sup> Apart from the omnipresent secularism endorsed by the French government, the mass media also plays a role in the adoption of French and western cultural norms by those of Maghrebi descent.<sup>125</sup> As these young people internalise the dominant western cultural codes in French society, the avenues of sexual liberation and personal decision making in regards to marriage, which their *français de souche* peers already enjoy, are at once opened up to them.

In reality this liberation is hindered by the attitudes of devout Muslim relatives, with women in particular being marginalised. Extra-marital sexual relations carried out by women are frowned upon within the Muslim community. Streiff-Fenart, cited by Hargreaves, notes that 'In France, the daughters of Muslim immigrants marrying a non-Muslim run a much higher risk of being shunned by their families than do sons who take non-Muslim spouses'.<sup>126</sup> Indeed, there is a trend for arranged marriages among particularly devout Muslims.<sup>127</sup> For example, in 2008 a young woman of Algerian origin was violently assaulted in Toulon by her mother and sisters, after having refused to go through with an

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<sup>123</sup> Giry, *France and its Muslims*, p. 90.

<sup>124</sup> Hargreaves, *Multi-Ethnic France*, p. 83.

<sup>125</sup> Ibid.

<sup>126</sup> Ibid., p. 97.

<sup>127</sup> Ibid., p. 102.

arranged marriage in Algeria.<sup>128</sup> While this case is extreme, Maghrebi parents in general tend to survey their children's choice of partners carefully. For example, exogamy in general is not encouraged, as it risks the dilution of cultural values and therefore the transmission of the same to future generations.<sup>129</sup>

This surveillance consequently causes major tensions between first-generation immigrants and their descendants. Having been raised in a culture permeated by *laïcité*, the Beurs, in general, see little attraction in the Islamic culture of their parents. On one hand they are resigned to classing themselves as Muslims, so as not to cause anguish to their more pious family members, yet on the other hand they are keen to assert the freedoms of a French secular society that are essentially natural to them, having been raised in France. Thus, they find themselves isolated from and unable to fully engage with the religion of their parental culture. Beur novelist Mehdi Charef, cited by Hargreaves, describes his frustration at the pressure placed on the Beurs to adhere to the values of Islam:

Ce qui me dérange avec la génération des premiers immigrés, c'est que la majorité d'entre eux voudrait que leurs enfants soient ce qu'ils sont ou ce qu'ils ont été. A la maison, c'est tout le temps : 'Attention, ne fais pas ci, parce que tu es Arabe... Ne fais pas ça... N'oublie pas que tu es Musulman !' Dans la rue, le gosse se retrouve carrément dans un autre monde que les parents ignorent. Il est déchiré et c'est ce déchirement qui me dérange. C'est ce déchirement qui fait souffrir les jeunes.<sup>130</sup>

The importance of Islam to their parents is not the only factor that isolates Beurs from their parental culture, however. They have also become linguistically alienated from the Maghreb as a result of their upbringing in France. Arabic and Berber, the languages of their parents' homelands do not play a large role in the lives of the Beurs. While their parents may speak to their children in these languages, there is evidence to suggest that the overwhelming influence of the French language in the education system and the media means they have little impact. For example, Hargreaves notes that:

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<sup>128</sup> 'Mariage forcé: Une lycéenne agressée par sa famille', *Le Figaro*, 11 November 2008, in 'lefigaro.fr', <<http://www.lefigaro.fr/actualite-france/2008/11/11/01016-20081111ARTFIG00347-mariage-force-une-lyceenne-agressee-par-sa-famille-.php>>, [accessed 12 June 2012].

<sup>129</sup> Hargreaves, *Multi-Ethnic France*, p. 94.

<sup>130</sup> Hargreaves, *Immigration and Identity in Beur Fiction*, p. 20.

Most Beurs can understand a limited amount of spoken Arabic or Berber, and can respond with at least a few phrases of their own; very few can read or write more than a few words in either of these languages.<sup>131</sup>

Tuition in Arabic provided by the Algerian, Tunisian and Moroccan states in French primary schools has only served to compound this situation, providing lessons in classical Arabic, a written standard much different to the oral Arab dialects and Berber languages spoken in the home.<sup>132</sup> This has led to much confusion amongst children receiving these lessons, and consequently impacted negatively on the dissemination of Arabic and Berber in France. Thus, the loss of their 'literal' mother tongue alienates them further from their parental culture.<sup>133</sup>

This is particularly evident for the Beurs who travel to the Maghreb. Immersed in Arabic and Berber languages they are left unable to communicate and are alienated from the local community. This only serves to reinforce their foreignness in the eyes of the locals, who disparagingly dub the Beurs 'les Arabes de France'.<sup>134</sup> Hargreaves observes that the Beurs are the victims of discrimination in the Maghreb, noting:

In North Africa, despite official claims to the contrary, they are not uncommonly despised as Frenchified outsiders. Tales of discrimination at the hands of those in authority in Algeria, whether customs officers at the point of entry or imams in remote village mosques, are legion.<sup>135</sup>

Indeed, even if the Beurs were accepted into mainstream Maghrebi society, they would find themselves in the midst of a culture clash, having internalised the secular and egalitarian values of France. These values are in opposition to those cherished in the Maghreb, where Islam prevails and gender equality does not have the same significance as

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<sup>131</sup> Alec G. Hargreaves, 'Language and Identity in Beur Culture', *French Cultural Studies*, 1 (1990), 47-58, (p.49).

<sup>132</sup> Ibid.

<sup>133</sup> Hargreaves, *Language and Identity in Beur Culture*, p. 48.

<sup>134</sup> Samia Mehrez, 'Azouz Begag; Un di zafas di bidoufile or The Beur Writer: A Question of Territory', *Yale French Studies*, 82.1 (1993), 25-42 (p.29).

<sup>135</sup> Alec G. Hargreaves, 'Resistance and Identity in Beur Narratives', *Modern Fiction Studies*, 35.1 (1989), 87-102 (p.91).

in France.<sup>136</sup> In essence, it is a society and culture which is alien to them, thus a society from which they find themselves alienated and unable to engage with. It would be misleading to suggest, however, that France has provided the Beurs with a sense of belonging which their parental culture has not. Next, the Beurs' experience of institutionalised discrimination and rejection in French society will be explored.

As noted previously, the Beurs have become increasingly isolated from their parental culture. Their upbringing in France has led to their internalisation of French cultural codes and customs, with evidence to suggest that Beurs hold the same 'aspirations and values as their majority ethnic peers'.<sup>137</sup> This affinity with French values has not been enough to secure an easy passage into French society, however. On the contrary, the Beur community has often been the target of discrimination and hostility in France. To be explored in this section are the many facets in which the Beurs community is discriminated against in French society, including the spheres of employment and education. Thus, it will be shown that the Beurs experience alienation and isolation from French society, as well as their parental culture.

Within the taxonomy of ethnic minorities residing in France, Maghrebis, particularly those of Algerian origin, appear at the bottom in terms of their perceived ability to integrate into French society.<sup>138</sup> Islam is perceived as one of the primary reasons for this, however there are other contributory factors.<sup>139</sup> The most prominent of these is the volatile relationship between France and its former colonies, particularly Algeria. Wounds in the French national psyche following the Algerian War of Independence still remain. It is well noted that the topic is a source of discomfiture for many within France, with the state experiencing a kind of amnesia in regards to the war. Derderian asserts that 'the

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<sup>136</sup> Hargreaves, *Immigration and Identity in Beur Fiction*, p. 23.

<sup>137</sup> Hargreaves, *Multi-Ethnic France*, p. 5.

<sup>138</sup> *Ibid.*, p144.

<sup>139</sup> *Ibid.*, p146.

French state has pursued wilful forgetting as its primary strategy toward the Algerian War and, one might add, much of the imperial past.<sup>140</sup>

This wilful forgetting becomes a great deal more problematic however, when ghosts from the war appear in French society in the form of Algerian immigrants and their descendants. Haunted by both the brutal manner in which the Algerian War was executed and the schism that it caused in the seemingly indivisible Republic, the French are resigned to reside amongst those whom they formerly colonised, encountering them on a daily basis. Moroccan and Tunisian immigrants and their children fare marginally better in French society than Algerians, as their independence incurred less French losses than that of Algeria.<sup>141</sup> Nevertheless, attitudes towards Maghrebis and their offspring residing in France are, in general, hostile. This hostility is converted into discrimination and the systematic alienation of this demographic. Some facets of this isolation will be explored in this section.

This imposed alienation manifests in many ways, perhaps most clearly in the spatial isolation of the Beurs in the *banlieue*. Their marginal position on the periphery of the city, often in quasi-tenement buildings, means they are effectively exiled from the majority middle-class population, as they left these areas in the 1970s and 80s.<sup>142</sup> This in turn led to what Fagyal identifies as the ‘paupérisation totale de certains quartiers périphériques’.<sup>143</sup> To dwell in the *banlieue* is generally not a choice but rather the majority of those who reside there do so by default or are lured there by cheap rates of rent.<sup>144</sup> Thus, they are resigned to residing in *les cités*, kept at a distance from the centre and the majority

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<sup>140</sup> Richard L. Derderian, ‘Algeria as a lieu de mémoire: Ethnic Minority Memory and National Identity in Contemporary France in Radical History Review’, *Radical History Review*, 83 (2002), 28-43 (p.29).

<sup>141</sup> Hargreaves, *Multi-Ethnic France*, p. 13.

<sup>142</sup> Robert Castel, ‘La discrimination négative: Le déficit de citoyenneté des jeunes de banlieue’, *Annales. Histoire, Sciences Sociales*, 61.4 (2006), 777-808 (p.781).

<sup>143</sup> Zuzanna Fagyal, *Accents de banlieue: Aspects prosodiques du français populaire en contact avec les langues de l’immigration* (Paris: L’Harmattan, 2010), p. 53.

<sup>144</sup> Stébé, p. 89.

ethnic population. In his analysis on the spatial formation of the *banlieue*, Michel Laronde invokes the image of a panoptic prison<sup>145</sup>, with the city centre acting as the central tower and the *banlieue* assuming the function of the prison cells under constant surveillance.<sup>146</sup> Using this analogy, Laronde asserts that the ethnic minorities dwelling in the *banlieue* are demonised by the French government, being kept at safe distance from the centre yet close enough to be surveyed by French bureaucracy. Brinda J. Mehta builds on this theory, stating that ‘France’s postcolonial architecture was nevertheless based on colonial design in terms of the HLM’s dislocation from metropolitan centres’.<sup>147</sup> Taking these arguments into account, it could be argued that the ultimate aim of the French government is to render the *minorités visibles* invisible by placing them on the periphery of the city.

This geographical displacement of the Beurs is only one element of their alienation in French society. Employment has been an area of particular inequity for this community. It is well documented that children of Maghrebis on average perform poorly at school.<sup>148</sup> Moreover, they leave full-time education earlier than their *français de souche* counterparts. They are also more likely to partake in solely technical education, with limits them somewhat in terms of employment.<sup>149</sup> In a 2002 article in *The Economist*, author Tahar Ben Jelloun was quoted as claiming that ‘only 4 per cent of the children of immigrants get to university, compared with 25 per cent of their native contemporaries’.<sup>150</sup> None of this sets them up particularly well for employment. However, as Hargreaves notes, the children of Portuguese immigrants, though usually only reaching the same level of educational

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<sup>145</sup> A panopticon is a circular building consisting of a central tower surrounded by an exterior wall of cells. The philosophy behind the panopticon is that the prisoners could be observed without their knowledge. It was invented by eighteenth century philosopher and theorist Jeremy Bentham.

<sup>146</sup> Michel Laronde, *Autour du roman Beur* (Paris: L’Harmattan, 1993), p. 96.

<sup>147</sup> Brinda J. Mehta, ‘Negotiating Arab-Muslim Identity, Contested Citizenship, and Gender Ideologies in the Parisian Housing Projects: Faïza Guène’s *Kiffe kiffe demain*’, *Research in African Literatures*, 41.2 (2010), 173-202 (p.178).

<sup>148</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 57.

<sup>149</sup> Dominique Maillard, ‘The Muslims in France and the French Model of Integration’, *Mediterranean Quarterly*, 16.1 (2005), 62-28 (p.73).

<sup>150</sup> ‘A Question of Colour, a Matter of Faith’, in ‘[theeconomist.com](http://www.economist.com)’, <<http://www.economist.com/node/1428558>>, 14 November 2002, [accessed 05 May 2012].



attainment as Maghrebis descendants, have far more success in acquiring employment than the latter, due to family links within the construction industry in particular.<sup>151</sup> When one examines the matter then, it becomes clear that despite their comparatively low educational attainment, there is another element impeding Beurs from procuring employment-discrimination due to their national origin. In a 2010 study conducted by the INSEE (*l'Institut national de la statistique et des études économiques*) it was found that:

En moyenne entre 2005 et 2009, 86 % des hommes français âgés de 16 à 65 ans ont un emploi quand leurs deux parents sont français de naissance. Ils ne sont que 65 % quand au moins un de leurs parents est immigré et originaire d'un pays du Maghreb.<sup>152</sup>

Evidence of this is found in an article by Stéphanie Giry in 2006. She observes that:

Jean-Francois Amadiou, a Sorbonne professor who runs the Observatoire des Discriminations, a think tank that studies discrimination in the workplace, found that of two French job applicants with identical credentials, the one whose name sounded Moroccan was six times less likely to get an interview than the one whose name sounded Franco-French. (Of six factors tested, only one-being disabled-was more penalising than having North African roots.) A follow-up study confirmed that the prejudice was not about race or skin colour but about national origin.<sup>153</sup>

Initiatives such as the anonymous CV have attempted to prevent situations like the one quoted above but have ironically compounded the problem and have consequently been scrapped. For example, an article in *Le Monde* claimed that 'les candidats issus de l'immigration ont seulement une chance sur 22 de décrocher un entretien, contre une chance sur 10 lorsque leur CV n'est pas anonyme'.<sup>154</sup>

Indeed, Giry also remarks that those of Maghrebi origin are 'conspicuously absent from high-visibility posts, say, in top corporations and the media'.<sup>155</sup> Discrimination within employment on the basis of ethnicity and national origin has been banned in France since

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<sup>151</sup> Hargreaves, *Multi-Ethnic France*, p. 57.

<sup>152</sup> Romain Aeberhardt et al, 'Les écarts de taux d'emploi selon l'origine des parents : comment varient-ils avec l'âge et le diplôme?', Institut national de la statistique et des études économiques, in 'insee.fr', <[http://www.insee.fr/fr/ffc/docs\\_ffc/ref/FPORSOC10F.pdf](http://www.insee.fr/fr/ffc/docs_ffc/ref/FPORSOC10F.pdf)>, November 2010, [accessed 02 June 2012].

<sup>153</sup> Giry, p. 94.

<sup>154</sup> 'Le CV anonyme ne sera finalement pas généralisé', *Le Monde*, 17 August 2011, in 'lemonde.fr', <[http://www.lemonde.fr/societe/article/2011/08/17/le-cv-anonyme-ne-sera-finalement-pas-generalise\\_1560612\\_3224.html](http://www.lemonde.fr/societe/article/2011/08/17/le-cv-anonyme-ne-sera-finalement-pas-generalise_1560612_3224.html)>, [accessed 04 June 2012].

<sup>155</sup> Giry, p. 94.

1972, yet employers sometimes defy legislation in order to dissuade those of Maghrebi origin from applying for their jobs. When receiving inquiries about jobs from second and third-generation Maghrebis, some employers in the private sector simply and bluntly proclaim ‘No colored people, no Arabs, no Maghrebis’.<sup>156</sup>

Discrimination and racist attitudes towards the Beur community appear also at a political and institutional level. The most visible manifestation of this is the far-right political party, *le Front National*. For instance, despite the victory of socialist François Hollande in the 2012 presidential election, Marine Le Pen, candidate of the *Front National* won 18% of the vote in the first round, equating to roughly 6.4 million votes in her favour.<sup>157</sup> As part of her election campaign, Le Pen promised to reduce the number of immigrants entering France from 200,000 per annum to just 10,000.<sup>158</sup> While she did not explicitly condemn Beurs or Maghrebi immigrants during her campaign, she did make a point of not canvassing in the *banlieues* as ‘l’immense majorité de la population’ do not live there.<sup>159</sup> Le Pen’s avoidance of the *banlieue* is telling; it implicitly implies that those residing in *les quartiers* are not worth spending time on, as they are exterior to what constitutes as the French population. Le Pen’s father, Jean-Marie, is more forthright in his anti-immigrant statements. For example, in a 2010 biographical documentary he declared that he had bought a house in the countryside ‘pour permettre à mes enfants, qui habitaient le XVe (arrondissement de Paris), de voir des vaches au lieu de voir des Arabes.’<sup>160</sup> Anti-immigrant rhetoric is not exclusive to the *Front National*, however. As noted previously,

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<sup>156</sup> Hargreaves, *Multi-Ethnic France*, p. 58.

<sup>157</sup> ‘What next for Marine Le Pen’s National Front?’, in ‘bbc.co.uk’, <<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-europe-17824436>>, 24 April 2012, [accessed 20 June 2012].

<sup>158</sup> ‘Immigration: Stopper l’immigration, renforcer l’identité française’, in ‘marinelepen2012.fr’, <<http://www.marinelepen2012.fr/le-projet/autorite-de-letat/immigration/>>, 2012, [accessed 04 June 2012].

<sup>159</sup> ‘Marine Le Pen se félicite de ne pas aller en banlieue’, *Le Monde*, 10 April 2012, in ‘lemonde.fr’, <[http://www.lemonde.fr/election-presidentielle-2012/breve/2012/04/10/marine-le-pen-se-felicite-de-ne-pas-aller-en-banlieue\\_1683373\\_1471069.html](http://www.lemonde.fr/election-presidentielle-2012/breve/2012/04/10/marine-le-pen-se-felicite-de-ne-pas-aller-en-banlieue_1683373_1471069.html)>, [accessed 20 May 2012].

<sup>160</sup> ‘Le Pen préfère les vaches aux Arabes, Gollnisch le défend’, *Le Point*, 26 August 2010, in ‘lepoint.fr’, <[http://www.lepoint.fr/le-pen-prefere-les-vaches-aux-arabes-gollnisch-le-defend-26-08-2010-1228958\\_19.php](http://www.lepoint.fr/le-pen-prefere-les-vaches-aux-arabes-gollnisch-le-defend-26-08-2010-1228958_19.php)>, [accessed 11 June 2012].

Former President Nicolas Sarkozy polemically declared that those involved in the 2005 *banlieue* riots were ‘des voyous, des racailles’.<sup>161</sup> Before the 2012 presidential elections he claimed that there were ‘trop d’immigrés’ living in France, and tougher laws monitoring immigration would have to be put in place.<sup>162</sup>

Hostility towards those of Maghrebi origin has filtered into more localised forms of authority, in the form of the French police force. The policy of *contrôle d’identité* has allowed the *gendarmerie* to ask members of the public to produce a form of identification on demand. It has become evident however, that this policy has been somewhat abused by certain members of the police. For example, a 2009 study by the Open Society Justice Initiative found that ‘Les citoyens français d’origine mmigrée, et en particulier ceux d’origine nord-africaine et subsaharienne, se plaignent depuis longtemps de ce que les fonctionnaires de police les soumettent à des contrôles d’identité injustes, discriminatoires et dépourvus de nécessité’.<sup>163</sup> The report found that those of Arabic origin were seven times more likely to encounter a *contrôle d’identité* than Caucasians.<sup>164</sup> There have also been complaints from those of immigrant backgrounds about the frequency of the checks, as well as the manner in which they are conducted. For instance, one individual targeted by the police stated:

What we want is for the cops to be correct with us: ‘Hello, identity control, do you have your papers?’ But they go: ‘OK guys, you hassling it out? We’ll have a good time, then! Give me your identity card and shut your trap’. So you give it to him, and you shut your trap. No hello, no goodbye, they treat us like shit. (B, 17, looking for work.)<sup>165</sup>

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<sup>161</sup> ‘Nicolas Sarkozy continue de vilipender «racailles et voyous»’, *Le Monde*, 11 November 2005, in ‘lemonde.fr’, <[http://www.lemonde.fr/societe/article/2005/11/11/nicolas-sarkozy-persiste-et-signe-contre-les-racailles\\_709112\\_3224.html](http://www.lemonde.fr/societe/article/2005/11/11/nicolas-sarkozy-persiste-et-signe-contre-les-racailles_709112_3224.html)>, [accessed 17 May 2012].

<sup>162</sup> ‘Sarkozy répète qu’il y a «trop» d’immigrés en France’, *Le Point*, 01 May 2012, in ‘lepoint.fr’, <[http://www.lepoint.fr/politique/election-presidentielle-2012/sarkozy-repete-qu-il-y-a-trop-d-immigres-en-france-01-05-2012-1456926\\_324.php](http://www.lepoint.fr/politique/election-presidentielle-2012/sarkozy-repete-qu-il-y-a-trop-d-immigres-en-france-01-05-2012-1456926_324.php)>, accessed [13 June 2012].

<sup>163</sup> ‘Police et minorités visibles: les contrôles d’identité à Paris’ Open Society Justice Initiative, in ‘cnrs.fr’, <<http://www.cnrs.fr/inshs/recherche/docs-actualites/rapport-facies.pdf>>, 03 September 2009, [accessed 10/06/2012].

<sup>164</sup> Ibid.

<sup>165</sup> Laurent Mucchielli, ‘Autumn 2005: A Review of the Most Important Riot in the History of French Contemporary Society’, *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 35.5 (2009), 731-751 (p.741).

This discrimination and hostility is perhaps reflective of what appears to be a widespread enmity towards those of Maghrebi origin in France. For instance, Body-Gendrot quotes a 1998 government survey which found that ‘18 per cent of the French admit that they are ‘rather racist’, while 40 per cent hint that they are tempted by racist thoughts’.<sup>166</sup> As previously established, the bulk of this hostility is directed towards the North African community. They are a group which has been the target of aggression and violence, with Hargreaves stating that ‘In the period between 1980 and 1993 Maghrebis, who represented less than 40 per cent of the foreign population, accounted for 78 per cent of all those injured and 92 per cent of those killed in attacks officially classified as racist’.<sup>167</sup> This situation has not changed much in recent years, with a 2009 report by *la Commission nationale consultative des droits de l’Homme* stating that ‘Les membres de la communauté maghrébine ont été les plus touchés [...] par des actes de violence raciste (33,64% du total, soit presque un acte sur trois) et par des menaces ou actes d’intimidation racistes (29,77%)’.<sup>168</sup>

Thus, the Beurs find themselves in a precarious position. Unable to relate to their parental culture yet alienated and discriminated against by French society, they are left with a sense of displacement and homelessness. They are rootless, drifting between cultures and belief-systems, yet finding a sense of identity and belonging in neither. This phenomenon is described by Salman Rushdie as ‘double unbelonging’, a painful division of the self.<sup>169</sup> The Beurs must negotiate a dual-cultural existence, shifting from the values and beliefs of their parents to those of France when required. It emerges that these children

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<sup>166</sup> Sophie Body-Gendrot, ‘Living apart or together with our differences? French cities at a crossroads’, *Ethnicities*, 2.3 (2002), 367-385 (p.371).

<sup>167</sup> Hargreaves, *Multi-Ethnic France*, p. 146.

<sup>168</sup> ‘Racisme en France: «flambée» de violence’, *Le Nouvel Observateur*, 31 May 2010, in ‘nouvelobs.com’, <<http://tempsreel.nouvelobs.com/societe/20100531.OBS4773/racisme-en-france-flambee-des-violences.html>>, [accessed 17 June 2012].

<sup>169</sup> Dominic Thomas, *Black France; Colonialism, Immigration and Transnationalism* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2007), p. 12.

of immigrants, though often not actual immigrants themselves, are in a constant state of flux, forced to migrate between different cultures within the territory of France itself, as Nada Elia proposes:

Another type of migration, the daily commuting between a Muslim, Arabic-speaking home where tradition-upholding parents reminisce about North Africa as they prepare cous-cous and meschwi, and the streets of the only city they know, the French metropolis with its corner bistros, its secular culture, and the growing racism of Jean-Marie Le Pen supporters and neo-Nazi skin-heads.<sup>170</sup>

This perpetual micro-migration from private to public sphere, from African culture to French, is disorientating and reaffirms the quasi-nomadic status of second and third-generation Maghrebis within France today. They are left unable to attach themselves fully to either Maghrebi or French culture and thus are left without a coherent sense of identity. Moreover, the apparent umbrella-term of immigrant has remained for those descendants of Arabic or Berber ethnicity, leaving them suspended somewhere between French and Maghrebi nationality.<sup>171</sup>

This ‘déchirement’ is undoubtedly problematical for those who experience it, but it is clear that in order to overcome this Maghrebi/French divide it is necessary to cease searching for a ready-made identity and rather actively create a new one.<sup>172</sup> These children of immigrants need not spend their existence struggling to fashion an exclusively French or Maghrebi identity for themselves. Rather, through embracing their unbelonging they can supersede their need to pledge allegiance to one nation and create a third, unique identity. This will be explored in the next section of the chapter.

## **2.2: The Formation of a New Identity**

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<sup>170</sup> Nada Elia, ‘In the Making; Beur Fiction and Identity Construction’, *World Literature Today*, 71.1 (1997), 47-54 (p.47).

<sup>171</sup> Lata Murugkar, ‘Beurs and Beurettes of France: Crisis of Identity’, *Economic and Political Weekly*, 29.38 (1994), 2476-2478, (p.2476).

<sup>172</sup> Hargreaves, *Immigration and Identity in Beur Fiction*, p. 20.

In the first section of this chapter it was established that second and third-generation Maghrebis find themselves in a most precarious position in French society, lodged between two nations and cultures full of contradictions. This section seeks to investigate the formation of the Beur identity, a possible escape from the predicament of double-marginalisation. Hargreaves notes that the sensation of double-isolation is disorientating for the Beurs, often resulting in a full-blown identity crisis, leading to adolescent delinquency, petty crime and drug-taking in the *banlieue*.<sup>173</sup> Indeed, much of the violence perpetrated in the *banlieue* can be attributed to the sense of marginalisation, alienation and apathy encountered by those residing there. For instance, the now infamous riots that took place within the *banlieue* in the winter of 2005 were born not out of fervent Islamism as the press and right-wing politicians depicted. Rather, they were the culmination of the frustration of living on the periphery of society, attempting to integrate into French society yet being hindered by discrimination from the majority ethnic population.<sup>174</sup> There is also a phenomenon of violence against women, including sexual violence, carried out within the *banlieue* by a small number of traditionalist Muslim men, who, in the face of racism from the ethnic majority, seek to maintain control over the female members of their family in a flawed attempt to gain a sense of stability and power in their lives.<sup>175</sup>

What can be done then to remedy this perturbing crisis of identity and to avoid the cycle of violence and hatred? Is there a manner in which second and third-generation Maghrebis can fashion for themselves a true sense of belonging? The answer it would seem is not an obligation to choose between the crystallised, conflicting forms of identity that have been thrust upon them — that of French culture and their parental culture — but

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<sup>173</sup> Alec G. Hargreaves, 'Beur Fiction; Voices from the Immigrant Community in France', *The French Review*, 62.4 (1989), 661-668 (p.662).

<sup>174</sup> Hargreaves, *Multi-Ethnic France*, p. 8.

<sup>175</sup> Alec G. Hargreaves, 'Testimony, Co-Authorship, and Dispossession among Women of Maghrebi Origin in France', *Research in African Literatures*, 37.1 (2006), 42-54 (p.45).

rather to create a new identity of their own. The children of Maghrebi immigrants are lodged precariously between two cultures, and occupy a 'third space of enunciation', a term coined by post-colonial theorist Homi Bhabha. Bhabha, cited in Thomas, states that this third space is 'the "inter"- the cutting edge of translation and negotiation, the in-between space- that carries the burden of meaning in culture'.<sup>176</sup> Considered neither fully French nor wholly Maghrebi, the descendants of Maghrebi immigrants inadvertently occupy this ambiguous space as cultural hybrids,<sup>177</sup> a sort of postcolonial equivalent to what Tyler Stovall refers to as the 'classical colonial stereotype of the *métis*, or the tragic mulatto'.<sup>178</sup> While second and third-generation Maghrebis occupy this space by default due to their bi-national condition, they have learned to embrace it, thus superseding the dual-cultural barriers that previously confined and defined them. The third space, though itself ambivalent, has been utilised by the children of Maghrebis as an empowering entity which allows them a certain degree of control in their lives, thus enabling them to rally against the supposed norms of their parents' culture and that of France.<sup>179</sup>

Rather than assuming that personal identity is something rigid and fixed, the postmodern view of the topic conceives of it as something altogether more fluid, unanchored and susceptible to change and outside influence.<sup>180</sup> If this is taken into consideration, it is not surprising that individuals do not find themselves tied to one crystallised sense of identity but rather regularly switch between identities, depending on the socio-cultural group with which they are in contact. In the case of second and third-generation Maghrebis, they too move between secular French and Islamic Maghrebi

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<sup>176</sup> Thomas, p. 12.

<sup>177</sup> The term 'hybrid' should be used with caution; here it is not intended to have any biological or racial connotations but is used rather in the sense of an individual or group who has or have inherited and experienced two cultures and *ipso facto* find themselves at the juncture of these cultures.

<sup>178</sup> Tyler Stovall, 'From Red Belt to Black Belt: Race, Class and Urban Marginality in Twentieth Century Paris', *L'Esprit Créateur*, 41.3 (2001), 9-23 (p.12).

<sup>179</sup> Meaghan Emery, 'Azouz Begag's "Le Gone du Chaâba": Discovering the Beur Subject in the Margins', *The French Review*, 77.6 (2004), 1151-1164 (p.1152).

<sup>180</sup> Hargreaves, *Multi-Ethnic France*, p. 82.

identities on a regular basis. While they can relate to both of these identities in different manners, it would seem necessary to resort to a third, supra-national identity to gain a real sense of belonging.

This third identity takes shape through the appropriation of the Beur identity. The term 'Beur' originated in the 1970s and denotes those of Maghrebi descent residing in France, mostly in the *banlieue*. Etymologically the word is the *verlan*-ised form of 'Arabe', though there is also a school of thought that claims it actually is a reference to the 'Berbères d'Europe', though this assertion has been dismissed by Beurs themselves.<sup>181</sup> The word is turned back to front in an attempt to symbolically break away from the purely Arabic identity by which these second and third-generation Maghrebis often themselves defined. It is a loaded term, however, as its popularisation and use within the media led to its rejection by some Beurs themselves, as its ubiquity negated its sense of subversion.<sup>182</sup> There is also some resistance among Beurs themselves to the use of the term 'Beur', as it is seen as a Parisian invention and so does not represent second and third-generation Maghrebis based in other French cities such as Lyon and Marseilles.

Nevertheless, what the term Beur represents is a type of suburban youth counter-culture, a form of resistance to their alienation in French society and a form of escape from being defined solely on the basis of their Arabic origin. It must be noted that through the creation of this identity they do not attempt to deny their Maghrebi ethnicity; indeed, the Beurs are mostly proud of their parents' culture, and while they do not wish to be defined by it, it would be considered an insult to claim that by embracing their Beur identity they are denying their Arabic roots.<sup>183</sup> In any case, their ethnic and national origin cannot be disavowed, particularly not merely through the assumption of a new, third identity. As previously noted the Beurs have been acculturated to French norms and values, and have

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<sup>181</sup> Hargreaves, *Immigration and Identity in Beur Fiction*, p. 30.

<sup>182</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 31.

<sup>183</sup> Hargreaves, 'Resistance and Identity in Beur Narratives', p. 94.



for the most part the same aspirations as their *français de souche* peers. Their desire to resist this culture therefore to a certain extent stems from their relative non-acceptance in it, rather than their antipathy towards the norms and values of French society itself.

As established previously, the sense of double unbelonging experienced by the Beurs due to their bi-cultural, bi-national condition is often a debilitating experience. However, through the creation of the Beur identity itself, they not only find a way to accept their unbelonging but also they assert a right to it.<sup>184</sup> Thus their once disconcerting unbelonging becomes an entity on which they can capitalise. Instead of tirelessly making efforts to assimilate into French society while simultaneously purporting to uphold the values of their parental culture, the Beurs can use the sensation of unbelonging born out of this struggle as a form of resistance. Given the fact that the feeling of double isolation is experienced by many young Beurs residing in the *banlieue*, a sense of unity in the midst of adversity emerges. Unbelonging therefore becomes a tangible entity to which Beurs feel they can, somewhat ironically, belong.

How do the Beurs then express their novel identity and what is achieved through the expression of it? The first public manifestation of Beur identity came about in ‘la Marche pour l’égalité et contre le racisme’ which became widely known as ‘la Marche des Beurs’ in the winter of 1983. The march from Marseilles to Paris became a symbol of the united identity of the Beurs that had formed in the *banlieue* and was their first collective manifestation of political resistance. The march not only highlighted the plight of the Beurs in terms of discrimination in relation to unemployment and racism, but also exposed their unique identity to the media and thus the wider French public. Subsequently, the term ‘Beur’ became a term increasingly adopted by the media, much to the dismay of many

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<sup>184</sup> Mireille Rosello and Richard Bjornson, ‘The “Beur Nation”: Toward a Theory of «Departenance»’, *Research in African Literatures*, 24.3 (1993), 13-24 (p.23).

Beurs themselves, as they felt that the word was being somewhat usurped.<sup>185</sup> Nevertheless, the term's fashionable status within media parlance helped to raise the profile of the Beurs. Beur identity and culture was then further disseminated through numerous forms of cultural production; theatre productions, music, through the media (radio, as in the case of Radio Beur), films and literature. The expression of the tensions arising from the Beurs' precarious position between French culture and that of their parents is played out through these outlets, in a form of quasi-cathartic resistance to the dominant cultural forces that surround them.

A form of resistance and expression that has been particularly potent is the use of the word, both written and spoken, to lend a voice to the Beur community residing in the *banlieue*. The employment of literature as a medium to highlight the marginalised position of Beurs will be examined in the next chapter of this work. In the next section of this chapter however, the Beurs' use of the spoken word in the context of the speech-form *verlan* will be analysed in order to evaluate its particular role in the linguistic representation of the Beurs' identity. Consequently, the sociological complexity of *verlan* will be shown, thus affirming the linguistic legitimacy of *la banlieue*.

### **2.3: *Verlan* as a Supra-national Linguistic Code**

This section of the chapter is concerned with analysis of the linguistic phenomenon of *verlan* in the context of its sociological implications for the *banlieue* and those residing within it. In the previous section we have seen that the descendants of Maghrebi immigrants, who have endured a divided sense of self due to their dual heritage, have found solace in embracing their bi-cultural condition, leading to the creation of the Beur identity. Just as this Beur identity transcends the French/Maghrebi schism, the speech forms that the Beurs have created, namely *verlan*, equally transcend this national, cultural

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<sup>185</sup> Hargreaves, *Immigration and Identity in Beur Fiction*, p. 31.

and linguistic barrier. To be explored in this section is the importance of *verlan* as a linguistic exemplification of the Beurs' innovative abilities and the desire to embrace their unbelonging. Thus, the status of *verlan* will be assessed in order to show that it is deserving of a title more prestigious than a mere word-game or street slang.

*Verlan*, stemming from the word '*l'envers*', is a type of speech form that consists of inverting the syllables in a word so that its spelling is effectively turned back to front. The result is a word, which although frequently retaining the same meaning as the original word, is often virtually unrecognisable in terms of orthography and when used in speech. Words that are *verlan*-ised are most often nouns and verbs, with pronouns and prepositions mostly left untouched.<sup>186</sup> The results of such linguistic gymnastics are combinations of initial consonants that are not typically found in the French language; (kt), (fs) and (ks) for example, are just a few of the consonant clusters appearing at the beginning of words due to the process of *verlan*-isation. Furthermore, pronounced consonants appear at the end of words in *verlan* more often than in standard French; for instance, the word *disque* changes to *skeud* when *verlan*-ised, with the 'd' in *skeud* pronounced.

*Verlan* as a linguistic practice emerged in the *cités* of the *banlieue* in the late 1970s. It was a practice initiated by the Beurs and is still spoken today, mostly among this group. Though it may be innovative, it is not the first lexical form of its kind. Some scholars trace the emergence of *verlan* to the Second World War, where 'French prisoners employed the technique in order to communicate with each other without being understood by their Nazi captors'.<sup>187</sup> On the other hand, it may be argued that *verlan* has its roots in an even older speech form, *le largonji des louchébèms* or butcher-slang originating in nineteenth-century

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<sup>186</sup> There are some exceptions to this rule, however; the relative pronouns *moi* and *toi* are sometimes *verlan*-ised to become *ouam* and *ouate* respectively. They are usually used in the context of *chez moi* and *chez toi*.

<sup>187</sup> Hargreaves, 'Resistance and Identity in Beur Narratives', p. 93.

France.<sup>188</sup> Furthermore, this type of word contortion is not exclusive to *l'Hexagone*. A similar type of inverted-syllable slang known as *Šatrovački* is found and practised in areas of Sarajevo, Bosnia and Herzegovina.<sup>189</sup> Indeed, *verlan* could even be likened to the Cockney rhyming slang spoken in the East End area of London.

While *verlan* may not be the first word-play of its kind, what it lacks in relative originality it makes up for in symbolic prowess. It is an active form of linguistic catharsis, offering a potential remedy to the precarious bi-cultural condition in which the Beurs unwillingly find themselves. Like the Beur identity itself, *verlan* is a product of active creation and choice, rather than an entity which is cast upon them and unsusceptible to change, like, for instance, their ethnic origin or their country of birth. It sits tentatively in the discursive space between the two dominant forces in the lives of the Beurs; the Maghrebi culture of their parents and the culture of France. These are represented on a daily basis through the languages spoken around them; Arabic or Berber, by their parents and relatives and standard French, by their teachers in school and their peers. Arabic has become inextricably linked with Islam<sup>190</sup> due to burgeoning nationalism in the Maghreb following decolonisation, while standard French is representative of secular, nominally egalitarian French culture.<sup>191</sup> To resist these dominant forces which appear in the form of languages, the Beurs themselves have created a linguistic form of resolution. *Verlan* falls between the poles of French and the Maghrebi languages. It is an intermediary linguistic space, which helps to fill the void between the Beurs' parental culture and the culture of

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<sup>188</sup> Barbara E. Bullock, 'Popular Derivation and Linguistic Inquiry: Les Javanais', *The French Review*, 70.2 (1996), 180-191 (p.182).

<sup>189</sup> Alma Sokolija, 'Etude contrastive des argots de Sarajevo et de Paris. Aspects méthodologique', *La Linguistique*, 38.1 (2002), 99-112 (p.104).

<sup>190</sup> It should be noted that much of what is perceived as being the Arabic language in France is in fact Tamazight, or Berber, of which there are many varieties. However, nationalist sentiment in the Maghreb, especially in the case of Algeria, following decolonisation, led to Berbers and Arab Muslims uniting through the use of Arabic as their main language. Therefore, Arabic is often seen as a symbol of Islam for Arab and Berber alike.

<sup>191</sup> Firoozeh Kashani-Sabet, p. 264.

France through a lexicon which is free from a predetermined cultural allegiance.<sup>192</sup> Moreover, through the twisting and contortion of words, the Beurs not only invert syllables but also shift the power balance from the hegemonic elements at play within French society to the subaltern by rendering the French language incomprehensible to uninitiated French natives themselves.

It is worth noting that *verlan* has a larger role to play in *banlieue* discourse than its function as an identity marker for the Beur community. Indeed, the socially and economically disempowered and disadvantaged communities residing within the *banlieue* do not consist exclusively of those of Maghrebi extraction. Though *verlan* is an essential element of the supra-national Beur identity, it also serves as a linguistic medium for the unification of both ethnic minorities and indeed the proportion of *français de souche* residing within the *banlieue*. *Les cités* of the *banlieue* are culturally heterogeneous spaces in which a vast proportion of France's ethnic minorities reside. Naturally, with cultural heterogeneity comes linguistic heterogeneity; a diverse linguistic landscape unfolds here consisting of French, Arabic, French Creoles, Portuguese and Berber languages. One would surmise that in such a varied linguistic setting that *le français standard*, as described by linguists Battye et al., would be adopted by inhabitants in order to communicate with each other effectively.<sup>193</sup> However, this is not the case. It is apparent that the purified variety of French favoured by institutions such as *l'Académie française* has not been adopted by most of those within *la banlieue*. In its place is an arguably more creative variety flavoured with borrowings from other languages, which has been created and practised by *les banlieusards* with great enthusiasm.<sup>194</sup> This lexically assorted variety of French, *le français contemporain des cités*, includes *verlan*.<sup>195</sup> Thus, the lexicon of *verlan*

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<sup>192</sup> Mehta, p. 197.

<sup>193</sup> Battye et al., p. 300.

<sup>194</sup> Goudailler, p. 20.

<sup>195</sup> Ibid.

has become increasingly peppered with various words from these tongues, underscoring its function as an entity which offers a compromise between often conflicting cultures. Sociolinguist Vivienne Méla remarks that ‘Le verlan en incorporant des mots d’origine arabe, africaine, créole, manouche, est en train de se « défranciser » et exprime une rupture avec la langue et la culture françaises’.<sup>196</sup> Méla’s notion that the addition of these non-French terms to the lexicon of *verlan* is leading to its ‘de-Frenchifying’ is not completely dissimilar to Brinda J. Mehta’s theory that these foreign words have a decolonising effect on the French language.<sup>197</sup> The addition of these terms, as well as the manipulation of French words, renders *verlan* tantamount to a foreign tongue to uninitiated French natives. Essentially through these actions Beurs and practitioners of *verlan* of various ethnicities shift the power balance from the former coloniser to the subaltern.<sup>198</sup> If we take into consideration the empowering properties of *verlan* like those discussed above, it emerges that *verlan* is a salient component of *banlieue* discourse and a creative and potent form of expression for the Beurs and other marginalised groups residing within the *banlieue*. Given *verlan*’s importance in reaffirming the Beur identity and lending a voice to the residents of the *cités*, what then is an appropriate definition of *verlan*? Is it still acceptable to refer to *verlan* as a word-game, a form of street-slang or a *langue de jeunes* given its sociological implications? This question shall be explored in more detail in the next section.

#### **2.4: Verlan: A New Definition?**

As noted in the previous section, *verlan* has been awarded various titles by scholars such as Lefkowitz and Méla in the past, branding it a form of speech-play or a *langue de jeunes* practised by adolescents residing in the *banlieue*. Others claim that it is more of a

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<sup>196</sup> Vivienne Méla, ‘Verlan 2000’, *Langue française*, 114 (1997), 16-34 (p.32).

<sup>197</sup> Mehta, p. 197.

<sup>198</sup> This is not unlike a reply to France’s declaration that Arabic become a *langue étrangère* in Algeria in 1938. Here, the Beurs and other speakers of *banlieue* based *verlan* are in a way rendering the French language a foreign language in its country of origin.

secret code, an oblique lexicon forged to conceal illegal or untoward undertakings. Here it will be shown however, that these titles are insufficient, given the sociological implications of *verlan*. Thus, this section seeks to advance a more accurate definition of *verlan*- a definition more reflective of its function as an identity marker for Beurs and similarly its unifying properties for other ethnic minorities residing in the *banlieue*. In bestowing this function upon *verlan* it will be shown that the *banlieue* is not a place where the French language is floundering, but rather where it is constantly being rejuvenated. Furthermore, it is a place where much derided slang has a more profound function than is traditionally recognised.

*Verlan* has all the hallmarks of a word-game and resembles closely a ‘ludling’, an umbrella term for speech-games and secret languages.<sup>199</sup> Given the fact that *verlan* is a genuine means of communication for many residing within the *banlieue*, to then reduce it to the status of a game or a form of play simplifies the matter to too large an extent. Indeed, Méla, notes that in interviews conducted with *banlieue* based *verlan* interlocutors, many of them refer to it as their second language. For example, one interviewee stated:

(Je parle verlan) comme tout jeune des cités : le verlan c'est un deuxième langage, je ne pense pas que c'est vulgaire, au contraire, c'est ma deuxième culture... de tous les jeunes des cités, ça fait partie de notre patrimoine, ce qu'on hérite des cités.<sup>200</sup>

Clearly, as this interviewee points out, *verlan* is more than a game invented to pass the time. It is in fact a viable manner in which to communicate for many within the *banlieue*. Moreover, while *verlan* may appear at first glance to be a mere inversion of syllables, it has a rather more sophisticated system of rules pertaining to the correct *verlan*-isation of disyllabic and trisyllabic words, with the precise positioning of consonants and vowels essential to correct *verlan*-isation. Méla encapsulates the dangers of underestimating the complexities of *verlan* succinctly:

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<sup>199</sup> Lefkowitz, p. 313.

<sup>200</sup> Vivienne Méla, ‘Le verlan ou le langage du miroir’, *Langages*, 101 (1991), 73-94 (p.91).

Le linguiste qui se penche sur le verlan retrouve d'abord la joie enfantine des jeux de mots piégés, des galipettes verbales. Mais comme tout enfant le sait, le jeu est une chose sérieuse. Jeu implique règles, règles impliquent conformité ; ainsi dans le monde à l'envers on retombe sur un autre ordre des choses qui, pour être à l'envers, n'en est pas moins contraignant et où transgresser les règles, c'est être exclu du jeu.<sup>201</sup>

As Méla notes here, the 'game' of *verlan* is a somewhat more ordered linguistic system than might first be imagined.

As well as the word-game tag, *verlan* is often referred to as a *langue des jeunes* by scholars of sociolinguistics.<sup>202</sup> *Verlan* is sometimes put forward as a kind of adolescent slang, perhaps with the implication that it is a teenage code to be outgrown and jettisoned in favour of standard French when adulthood is reached. Indeed, it cannot be denied that the demographic most likely to speak and embrace *verlan* is in fact the adolescent population of France, particularly those living within the *H.L.M.s* of the *banlieue*.<sup>203</sup> Thus, *verlan*, for all intents and purposes, is a youth language. The problem occurs when *verlan* is considered only in these terms. Youth language implies a lexicon forged by adolescents primarily to defy those in positions of authority, usually older family members or school teachers and secondly to create a badge of group identity.<sup>204</sup> The case of *verlan* is decidedly more complex. As noted, *verlan* is entwined with the formation of the Beur identity and the unification of ethnic minorities residing in the *banlieue*. It is not only a form of resistance to parents and other more localised forms of authority but more significantly to the hegemonic powers of a French state which appears to marginalise them socially and spatially, as noted earlier in the chapter. *Verlan* is a more politicised entity than a traditional *langue des jeunes*. As previously noted, former president Nicolas Sarkozy famously dubbed those involved in the *banlieue* riots of 2005 as *racaille*, which translates roughly into English as 'scum'. In an act of resistance to this claim, a proportion

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<sup>201</sup> Ibid., p. 73.

<sup>202</sup> Battye et al., p. 309.

<sup>203</sup> Albert Valdman, 'La Langue des faubourgs et des banlieues: de l'argot au français populaire', *The French Review*, 73.6 (2000), 1179-1192 (p. 1190).

<sup>204</sup> Battye et al., p. 308.



of Beurs then began to refer to themselves as *cailleras*, the *verlan*-ised form of *racaille*.<sup>205</sup> Through the manipulation of syllables achieved by *verlan*-isation, the Beurs and other practitioners of *verlan* at whom Sarkozy's comment was aimed appropriated the word for themselves, thus nullifying the comment's intended potency. A seemingly simple change in orthography, an altogether more profound political significance. Thus, it can be argued that *verlan* is a more substantial language-form than the traditional *langue des jeunes*.

Furthermore, *verlan* is often defined as a secret language, given its function as a coded lexicon of terms often pertaining to criminal activity. While the term 'secret' could be conceived as demonising *verlan* to a certain extent, it is necessary to be conscious of the fact that *verlan* began as a type of argot. Many forms of argot had their beginnings in somewhat dubious circumstances; the world of prisons, petty thieves, beggars and criminals, where creating a code with which to communicate helped them to conceal their subversive and unsavoury dealings, thus evading interference and investigation from the law.<sup>206</sup> Indeed, Vidocq's 1837 novel *Les Voleurs*, one of the most seminal works of literature using argot, is set within nineteenth century French prison life.<sup>207</sup> *Verlan* admittedly is no exception to the argot rule, with the variety used mostly *en banlieue* basing its vocabulary on rather questionable activities; petty crime and drug-taking are just a few examples.<sup>208</sup> However, the term 'secret' has the potential to taint *verlan*; it discreetly implies that *verlan* merely serves as a linguistic medium to facilitate their unsavoury undertakings. To imply that *verlan* is a coded lexicon for delinquents could be conceived as a somewhat simplified view. *Verlan* is indeed a code; syllables are shuffled to conceal

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<sup>205</sup> Ahmed Boubeker, 'Outsiders in the French Melting Pot: The Public Construction of Invisibility for Visible Minorities' in *Frenchness and the African Diaspora; Identity and Uprising in Contemporary France*, ed. By Charles Tshimanga, Didier Gondola and Peter J. Bloom (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2009), pp. 70-90 (p.88).

<sup>206</sup> Liogier, p. 42.

<sup>207</sup> Bullock, p. 181.

<sup>208</sup> Christian Bachmann and Luc Basier, 'Le verlan: langue de l'école ou des keums?', *Mots. Les langages du politique*, 8 (1984), 169-187 (p.178).

the meaning of words in order to exclude the uninitiated. However, the term ‘secret’ can no longer reasonably be applied to it. Beurs and other practitioners of *verlan* make use of it in various forms of cultural production, such as literature and music, proudly opening up this marker of their identity to the wider public. While *verlan* remains most definitely a code in which one must be initiated, the term ‘secret’ should be used with caution.

It has been advanced that terms such as word-game, youth-language or secret code do not accurately convey the true functions of *verlan* as an essential element of the Beur identity and a unifying medium for various ethnic groups within the *banlieue*. Within this context it is being argued that the term ‘supra-national linguistic code’ better and more accurately defines the linguistic phenomenon that is *verlan*. It is not dissimilar to the concept of a supra-ethnic language which Battye et al. define as a language which offers ‘both an alternative to internal language issues and ethnic conflict and provides ready-made links to the outside world’.<sup>209</sup> Essentially, it is a language which transcends the barrier of ethnicity allowing a sense of unification to be formed amongst citizens of differing linguistic backgrounds. Clearly the definition given by Battye et al. is in relation to a country in which language is an issue of contention, thus not directly applicable to the context of the *banlieue*. However, let us consider *verlan* not as a supra-ethnic language in the setting of a country but rather a supra-national linguistic code in terms of the *banlieue*. It is supra-national in the way that it allows the barriers and complexities of nationality, a contentious issue for those of Maghrebi extraction, to be temporarily superseded in favour of an entity which allows for compromise between Maghrebi and French cultures. It is a code in terms of the fact that it is an entity to which one must be inducted. For the Beurs, *verlan* is a way of surmounting the French/Maghrebi divide. It allows them to express themselves through a de-Frenchified form of French, interspersed with words from other

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<sup>209</sup> Battye et al., pp. 8-9.

languages found within the *banlieue*. While remaining a part of the French language under the guise of slang, it is essentially a supra-national linguistic space in which the Beurs can express themselves through a lexicon of mostly their own creation and which is not predetermined by either of the nations to which they are dual-heirs. When Maghrebi immigrants arrived in droves in France in the second half of the twentieth century in search of employment and better living conditions, there was speculation and fear that their offspring would form a supra-national identity through the unifying force of Islam.<sup>210</sup> However, the Beurs' relative lack of interest in the appropriation of their parents' religion led them to seek other means through which to remedy the sense of homelessness experienced due to their bi-national condition. The Beurs did indeed achieve a supra-national identity, though it was through the rather unexpected guise of the French language itself, widely considered a bastion of French national identity.<sup>211</sup>

Furthermore, apart from linguistically representing and enriching the culture of the Beurs, *verlan* has the potential to linguistically unite all those within *les cités* regardless of nationality or mother tongue in a stand against the hegemony of standard French. It is a lexicon that supersedes ethnicity and creates a supra-cultural linguistic space in which inhabitants of the *banlieue* can communicate and interact without hesitation, be they of Maghrebi, Antillean or French descent. It is a linguistic third space, one in which a counter-discourse is provided to the binary opposites of standard French/non-standard French.<sup>212</sup> It is a lexicon which is interspersed with vocabulary from various tongues found within *la banlieue* (Arab, Berber etc.) yet it avoids an allegiance to any specific culture; more than being a lexicon for those who are part of an ethnic minority exclusively, it is a lexicon for all those who are culturally and linguistically subordinated in French society. It is a cathartic process; in a creative and non-violent way they are expressing their non-

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<sup>210</sup> Murugkar, p. 2477.

<sup>211</sup> Enjelvin and Korac-Kakabadse, p. 153.

<sup>212</sup> Mehta, p. 196.

conformity with authority and the *bourgeoisie* who have relegated them to the suburbs. Brinda J. Mehta reaffirms the centring and unifying effect of *verlan* on those who feel at odds with French society and their parental culture, stating that ‘this language fills the void of homelessness by creating the necessary discursive space within which feelings of alienation and loss are decentred by a self-generated linguistic rapprochement between and among the dispossessed.’<sup>213</sup>

*Verlan*, when considered in purely linguistic terms, could be defined simply as a type of back-slang. However, when its sociological implications are analysed, it emerges that it is far more than a form of argot. Its function as a supra-national linguistic code lends it a depth which other types of back-slang do not possess. It is a linguistic medium for the unification of not only the Beur community, but many of the other immigrant communities within the *banlieue*, allowing them to communicate in a culturally homogenous discursive space.

What renders *verlan* more potent still is the fact that it is a positive linguistic product stemming from adversity. In creating the Beur identity, the Beur community reacted against the double-marginalisation they encountered. They capitalised on their difficult situation to convert their double unbelonging into a positive entity. *Verlan* is the product of this. The Beurs appropriated and expanded *verlan* in a cathartic process of positive lexical creativity. In doing so, they helped to lend a voice to the *banlieue* community and show the wider French population the creative capital of the *les cités*.

It must be acknowledged however, that while *verlan* is overall a positive element of French suburban discourse, as it reveals the innovative potential of the *banlieue*, its use could be interpreted as risking further alienation in French society. The French nation, as noted in the previous chapter, sees itself as a purely monolingual state, intolerant of deviances from *le français standard*. Consequently, *verlan* could be construed as a

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<sup>213</sup> Mehta, p. 197.

dangerous deviation from not only the French language but the values of the Republic. Thus, practitioners of *verlan* run the risk of isolating themselves further by resisting assimilation into French society. While the positive attributes of *verlan* as revealed in this chapter should not be disregarded in light of these statements as important factors in the struggle to assert the creative potential of the *banlieue*, it is likely that the second element of French suburban discourse to be examined in this work – Beur literature – will be perceived as a more substantial and realistic attestation of the linguistic capital of the *banlieue* in the eyes of French language purists. The reasons behind this will be explored in the next chapter.

### 3: Creative Forces within the French *banlieue*: Beur Literature and the Voice of the Subaltern

This chapter will highlight the linguistic capital of France's *banlieues* through the analysis of the literary production emerging from these areas. As established in the previous chapter, the linguistic phenomenon of *verlan* could be regarded as proof on a sociolinguistic level that France's *banlieues* are not linguistic ghettos. Owing to the inventive nature of *verlan* the *banlieues* are domains in which the French language is flourishing rather than floundering. Moreover, the Beurs have capitalised on their double-marginalisation to create a positive and creative linguistic code, which affirms their identity and aids the unification of other ethnic minorities in the *banlieue*.

The Beurs' utilisation of their double unbelonging to create a positive entity is not exclusive to the development of *verlan*. They also use the difficulties of their bi-cultural condition, as well as the negative aspects of *banlieue* life, as a springboard for insightful literary production. This chapter will analyse a corpus of four Beur narratives in order to highlight their astute representations of tensions and adversities experienced by Beurs living in the *banlieue* and the challenges they face in French society. This analysis seeks to demonstrate that, while the Beur novels deal with the difficulties inherent to *banlieue* life, the novels ultimately are positive literary products of the *banlieue*, as they give a voice to the subaltern and reveal the artistic capital of *les cités*.

Beur narratives most often recount tales of life within the *banlieue*, highlighting the predicament of those on the periphery of France's cities and society.<sup>214</sup> At the heart of most Beur novels is the perpetual quest for a definite sense of identity, something which has been denied to them owing to their dual-cultural heritage. The selected corpus of Beur works to be analysed in this dissertation consists of four novels. These range from Mehdi

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<sup>214</sup> Or Belgium, as is true in the case of author Leïla Houari.

Charef's *Le thé au harem d'Archy Ahmed*, published in 1983 to Faïza Guène's 2004 novel, *Kiffe kiffe demain*. Also included are *Zeida de nulle part* by Leïla Houari and *Le gone du Chaâba* by Azouz Begag. These novels were chosen in consideration of gender balance and date of publication. Moreover, the four authors all grew up in the *banlieue*; Charef, Begag and Guène spending their formative years in *bidonvilles* and *cités* in the French *banlieue*, Houari in the Belgian *banlieue*. It should be noted that Houari's inclusion in the corpus is considered relevant and appropriate in light of research conducted by Hargreaves, which argues that 'The North African community in Belgium has a very similar status to that of its counterpart in France, and Houari ranks to all intents and purposes as a Beur'.<sup>215</sup> Therefore, these authors are in a position to speak about the trials and tensions experienced by *Beurs* both inside the *banlieue* and in life in general.<sup>216</sup> The thematic and linguistic elements of their works will be analysed under three separate headings; (i) *Béton* as a symbol of despair in the Beur novel, (ii) Escapism in the Beur novel and (iii) Shame and identity in Azouz Begag's *Le gone du chaâba*. The analysis will show the *banlieue* not to be a linguistic ghetto as it is deemed by some parts of the media. Rather, it will confirm the *banlieue*'s artistic capital and linguistic legitimacy.

### **3.1: Béton as a Symbol of Despair in the Beur Novel**

This section will analyse the representation and recurrence of the leitmotif of *béton* in the novels *Le thé au harem d'Archy Ahmed*, *Kiffe kiffe demain* and *Zeida de nulle part*. Reflecting upon Michel Laronde's assertion that 'le béton appartient au monde du dur' *béton* will be explored as an architectural symbol of despair encountered by those residing

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<sup>215</sup> Hargreaves, *Immigration and Identity in Beur Fiction*, p. 5.

<sup>216</sup> It is difficult to ascertain whether the novels in the corpus are truly autobiographical. However, it is the concern of this work to analyse the novels as literary representations of the *banlieue*, whether they are semi-autobiographical, autobiographical or neither. Thus, the issue of autobiography is outside the parameters of this work.

in the *banlieue* in the above works.<sup>217</sup> By drawing parallels with the reality of living in the concrete world of the *cit *, this section of the chapter will underline the importance of Beur literature, not only as a form of literary production but also its role in appropriating a voice to those marginalised in the *banlieue*. Thus, the *banlieue* will be shown as a birthplace of insightful literature.

As noted earlier in this work, the *banlieue* is a place of segregation for France's economically disadvantaged immigrants, cut off from the city and positioned on its periphery, with only the RER tenuously linking it to the centre. In terms of architecture the *banlieues* are, in general, somewhat bleak. Constructed between the 1950s and 1970s as a solution to overcrowding in France's cities, these areas encountered numerous difficulties due to 'inadequate public transportation, few social amenities (and) few commercial facilities'.<sup>218</sup> Furthermore, the buildings themselves, known as the HLM or *habitations   loyer mod r *, were cheaply constructed, punctuated by 'substandard building material such as asbestos, inhospitable living conditions such as overcrowding, inadequate plumbing and electrical facilities; flimsy construction; light deprivation' in addition to 'an absence of green spaces' in the areas surrounding them.<sup>219</sup> The frustration experienced by the mostly immigrant inhabitants due to these abject living conditions has led to vandalism of public spaces in the *banlieue*. Body-Gendrot notes that the defacement of these buildings 'may also be seen as a reaction against the French state bureaucracy for putting tenants in the same identical mortar and concrete boxes without any sensitivity to ethnic and cultural preferences'.<sup>220</sup>

The notion that those dwelling in the *banlieue* are ill at ease with the suburban concrete jungle that is their home is reflected by the recurrence of the leitmotif of *b ton* in

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<sup>217</sup> Laronde, p. 99.

<sup>218</sup> Body-Gendrot, p. 373.

<sup>219</sup> Mehta, p. 178.

<sup>220</sup> Body-Gendrot, p. 373.



Mehdi Charef's first novel *Le thé au harem d'Archimède* (*Le thé.*) Here Charef, the son of Algerian immigrants and raised in the Paris conurbation, recounts the story of Madjid, a young Beur residing in the Parisian *banlieue*. Contrary to any exotic connotations evoked by the novel's title, it is a tale of the mundane exploits of the protagonist and his band of friends which take place between the concrete towers of a Parisian *cité*.<sup>221</sup> Here Charef paints a bleak picture of life in the *cités* of the *banlieue*. This is achieved for the most part through his use of the image of concrete which appears throughout the novel, as a symbol of despair and hopelessness experienced by the residents of the *banlieue*.

Charef first employs this motif in contrasting the artificiality of concrete with the titles given to the streets in the *cité* where Madjid resides, which bear the names of various types of flora 'Il allume une cigarette et quitte l'allée des Azalées, celle de son bâtiment, pour rejoindre celle des Acacias. Toutes les allées ici portent des noms de fleurs. La Cité des Fleurs, que ça s'appelle !!!'<sup>222</sup> The three exclamation marks that Charef uses at the end of the sentence are intended to highlight the irony of the nomenclature. That those who constructed Madjid's *cité* would name its streets after flowers is completely at odds with the reality of the *banlieue*, which Charef goes on to describe:

Du béton, des bagnoles en long, en large, en travers, de l'urine et des crottes de chiens. Des bâtiments hauts, longs, sans cœur ni âme [...] Le terrain de jeux, minuscule, ils l'ont grillagé! Les fleurs! Les fleurs![...] Et sur les murs de béton, des graffiti, des slogans, des appels de détresse, des S.O.S. en forme de poing levé.<sup>223</sup>

Evidently, attempting to appropriate the names of flowers to this type of *banlieue* constructed of concrete is flawed and inevitably serves to underline the grimness of the area. The only source of colour comes not from flowers or any natural substance, but from the graffiti which Charef describes above, serving to break the hegemony of the grey

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<sup>221</sup> The title of the novel actually springs from a misunderstanding between a character in the book, Balou, the son of Tunisian immigrants and his teacher, M. Raffin. Balou mistakenly translates the mathematical theorem '*le théorème d'Archimède*' as '*le thé au harem d'Archimède*' when asked to do so by M. Raffin. Thus, the title of the novel is taken from this cultural mix-up.

<sup>222</sup> Mehdi Charef, *Le thé au harem d'Archimède* (Paris: Mercure de France, 1983), p. 24.

<sup>223</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 24-25.

*béton*. The monochrome monotony is described further on in the novel, as Charef recounts the ‘neige grise de la banlieue’ and high above it ‘le béton devient livide, se confond avec le ciel gris’.<sup>224</sup> The artificiality and drabness of the concrete *cit * is posited further by Charef when he refers to Madjid and his mother Malika’s native village in Algeria, describing it thus:

Oualou! Apr s la f te! Il avait de la place pour jouer, on  tait en pleine campagne dans le Nord-Ouest alg rien, chez des paysans qui ne connaissent pas encore la ville, et s’en fichaient  perdument. Le soleil ne les quittaient pas de ses rayons, devait m me prendre du plaisir   la f te, car il cognait fort.<sup>225</sup>

Here the Maghreb is portrayed by the author as a place of joviality and warmth, with open spaces and endless sunshine. It is a space which represents the natural world, in opposition to the artificiality of the concrete *banlieue*. While, as noted above, the children of the Madjid’s *cit * have little space to play due to their ‘minuscule’ playground having been fenced off, Madjid had plenty of space in which to roam in his native village. Moreover, the ‘silence’ of the *b ton* in the *banlieue* is contrasted with the apparent jollity of the *f te*.<sup>226</sup> While Charef may be accused of being overly nostalgic here (he himself moved from the sun-soaked Maghreb to a wintry Paris *bidonville*) it is apparent that life in the Maghreb was more agreeable than in Madjid’s cramped, concrete-filled *cit *.<sup>227</sup>

While concrete is representative of the artificiality of the *banlieue*, it also permeates the consciousness of those living in the *cit s* to an extent that Charef claims they begin to internalise its hardness. Referring to the youth of the *banlieue* later in the novel, he states ‘Dans le b ton, qu’ils poussent, les enfants. Ils grandissent et lui ressemblent,   ce b ton sec et froid. Ils sont secs et froids aussi, durs, apparemment indestructibles, mais il y a aussi des fissures

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<sup>224</sup> Charef, p. 161.

<sup>225</sup> Ibid., p. 160.

<sup>226</sup> Ibid., p. 113.

<sup>227</sup> Hargreaves, *Immigration and Identity in Beur Fiction*, p. 13.

dans le béton'.<sup>228</sup> As Charef describes here, *béton* has a desensitising effect on the fictional youths of the *banlieue*, one which cannot be shaken off easily. He goes on to say:

On ne se remet pas du béton. Il est partout présent, pesant, dans les gestes, dans la voix, dans le langage, jusqu'au fond des yeux, jusqu'au bout des ongles [...] Il suit partout comme une ombre. Même au Pérou, il suivre celui qui est né dedans. Même dans le lit de la plus belle, de la plus riche.<sup>229</sup>

The repetition of the words 'dans' and 'jusqu'au' in the above quote add to the heavy, leaden sentiment associated with the *béton*, while the use of the term 'ombre' accentuates the dark grimness of the HLM's concrete façade. *Béton* has become an inescapable entity for Madjid and his neighbours. Even when one cannot see it, it still infiltrates the body and mind through its odour, 'celle qui dort au fond de la gorge'.<sup>230</sup> Charef makes many references in the novel to those residing in the *banlieue* attempting to escape its apparent stench, to no avail 'Tout a été essayé, toutes les bières, toutes les drogues. Rien. Elle reste, comme une chenille s'accroche à sa branche'.<sup>231</sup>

It becomes evident through analysis of *Le thé* that the author is keen to utilise *béton* as a metaphor for the hopelessness and tedium of life within the *banlieue*. The omnipresence of the sombre, grey colour of the concrete, combined with its cold, rigid physical attributes renders it an expression of the harshness of life within the *banlieue*. The towers of *béton* stand over the fictional *banlieusards*, creating a claustrophobic atmosphere and represent metaphorical obstacles to their advancement out of the *banlieue* and into mainstream French society. Charef attempts to show the reader that the placement of economically disadvantaged immigrants in the gloomy, artificial realm of the *banlieue* permeates their being.

The negative connotations associated with the image of concrete in the *cités* are also to be found in the works of Guène and Houari. *Kiffe kiffe demain* is the story of fifteen

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<sup>228</sup> Charef., p. 62.

<sup>229</sup> Ibid., p. 63.

<sup>230</sup> Ibid.

<sup>231</sup> Ibid.

year old Doria, the daughter of Moroccan immigrants who lives in the  *cité*  of  *Livry-Gargan*  in the north-eastern suburbs of Paris. Living alone with her mother in an HLM, Doria, the narrator of the book, recounts episodes from her mundane daily life, interspersed with daydreams and other anecdotes. While Guène does not emphasise the presence of  *béton*  to the same extent as Charef, she too utilises the image of concrete to highlight the grimness of the  *banlieue* . In one incident, a friend of Doria's mother telephones with the news that her son, Youssef, has been arrested on suspicion of selling narcotics. Doria and her mother's mood immediately drops upon hearing this news, as the boy had been close to the family. Doria then notes 'Juste, on regardait par la fenêtre et ça voulait tout dire. Dehors, il faisait gris comme le béton des immeubles et il pleuvait à très fines gouttes, comme si Dieu nous crachait dessus'.<sup>232</sup> Here Guène employs the image of the concrete HLM towers as a metaphor for the bleakness of the situation in which Doria and her mother find themselves. The  *béton*  blends with the grey of the sky to create a dull, monotone canvas, thus reflecting the despondency of Doria and her mother after having heard of Youssef's plight.

Further on in the novel, Doria informs us of a young woman named Samra who lives in her HLM. Samra's father and brother constantly survey her actions, with violent consequences if she returns home from school later than anticipated. Doria claims that Samra is trapped by them in a 'cage de béton'.<sup>233</sup> In likening Samra's apartment in the HLM to a concrete cage, Guène underlines  *béton* 's role as an imprisoning force in the  *banlieue* . As in Charef's  *Le thé* , concrete is portrayed here as an entity that metaphorically cements the residents of the  *banlieue*  in the  *banlieue* . The cage is not unlike a prison cell, trapping its occupants in concrete. Guène's use of  *béton*  imagery reflects that of Charef; it is symbolic of despair, despondency and incarceration. It is also reminiscent of Laronde's

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<sup>232</sup> Faïza Guène,  *Kiffe kiffe demain*  (Paris: Hachette Littératures, 2004), p. 70.

<sup>233</sup>  *Ibid.* , p. 92.

theory of the panoptic construction of the city and the *banlieue*, as examined in the previous chapter.

*Béton* receives little mention in *Zeida de nulle part* by Leïla Houari yet the references made to it are significant. The novel tells the story of Zeida, a young woman of Moroccan immigrant descent living in a Brussels *banlieue*, who travels to stay with her aunt in the Maghreb in the hope of forming a definite sense of personal identity. Houari uses *béton* imagery to underline the artificiality of Europe, in comparison with the Maghreb. Speaking to an unknown figure, presumably an individual originating from the Maghreb now residing in Belgium, she states ‘L’Europe, le béton, l’exil ne remplaceront jamais le vent d’encens, l’odeur lavande sur les femmes voilées que tu aimais’.<sup>234</sup> As Charef juxtaposed the concrete *cit * of Paris with the rural setting of his native village in the Maghreb in *Le th *, Houari here juxtaposes the artificial *b ton* of Europe with the natural fragrances of the Maghreb, that of incense and lavender. In doing so, she underlines the fundamental grimness of the city in which Zeida resides where she has experienced ‘huit ans de grisaille, de noir, de neige’.<sup>235</sup> *B ton* is, as in the works of Charef and Gu ne, used to symbolise artificiality and despondency in Houari’s novel.

It becomes apparent thus, that the leitmotif of *b ton* in *Le th *, *Kiffe kiffe demain* and *Zeida de nulle part* has come to symbolise the bleakness of life within the *banlieue*, as well as the artificiality of the *cit s*. As shown in the novels analysed, its omnipresent grey hue symbolises the tedium of *banlieue* life, while the rigidity and coolness of the concrete HLM towers pervade the consciousness of their inhabitants, leaving them hardened. As negative as the theme of *b ton* may be, its inclusion in the novels analysed is enlightening. Owing to the mass media, the majority of the French population are aware of the HLM towers and the general architectural landscape of the *banlieue* yet remain unaware of the

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<sup>234</sup> Leïla Houari, *Zeida de nulle part* (Paris: L’Harmattan, 1985), p. 17.

<sup>235</sup> Houari, p. 26.

effects of this structural design on its residents. The works of Charef, Guène and Houari work to combat this obliviousness, with the novels gaining a large French, and global, readership. These authors use the proliferation of concrete to positive effect by writing about it in a literature which is accessible to the wider French readership. This literature sends a voice from the margins to the majority of the French nation, highlighting the pervasive effects of *béton* on the residents of the *banlieue*. This use of creativity serves to affirm the artistic capital of these areas. Thus, the scourge of *béton* has been the source of inspiration for the authors and ultimately leads to positive literary production.

### 3.2: Escapism in the Beur Novel

From the claustrophobia and monotony of *béton* stems the desire to flee from the *banlieue*. In this section the theme of escape in the Beur novel will be examined. To this end, two novels will be analysed; *Kiffe kiffe demain* and *Zeida de nulle part*. Escape is represented in various ways in these works; escape from the banality of the *banlieue* and escape from the double-marginalisation often experienced by the Beur community.

The theme of escape in *Kiffe kiffe demain* is based in the protagonist's attempts to escape her mundane and claustrophobic life in the *banlieue*. As established earlier in the chapter, Doria resides in an HLM tower with her mother in the Parisian suburb of *Livry-Gargan*. It is apparent from the outset of the novel that Doria attempts to escape, albeit temporarily, her buttoned-down life in her *cit *, which she sarcastically dubs 'La cit  du Paradis', reminiscent of the ironically named streets in Charef's narrative.<sup>236</sup> This escape is achieved through her daydreams and also through her asides in which she regales the reader with anecdotes from various television programmes.

Gu ne's attempt to convey Doria's sense of boredom at living in the *banlieue* is first underlined in the title of the book, *Kiffe kiffe demain*. The title is a play on the words

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<sup>236</sup> Gu ne, p. 90.

of the expression ‘kif-kif demain’ uttered by Doria and which roughly translates into English as ‘same again tomorrow’.<sup>237</sup> Doria seems convinced that she is condemned to aimlessly pass her time in the *banlieue*, with little changing in her life. Referring to her friend Hamoudi, who has recently acquired a girlfriend, she says ‘Au moins il se passe des choses dans sa vie. Alors que pour moi c’est kif-kif demain’.<sup>238</sup> Compounding her sense of hopelessness is her father’s abandonment of the family, as he left her mother for a younger woman in Morocco, in the hope that she could provide him with a son. Doria blames the abandonment on the notion of destiny ‘Quel destin de merde. Le destin, c’est la misère parce que t’y peux rien. Ça veut dire que quoi que tu fasses, tu te feras<sup>239</sup> toujours couiller’.<sup>240</sup> Her sense of dejection and impotence is evident in this statement. It appears that for Doria, the events in her life are predetermined by ‘le destin’.<sup>241</sup> She feels that she is ‘destined’ to be perpetually trapped in the *cit *, powerless to change her future. Furthermore, Doria’s sense of confinement in the banality of the *cit * is augmented by the physical barriers that surround it. She describes the dividing line between *Livry-Gargan* and the *zone pavillonnaire Rousseau*, a housing estate for middle-class, non-immigrant families, as ‘pire que la ligne Maginot ou le mur de Berlin’ with its ‘grillages immenses qui sentent la rouille tellement ils sont vieux et un mur de pierre tout le long’.<sup>242</sup> She goes on to describe the graffiti appearing on the side of the wall belonging to the *cit *, with her favourite being ‘un ange menott  avec une croix rouge sur la bouche’.<sup>243</sup> The silenced and bound angel in the image exemplifies Doria’s sense of claustrophobia and suppression,

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<sup>237</sup> Gu ne, p. 76.

<sup>238</sup> Ibid.

<sup>239</sup> *Se faire coullier* is a colloquial way of saying *se faire avoir*. In English the appropriate translation would be something like ‘to be had’ or the more argotic ‘to be screwed over.’

<sup>240</sup> Gu ne, p. 18.

<sup>241</sup> Ibid.

<sup>242</sup> Ibid., p. 90.

<sup>243</sup> Ibid.

with Guène hinting at a wider sense of repression experienced by those isolated in the *banlieue*.

Doria seeks to remedy the facileness of life in *Livry-Gargan* thus by attempting to escape it, not by physical means, but rather through her daydreams and her favourite pastime, the television. Her teachers comment on her sense of distraction in class. Doria describes some of the comments made by her teachers on her school report ‘Sinon, ce que je retrouve toujours et que j’appelle les appréciations récurrentes, c’est: « semble perdue » ou bien « semble ailleurs » ou, pire, des trucs qui font pitié, style: « Redescendez sur terre! »’<sup>244</sup> Indeed, it does seem that Doria has her head somewhat in the clouds. Guène devotes whole passages of the book to Doria’s fantasies, ranging from her description of her ideal husband to elaborate imaginings pertaining to the lives of those around her.<sup>245</sup> Describing the possibility of becoming an actress she says:

Je devrais peut-être faire ça au fond. Jouer la comédie. Faire du cinéma, c’est la classe quand même. Je connaîtrais la gloire, l’argent, les récompenses...Je me vois déjà au festival de Cannes, prendre la pose et sourire au troupeau de photographes en train de me flasher, habillée comme Sissi dans *Sissi impératrice*.<sup>246</sup>

As farfetched as her fantasies may seem, Doria has less extravagant aspirations too. In one episode Doria refers to an atlas, on which she draws a travel itinerary, marking off her intended ports of call as she dreams of travelling the world, though she tellingly notes ‘meme si je suis encore au point de départ et que le point de départ c’est Livry-Gargan’.<sup>247</sup> Her desire to leave the *banlieue* is further underlined in a dream she had one night in which she metamorphosed into a bird and flew high over her  *cité*, apparently on her way to freedom. Thus, her sense of being stifled in and confined to the *banlieue* is palpable.

Elsewhere, Guène makes reference to Doria’s fantasies in a passage in which her mother inadvertently buys her a pyjama top which she mistakes for a jumper. Across the

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<sup>244</sup> Guène, p. 45.

<sup>245</sup> Ibid., pp. 112, 23-24.

<sup>246</sup> Ibid., p. 141.

<sup>247</sup> Ibid., p. 73.



top is emblazoned 'Sweet dreams'. As neither Doria nor her mother could read English at the time of purchase, the error went unnoticed until Doria wore the item of clothing to school, where she was laughed at by her schoolmates. Though not directly part of Doria's fantasies, this anecdote serves to metaphorically underline the apparent futility of her imaginings; her propensity to daydream is juxtaposed with the jolting reality of her classmates teasing her. Further to this, as many passages in the novel are in reference to daydreams and imaginings, a substantial proportion of the text is written in the conditional and conditional perfect tenses. This underlines the protagonist's desire to move beyond her mundane present in the *banlieue* into a hypothetically brighter future. However, her placement of these musings not in the future tense but rather in the conditional signals that Doria may not truly believe in the viability of these dreams but rather uses them a diversion from everyday life.

In addition to her own daydreams are Doria's numerous references to mostly American television programmes. These programmes allow Doria to escape into a glossy world of romance and wholesome family values, diverting her temporarily from her rather more drab reality. She becomes dependent on the television to transport her from the *banlieue*, noting that 'S'ils nous coupent la télé comme ils nous ont coupé le telephone, c'est chaud. J'ai que ça'.<sup>248</sup> What seems like a rather harmless way for Doria to divert herself from the monotony of *banlieue* life is in fact rather more sinister. The images projected in these programmes reflect a life which, for a young woman of immigrant origin like Doria, is unattainable. As Brinda J. Mehta notes, Doria's favourite television programmes create 'psychological dependence through a "virtual consumerism," ensuring

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<sup>248</sup> Guène, p. 151.

that subalterns will always be reminded of “their place” in society through the overpowering and controlling potential of TV propaganda’.<sup>249</sup>

Nevertheless, through her daydreams and the television Doria has fashioned a way to provide temporary release from the tedium of *Livry-Gargan*. Through the fantastical images she creates in her mind and watches on her television screen she can momentarily transcend both the borders of her *cit * and the ‘mektoub’ (destiny) that ensnares her.<sup>250</sup>

By the end of the novel, life has somewhat brightened for Doria. Her mother has found a steady job and has learned to read and write. Doria herself has found romance and her prospects of employment seem improved, due to her hairdressing apprenticeship at the *Lyc e Louis Blanc*. Significantly, Doria’s catchphrase ‘kif-kif demain’ has changed to ‘kiffe-kiffe demain’, stemming from the verb *kiffer* meaning ‘to like’ by the end of the novel, a reflection of her change of attitude towards life.<sup>251</sup> Doria claimed at the beginning of the novel that the path of her life was predetermined and depended on the notion of destiny. At the end, she is in charge of her own fate. This positive ending can be read as a means of asserting that residents of the *banlieue* have the right to dream and have aspirations. They are not condemned to play out their days at the hands of destiny, but rather should have ambitions and desires. Gu ne’s novel is a positive literary product of the *banlieue* as it promotes the hope and positivity present within the area, thus empowering the subaltern by challenging the status quo.

The theme of escape also takes centre stage in Le ila Houari’s *Zeida de nulle part*, however it takes a rather different path than in *Kiffe kiffe demain*. As noted, Doria’s escape from her banal life in the *cit * is imagined. It is achieved through daydreams, dreams, musings and the world of television, as opposed to any physical form of escape. The protagonist’s escape in *Zeida de nulle part* is rather more tangible. Zeida, the daughter of

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<sup>249</sup> Mehta, p. 188.

<sup>250</sup> Gu ne, p. 151.

<sup>251</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 188.

Moroccan immigrants, has grown weary of her life in Brussels. Her domineering father seeks to control her actions, leading to her to flee the family home temporarily, with Zeida sensing that ‘une ombre me poursuit, me bloque, et je crois bien que toute ma vie sera tatouée’.<sup>252</sup> She returns out of respect for her parents, however, yet remains unhappy with her life. Caught between the culture of her parents and the culture of Belgium, she experiences the sensation of double-marginalisation so common to Beurs, as discussed in the previous chapter. As indicated in the title, Zeida feels as if she is from ‘nulle part’- neither Belgium nor Morocco. Left without a definite sense of personal identity, she indulges in a form of escape. Encouraged by the happy memories of a visit to Morocco when she was fifteen, she decides to travel there to live with her paternal aunt in anticipation of locating a sense of belonging. Indeed, the narrator readily admits that for Zeida ‘Ce n’était qu’une fuite, elle le savait, mais vivre autre chose et ailleurs, cela pouvait peut-être l’aider à échapper à toutes les contradictions dont elle souffrait’.<sup>253</sup>

Nevertheless, warmly welcomed to the rural village by her aunt, Zeida feels at ease to begin with. However, it becomes quickly apparent that here, as in Belgium, she is considered an outsider. A number of incidents indicate this, the first of which is her rather clumsy attempt to draw water from a well, as there is no running water available in the village. Her aunt recognises that Zeida is having difficulties and advises her ‘laisse faire mes enfants, le puits ce n’est pas pour toi, tes mains n’ont pas l’habitude.’, to which Zeida replies ‘Non, non, répondit-elle avec entêtement, j’apprendrai, même si je dois y perdre mes doigts’.<sup>254</sup> While Zeida’s determination is evident here, so too is her inexperience. Though this is supposed to be her ancestral home, she cannot complete the simple tasks that come naturally to the residents of the village, including even her aunt’s younger children. Further alienation ensues when Zeida’s aunt scolds her for straying from her

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<sup>252</sup> Houari, p. 39.

<sup>253</sup> Ibid., p. 41.

<sup>254</sup> Ibid., p. 42.

property to go for a walk, warning Zeida that the local dogs could have attacked her. Zeida appears nonplussed yet her aunt remarks ‘ « Fais attention quand même, tu as eu de la chance : en général ils sentent très vites les étrangers. » Zeida regarda sa tante bizarrement, étranger, qui est étranger ? C’est mon village ici, elle était triste maintenant’.<sup>255</sup> Evidently, the realisation that she is considered a stranger does not sit well with Zeida. After all, this is ‘her’ village. It is clear that Zeida is perceived as an outsider, not only by her aunt, but by the other inhabitants of the village. Taking a walk one evening in the village with her cousin Mustapha, she overhears the villagers discussing amongst themselves ‘Europe, Europe, fille d’Europe’ as she passes by.<sup>256</sup> ‘Dis, tu les entends, pour eux je ne suis plus la fille d’ici’, she remarks to Mustapha.<sup>257</sup> Moreover, as Najib Redouane notes, ‘Zeida se rend compte que les images de son enfance ne correspondent pas à la réalité’.<sup>258</sup> Her idealised visions of Morocco forged after her last visit there are countered by the reality of the country, as the narrator remarks ‘Les illusions font oublier bien des vérités et celles justement de ce pays bleu et dans le fond très misérable, pas aussi sentimental qu’elle avait cru’.<sup>259</sup> Jean Dejeux, cited by Redouane, remarks that ‘Le retour au Maroc avait été un désenchantement. Elle avait constaté ses désirs frustrés, ses contradictions d’immigrée acculturée dans le pays des ‘autres’.’<sup>260</sup>

Zeida herself seems convinced that Morocco is indeed ‘her’ country, yet grows weary of proving this to her aunt and the other villagers.<sup>261</sup> It becomes ever more apparent to Zeida that she will never truly be able to integrate into Maghrebi society, despite her most earnest of efforts. To her aunt and those around her she is merely a visitor, making

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<sup>255</sup> Houari, p. 43.

<sup>256</sup> Ibid., p. 68.

<sup>257</sup> Ibid.

<sup>258</sup> Najib Redouane, ‘«Zeida de nulle part» de Leïla Houari: l’écriture de l’entre-deux’, *Arabic and Middle Eastern Literatures*, 4.1 (2001), 43-52 (p.49).

<sup>259</sup> Houari, p. 77.

<sup>260</sup> Redouane, p. 49.

<sup>261</sup> Houari, p. 48.

quaint attempts to adapt to the local way of life, yet ultimately remaining a European outsider. Disheartened by this non-acceptance into village life, Houari concedes that for Zeida ‘le choix d’être retirée totalement de tout ce qui pouvait lui rappeler l’Europe n’avait fait qu’accentuer les contradictions qui l’habitaient’.<sup>262</sup> It becomes clear for Zeida however that she must learn to not only accept these contradictions from which she seeks to escape, but rather embrace them. Houari states that Zeida must ‘Chercher et encore chercher et trouver la richesse dans ses contradictions, la réponse devait être dans le doute et pas ailleurs’.<sup>263</sup> Her escape to Morocco has perhaps not brought her the desired solution to her double marginalisation, yet it has taught her to accept and capitalise on her situation in embracing its contradictions.<sup>264</sup>

This is in fact the salient message of the narrative. Redouane notes that in the preface to the novel, Martine Charlot suggests that Houari herself has capitalised upon her alienation through the cathartic process of writing, highlighting the creative possibilities for those doubly alienated.<sup>265</sup> This is reflected in Zeida’s realisation at the end of the novel that she must embrace the incongruities of her situation in order to find peace of mind. Thus, the novel sends a message to the Beurs that these difficulties can be used as catalysts for constructive cultural production and creativity. Once more, the Beur novel revolves around the converting of negatives into positives, obstacles into opportunities and thus projects a positive image of *banlieue* discourse to the wider French readership. This manipulation of adversity into cathartic creativity is reflected in Azouz Begag’s *Le gone du Chaâba*, the final Beur novel to be studied in this work.

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<sup>262</sup> Houari, p. 74.

<sup>263</sup> Ibid., p. 83.

<sup>264</sup> Redouane, p. 49.

<sup>265</sup> Ibid.

### 3.3: Shame and Identity in Azouz Begag's *Le gone du Chaâba*

*Le gone du Chaâba* is imbued with the theme of shame, resulting from the protagonist's feelings of betrayal of his roots. The novel recounts Azouz Begag's childhood in a Lyon bidonville, known to its residents as *le Chaâba*, and later his time spent in a newly constructed HLM in the Lyon *banlieue*. While the protagonists of the three other novels studied thus far have been based loosely on their respective authors, *Le gone du Chaâba* is the only novel in the selected corpus of this work that is proclaimed to be truly autobiographical.<sup>266</sup> In the novel, Begag documents his struggle with gaining acceptance from his peers and French society in general, while harbouring a deep sense of shame at his innate difference from the majority of the population.

Begag spent the first part of his childhood in the *Chaâba*, a *bidonville* without electricity and only rudimentary sanitation, with residents often living in make-shift huts known as *baraques*. Begag notes that 'un coup de vent brutal pourrait tout balayer d'une seule gifle'.<sup>267</sup> Most of the lavatories are located outside, with Azouz forced to wander out into the dark in the middle of the night, an experience which displeases him, as 'lorsqu'il fait noir, je sais qu'il ne faut pas aller aux toilettes, ça porte malheur, et puis c'est là que l'on trouve les djnoun, les esprits malins'.<sup>268</sup> Perhaps ironically, the outdoor toilets Begag refers to here evoke stereotypical images of the primitivism of the Maghreb before France's colonial *mission civilisatrice* in the nineteenth century. His reference to superstition and evil spirits compounds this. The primeval living conditions of the *Chaâba* are in stark contrast to those of Begag's *français de souche* school friends. He describes visits to his friend Alain's house with a combination of wonderment and shame:

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<sup>266</sup> Hargreaves, *Immigration and Identity in Beur Fiction*, p. 41.

<sup>267</sup> Azouz Begag, *Le gone du Chaâba* (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1986), p. 11.

<sup>268</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 13.

Et l'espace! Sa maison à lui, elle est aussi grande que notre *Chaâba* entier. Il a une chambre pour lui seul, un bureau avec des livres, une armoire pour son linge. À chaque visite, mes yeux en prennent plein leur pupille. Moi, j'ai honte de lui dire où j'habite. C'est pour ça qu'Alain n'a jamais venu au *Chaâba*.<sup>269</sup>

Azouz's sense of embarrassment at his own home is evident here. The *Chaâba*'s corrugated iron rooftops and dusty roads are not part of the image Begag wants to project about himself. Eager to assimilate into French society, Azouz attempts as best he can to separate his home life from that of school. It is not a simple task however, and the two spheres often unwittingly overlap. Azouz recounts an episode in which his *français de souche* classmates are engaging in a debate in class, under the direction of their teacher. Perplexed by some of the terminology used by these youngsters, Azouz reflects that they:

Prononcent les mots que je n'ai jamais entendus. J'ai honte. Il m'arrive souvent de parler au maître et de lui sortir des mots du Chaâba. Un jour, je lui ai même dit : « M'sieur, j'vous jure sur la tête d'ma mère qu'c'est vrai ! » Tout le monde a ri autour de moi.<sup>270</sup>

It is apparent that for Azouz the *Chaâba* is a byword for backwardness and a source of shame. Moreover, the *Chaâba* is symbolic of Azouz's Algerian heritage and immigrant background and the perceived primitivism of the Maghreb before the civilising mission of French colonialism. If he is to truly assimilate into French society then he decides it will be necessary to advance himself by a denial of these roots, declaring 'J'ai honte de mon ignorance... Depuis quelques mois j'ai décidé de changer de peau. Je veux être dans les premières places du classement, comme les Français'.<sup>271</sup> Reflecting on the debate in class, Azouz affirms his willingness to efface his Arabic origins in stating 'À partir d'aujourd'hui, terminé l'Arabe de la classe'.<sup>272</sup> For Azouz, this apparent denial of his roots is the only way to progress in French society. As Kathryn Lay-Chenhab and Tess Do note:

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<sup>269</sup> Begag, p. 58.

<sup>270</sup> Ibid.

<sup>271</sup> Ibid.

<sup>272</sup> Ibid., p. 59.

It is at the precise moment when the young Azouz realises that the Arabs are the weakest in the class that he decides to sit at the front, separating himself geographically and symbolically from the Arabs and siding with the French.<sup>273</sup>

Azouz's assimilation into French society can only be successful if he associates with his *français de souche* classmates, and effectively breaks away from the other boys from the *Chaâba* while attending school. This is not an unproblematic process, however. It provokes a reaction from these friends of Azouz who believe him to be a traitor to his family and relatives, claiming his association with his French peers and desire to progress in school render him no longer an Arab.<sup>274</sup> Azouz fervently denies this, but the boys from the *Chaâba* insist that he must choose his allegiance. Moussaoui, one of the boys, offers him an ultimatum: 'Je ne veux pas me battre avec toi, dit-il, parce que t'es un Algérien. Mais faut savoir si t'es avec eux ou avec nous !'<sup>275</sup> This incident elicits an intense feeling of shame in Azouz, as he recognises that what the boys are saying to him is true. In his quest for acceptance with his *français de souche* classmates, Azouz has denied his Arabic roots by choosing them over his friends from the *Chaâba*. Azouz momentarily shuns his French friends so as not to provoke more aggression from his Arabic friends 'Jean-Marc a essayé de me parler...je lui ai répondu de se taire parce que M. Grand parlait. En réalité, je ne voulais pas que les cousins me voient échanger des mots avec lui'.<sup>276</sup> Nevertheless, Azouz cannot escape the truth of his friends' accusations. He later admits to himself that they had such a profound effect on him because they were true. He concedes that 'je joue toujours avec les Français pendant la récré. J'ai envie de leur ressembler'.<sup>277</sup> For Azouz, success and acceptance is equated with Frenchness.

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<sup>273</sup> Kathryn Lay-Chenchabi and Tess Do, 'Guilt and Betrayal in the Works of Azouz Begag and Linda Lê', *French Cultural Studies*, 19.1 (2008), 39-56 (p.41).

<sup>274</sup> Begag, p. 91.

<sup>275</sup> Ibid., p. 92.

<sup>276</sup> Ibid., p. 93.

<sup>277</sup> Ibid., p. 103.



Identity is a somewhat fluid entity for Azouz. As previously noted, his divided sense of self leads him to profess to be Arabic when pressured by his peers from the *Chaâba*. However, a few pages later in the novel he is once again eager to identify with his *français de souche* peers. In fact, at one point Azouz even goes as far as to claim that he is Jewish in order to appease his schoolmates at his *lycée*. Questioned about his ethnicity and religious belief by two boys at school Azouz states ‘«Je suis juif!» dis-je, convaincu. Les deux Taboul manifestent leur satisfaction. Je savais qu’ils étaient juifs’.<sup>278</sup> Azouz seems content to conform to the expectations of those around him in order to be accepted. However, in this particular instance, his attempt at appeasement goes awry. When Azouz prepares to leave school, his mother is waiting for him outside. With the two Jewish boys at his side, he catches sight of her:

Là, sur le trottoir, évidente au milieu des autres femmes, le binouar<sup>279</sup> tombant jusqu’aux chevilles, les cheveux caches dans un foulard vert, le tatouage du front encore plus apparent qu’à l’accoutumée : Emma. Impossible de faire croire qu’elle est juive et encore moins française.<sup>280</sup>

The two boys soon come to realise that the woman is Azouz’s mother when she starts to wave at him. While they find Azouz’s fabrication to be uproarious, he is deeply embarrassed by his mother’s presence. He eventually joins her and walks back home, chastising her for coming to school to give him his afternoon snack. When inquiring as to Azouz’s displeasure at her presence, his mother suggests that he is ashamed of her ‘parce que je ne ressemble pas à une Française, et puis mon binouar...’.<sup>281</sup> Azouz denies this, yet when his mother hands him a piece of bread and some chocolate to snack on he notes that ‘un profound sentiment d’humiliation me coupait l’appétit’.<sup>282</sup> The exposition of Azouz’s North African roots in such an obvious and visual manner has left him deeply ashamed.

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<sup>278</sup> Begag, p. 182.

<sup>279</sup> A binouar is a type of traditional Algerian dress, worn mostly in the area surrounding Sétif in north-eastern Algeria.

<sup>280</sup> Begag, p. 183.

<sup>281</sup> Ibid., p. 185.

<sup>282</sup> Ibid., p. 186.

Any subterfuge that he had previously engaged in to cloud his national origins is now rendered futile. This is further compounded by a conversation which took place between Azouz and a teacher, M. Loubon, at his *lycée*. M. Loubon asks Azouz how his surname is pronounced in Arabic. A conversation about Algeria ensues between Loubon and Azouz, with the former inquiring as to where in Algeria Azouz's family is from. At this point, Azouz states that 'Je ne pourrai plus jamais cacher mes origines sarrasines'.<sup>283</sup> While he claims he doesn't fear the teasing from his classmates, he admits that 'J'ai un peu honte, c'est tout.'<sup>284</sup>

It is difficult to ascertain whether Azouz's sense of shame is due to African roots or rather his denial of them. The most likely answer is a combination of both. It becomes increasingly evident through analysis of the novel that Azouz's contested identity is a profound source of anguish for him. His attempts at effacing his Algerian identity are not unlike those that would have occurred in colonial Algeria. Under French rule, the indigenous population was 'systematically excluded from the power structure created by the French'.<sup>285</sup> Thus, to gain access to French citizenship, natives had to be seen to assimilate themselves fully into French culture, renouncing their own language and religion.<sup>286</sup> While Begag's novel is set in what is officially a post-colonial France, fragments of the colonial ideology of the French Republic are exposed in Azouz's attempts to assimilate into French society. In rejecting his North African roots, Azouz desires to not only be as good as the French, for example in terms of academia, but better 'Je veux prouver que je suis capable d'être comme eux. Mieux qu'eux'.<sup>287</sup> Yet, at other points in the novel, Azouz seems to proclaim his Arabic heritage, proudly citing his circumcision as

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<sup>283</sup> Begag, p. 202.

<sup>284</sup> Ibid., p. 211.

<sup>285</sup> Hargreaves, *Resistance and Identity in Beur Narratives*, p. 89.

<sup>286</sup> Ibid.

<sup>287</sup> Begag, p. 58.

proof of his roots.<sup>288</sup> Azouz's attitude to identity and the shame often associated with it point to the tensions inherent to his bi-cultural condition. His constant engagement in subterfuge to efface his Arabic roots yet his shame at betraying them is a difficult and tiring process for Azouz.

It is one likely to be experienced by other Beurs, however. As Hargreaves notes, not unlike the situation in the colonial Maghreb, there is an argument that if the Beurs wish to advance in French society then they must be prepared to somewhat move away from their North African roots.<sup>289</sup> Thus, the novel, though essentially autobiographical, could be deemed reflective of the tensions and sense of betrayal experienced by many Beurs in France today. Begag's narrative, though imbued with these feelings of disloyalty and dishonour, is ultimately a form of catharsis and reconciliation for Begag. Meaghan Emery posits this theory, stating that 'through the act of writing his story, Azouz Begag not only assumes the liberties of authorship but uses them to mediate cultural and identity conflicts'.<sup>290</sup> Indeed, the novel is beneficial not only for Begag but for the wider Beur community, as it reveals their dilemma to a wider French readership. Consequently, it lends a voice to a community which is often silenced, thereby empowering its members.

The themes expressed in the narratives studied are those that, in general, affect the residents of the *banlieue*. From the oppressive omnipresence of *béton* in *les cités* to the tensions inherent to the Beurs' bicultural condition, these narratives are permeated by the difficulties encountered by the *banlieue* community on a daily basis. As negative as these themes may appear, the Beur authors are keen to express them in a creative outlet. In doing so, they capitalise upon the adversity they are faced with and convert it into a positive entity in the form of these astute narratives.

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<sup>288</sup> Begag, p. 109.

<sup>289</sup> Hargreaves, *Resistance and Identity in Beur Narratives*, p. 89.

<sup>290</sup> Emery, p. 1161.

The importance of these works should not be understated. Firstly, they serve to refute generalisations pertaining to the *banlieue* as a mere site of illiteracy. Rather, they show it to be a space of creativity and literary capital. Secondly, these narratives lend a voice to the subaltern. As Bouraoui rightly claims, the Beurs are the ‘génération de parole’.<sup>291</sup> Rather than allowing themselves to be the victims of adversity, the Beur authors use their creativity as a voicing tool and a method of empowerment. The fact that the narratives are written in standard French amplifies the Beurs’ voice, allowing it to be heard by the wider French population. It allows them to penetrate mainstream French society in a medium perceived as acceptable. Thus, they illuminate the difficulties of *banlieue* life for the mainstream population yet ultimately show that the *banlieue* has positive elements, such as its literary production. This is affirmed by Faïza Guène, who stated in a 2006 interview that French society’s reaction to Beur literature is the feeling of something positive emanating from the *banlieue*.<sup>292</sup>

Indeed, the reaction in general to Beur literature has been positive and further serves to highlight the creative potential and capital of the suburbs. Some examples concerning the public reaction to the corpus analysed in this work are insightful in this regard: *Le thé* has been translated into English and was also made into a successful film in 1985 under the title of *Le thé au harem d’Archimède*.<sup>293</sup> *Le gone du Chaâba* won several prizes for youth literature<sup>294</sup> and proved popular with the public, with 15,000 copies sold in the first six months alone after its publication.<sup>295</sup> After somewhat of a lull in the nineties, Faïza Guène revitalised the genre in 2004 with the publication of *Kiffe Kiffe Demain*, with the novel experiencing much success; it has thus far been translated into twenty two

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<sup>291</sup> Susan Ireland, ‘Writing at the Crossroads: Cultural Conflict in the Work of Beur Women Writers’, *The French Review*, 68.6 (1995), 1022-1034 (p.1030).

<sup>292</sup> Faïza Guène, interviewed by Jim Wolfreys, *Socialist Review*, May 2006, in ‘socialistreview.org.uk’, <<http://www.socialistreview.org.uk/article.php?articlenumber=9736>>, [accessed 10 June 2012].

<sup>293</sup> *Le thé au harem d’Archimède*, dir. by Mehdi Charef (Centre national de cinématographie, 1985).

<sup>294</sup> Hargreaves, *Immigration and Identity in Beur Fiction*, p. 32.

<sup>295</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 35.

languages.<sup>296</sup> These statistics point to a thriving genre, a literature that is proof of the creative capital of the *banlieue*. Moreover, its success means that the voice of the subaltern is being disseminated and listened to by not only a wide French readership, but a global one.

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<sup>296</sup> Laura Ceia-Minjares, 'DJ Zaïfe: Remix de la cité du Paradis: Interview avec Faïza Guène, écrivaine', *Contemporary French and Francophone Studies*, 11.1 (2007), 93-97 (p.93).

## Conclusion

The aim of this work has been to challenge the prevailing negative discourse surrounding the linguistic impoverishment of the French suburbs. More broadly, it has attempted to portray the *banlieue* in a positive light, in contrast to the stereotypical depictions of the *quartiers chauds*. It should be noted that it has not been intended to present a quixotic image of the *banlieue*, but rather a more balanced representation than is often given in the media. This has been achieved through an examination and affirmation of its linguistic and creative capital.

Through an analysis of *verlan* and Beur literature it has been revealed that the *banlieue* is a place of rejuvenation for the French language. The marginalised ethnic minorities residing there use their precarious position in French society, as well as their abject surroundings, as inspiration for creative pursuits. This cathartic creativity is achieved through the medium of the French language under the guise of *verlan* and Beur literature. It has been established that *verlan* is a positive lexical product of the *banlieue* as it allows the Beur community to affirm its unique identity in a creative discursive space. Through the vehicle of the French language, Beur narratives too represent the conversion of adversity into creativity, resulting in an insightful literature which empowers the Beur and wider *banlieue* community. Thus, it is a highly positive literary product of *les cités*.

While both elements of French suburban discourse examined have been shown to contribute to the affirmation of the linguistic capital of the *banlieue*, it could be argued that *verlan*, due to its deviation from *français standard*, will never be fully accepted by French language purists in the media or academia. It must be acknowledged that the Republic is a staunchly monolingual space, in which variations from the standard French language are perceived by some as threats to the cohesion of the state. Thus, practitioners of *verlan*, such as the Beurs and other ethnic minorities residing in the *banlieue*, will be continue to

be excluded from French mainstream discourse for as long as they use these deviations from the standard. However, Beur literature may prove to be more effective in paving the way for these ethnic minorities into mainstream discourse, as it uses *le français standard* to highlight their alienation from French society. Thus, by using the language of the majority, the Beur authors are more likely to legitimise *banlieue* discourse.

Notwithstanding the difficulties facing the inhabitants of the French *banlieue* as a result of dogmatic Republican standardisation, it is also worth posing the question as to what this refusal of the ‘Other’ — be it literally or linguistically — means to, and indeed for, the French Republic and its citizens more broadly? This point raises other important questions, which, though beyond the scope of the present study, merit attention. Is the Republic in a state of linguistic self-destruction? Is its aberration of linguistic difference in the pursuit of upholding an unattainable standard form destroying the language from the inside? There is debate among scholars that this fervent upholding of *le français standard* may lead to a situation in which it becomes irrevocably crystallised and tantamount to a defunct written standard, such as Latin or classical Arabic.<sup>297</sup> The widening gap between this written standard and the oral French used in informal settings would lead to a situation of diglossia.<sup>298</sup> If this is indeed the case, could it be that in years to come, the alleged ‘linguistically impoverished’ space that is the French *banlieue* will prove to be a source of inspiration and rejuvenation for what threatens to become an overly-homogenised *français standard*?

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<sup>297</sup> Battye et al., p. 47.

<sup>298</sup> Diglossia is a situation in which a language has two forms; the ‘H’ form, or high language, is used in formal and official settings, and the ‘L’ form, or low language, which is used in informal settings and speech.

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