

# Putting a Face on Sans-Papiers Youth: Issues of Representation in Children's Literature

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Honors Essay

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2014

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## Introduction

In France and around the world, immigrants have always been seen as the “other”, a faceless, nameless, and powerless people. With the implementation of strict immigration policies, illegal immigrants in particular are constantly in hiding and have consequently fallen even deeper into the “other”. The children of sans-papiers are perhaps the most vulnerable section of this population because of their inability to tell their own story or speak out. Sans-papiers children live a practically invisible existence in order to protect themselves and their families from being deported and sent back to countries with which the children, more often than not, have no ties. Because sans-papiers youth are unable to represent themselves, the rest of society interacts with this population through media, the works of activist organizations, and literature.

Mobilization to support sans-papiers and resultant cultural and literary representations have worked to put a face on illegal immigrants and especially their children. These representations are important because they can influence how French society views sans-papiers issues and ultimately the immigration policies that are put in place. The genre of children’s literature about immigration is particularly interesting because it shows how such a sensitive and controversial issue is being presented to the next generation of French society. These children’s books are a small part of a much larger genre of literature about immigration. Today many works exist and are being written that explore the hardships and mixed identities of today’s immigrants. Literature tends to have a larger impact than other kinds of representation like media coverage because it is longer lasting. What can we learn from these

representations, how have they have changed over time, and how are they both problematic and useful?

Looking at popular discourse, the publications of activist groups, and media coverage highlights certain recent developments that have affected French society's perspective on sans-papiers rights and indicates what kind of representations of sans-papiers are prevalent. Examining how selected works of children's literature about sans-papiers portray issues of representation such as the role of the media, the view of society and a lack of genuine self-representation indicates what kinds of effects these specific challenges may have on undocumented children. Finally, assessing the factors outside of these works' narratives such as authorship, call to action, and cover images helps to analyze the effectiveness of these works of children's literature as representations of sans-papiers to French society.

Before examining selected representations it is important to know what constitutes a sans-papiers. A sans-papiers is either someone who came to France illegally or someone whose residency card has been rejected for renewal by L'Office français de protection des réfugiés et apatrides or l'OFPRA. Many sans-papiers are victims of political or social persecution in their countries of origin. It is very difficult to estimate accurate numbers and statistics regarding sans-papiers because they are, by nature of their illegality, an invisible people. In 2012 l'OFPRA gave residency papers to 4,348 individuals ("Les Demandes d'asile"). In that same year 55,255 immigrants applied for a residency card with OFPRA, of which 14,001 were minors ("Les demandes d'asile"). From these statistics we can see the enormous numbers of immigrants who are denied legal residency in France. When applying for residency through OFPRA an

immigrant must first file an application for asylum with the office. OFPRA will then decide whether or not to hear the case. If a hearing is granted the applicant can present their reasons for applying for asylum and the threats they face in their country of origin ("Demande d'asile: instruction et décision de l'Ofpra."). In the case that this application is rejected, the immigrant can file an appeal to La Cour nationale du droit d'asile or CNDA. If the immigrant is rejected again they may file another appeal ("Réexamen d'une demande d'asile rejetée."). The overall process can be long and complicated because of the bureaucratic procedures that are required.

### **General representations of sans-papiers in French society**

In order to understand children's literature as representations of sans-papiers we must first look at how sans-papiers are generally represented through other mediums to French society. First we will examine how the term *sans-papiers* came about and its numerous implications. The term was revolutionary in the struggle to support sans-papiers because it describes immigrants as more than criminals. Next we will look at the role of nongovernmental organizations or NGOs and other organizations in representing sans-papiers. The work of these organizations has made tremendous strides to raise awareness about sans-papiers issues and combat their invisibility in French society. Lastly, analyzing various examples of representative materials with sans-papiers characters will demonstrate some of the issues and obstacles sans-papiers face today. Ultimately, the sans-papiers characters in these works influence the public to see immigrants as people with stories to be heard and valued.

The term *sans-papiers* appeared in popular discourse and media coverage in the summer of 1996 when 300 sans-papiers occupied the Eglise Saint-Bernard to protest being

denied legal papers. The effects of this event were twofold; a new discourse was adopted and immigrants were humanized through media coverage in an unprecedented manner. The protestors of Saint Bernard declared that they were not *clandestins* and instead renamed themselves *sans-papiers* (Rosello 148). The event was heavily covered by both local and national media. Headlines featured the new term and the protest was coined *l'affaire des sans-papiers de Saint-Bernard* (Rosello 138). Through news reporting on this event undocumented immigrants were given names, faces, and stories. The media had to be specific when referring to one of the hundreds of black immigrants protesting in the church. These reports evoked empathy in the French public and challenged their views of what they assumed a *clandestin* was (Rosello 141). Immigrants were represented as humans, instead of criminals, economic drains or threats. This was a pivotal moment in history for undocumented immigrants' rights. It contributed greatly to their visibility and helped to humanize them in the eyes of the French public.

*As l'affaire des sans-papiers de Saint-Bernard* demonstrates, the term *sans-papiers* has not been around forever, it was created for a specific purpose and has had a significant impact on how they are perceived by the general French public. In the past, the most common term used to refer to undocumented immigrants in France was *clandestin*. The adjective *clandestin* is defined by *Larousse Dictionnaire* as "Qui est en contravention avec les lois et règlements; qui se dérobe à la surveillance ou au contrôle de l'autorité" and "Qui se fait en secret, en cachette." Both of these definitions show the negative connotation of the term *clandestin*. The change to the term *sans-papiers* is significant because it turns the focus away from an emphasis on illegality or secretiveness. *Sans-papiers* simply means 'without papers' and thereby underlines

the arbitrariness of this created category. The term *sans-papiers* reduces the fault of the immigrant and also implicates the French government for denying immigrants proper documentation. It shifts the blame or responsibility from the immigrants themselves to the French government. Ultimately, this change in discourse signaled a movement that directed the focus away from the illegality of immigrants (Rosello 148). It was an important step in changing French society's view of *sans-papiers*. The invention of the term can be regarded as a first step towards humanizing undocumented immigrants. It is still used today in popular discourse and as a point of empowerment by organizations and advocates across France.

Non-governmental organizations have played a strong role in both advocating for *sans-papiers* and making them more visible to larger French society. Through staging protests, producing publications, and helping individuals they have raised awareness and given many *sans-papiers* a place where they can speak out. Throughout France there are many different groups and organizations that support *sans-papiers* youth and their families. Réseau d'éducation sans frontières or RESF is perhaps the most well-known organization of this kind. RESF focuses on helping families become regularized, mobilizing efforts should a family be in danger of being expelled, and organizing petitions and other events. RESF uses a system of *parrainage* in which a member of RESF accompanies an immigrant to help them navigate legal processes necessary to receive documentation and avoid exploitation ("*Parrainage*"). Another organization worth mentioning is the Fédération jeunes errants based in Marseille that takes a transnational approach by working with domestic organizations and institutions as well as ones abroad in order to find solutions to the challenges *sans-papiers* minors face ("*Qui sommes-nous?*"). There are many other regional organizations advocating for *sans-papiers* scattered

throughout France. Each group uses its own means of organization and mobilization but they are all dedicated to protecting the rights of sans-papiers.

One of civil societies' most powerful tools is organizing protests. These protests are important because they attract the attention of those around them and often media coverage as well. The media ultimately dictate what images and words are used to describe sans-papiers. These representations are influential because, for the most part, sans-papiers are not able to refute them and speak for themselves. NGO's have taken steps to combat this lack of self-representation by providing opportunities to speak out, often in the form of mass protests. During protests sans-papiers can share their story and support others who are in danger of being expelled. Because these protests often draw media attention they can have a wide effect on how the nation views immigrants. Together, protests and the media can be powerful tools in changing how sans-papiers are represented.

In addition to protests, civil society organizations are responsible for supporting and producing publications that both represent and help sans-papiers such as posters, books, films and graphic novels. The RESF website hosts a wide array of different kinds of publications for sans-papiers and their supporters, everything from flow-charts and petitions to handouts and questionnaires. They are translated into different languages including Arabic and Chinese. One particularly interesting document produced by RESF gives detailed instructions on how to avoid being arrested and in case you are, how to handle it. Some of the advice includes taking the bus instead of the subway and demanding to see a doctor if you are arrested. In addition to

instructions like these there are many other similar documents meant to guide sans-papiers and their supporters.

Of particular interest to this research, many of these organizations' websites feature bibliographies that list books and other resources that are about sans-papiers organized into appropriate viewer and reader age groups ("Des livres ici."). One of the key roles NGOs play in arousing popular support of sans-papiers is producing and supporting positive representations of sans-papiers. By working to integrate sans-papiers into popular culture these organizations are trying to increase the visibility of undocumented immigrants and portray them as compelling individuals. In looking at these different forms of representation we not only learn about what kind of portrayals the general population has access to, we also learn about many of the issues sans-papiers face.

### *Visual media*

One example of a representation specifically concerning sans-papiers children is the video clip *Laissez-les grandir ici* created and produced by the members of le Collectif des cinéastes pour les sans-papiers. This is an organization loosely tied with RESF. The video shows images of a diverse set of children presenting the obstacles they face as sans-papiers youth. The themes of the clip include constant fear of expulsion, the persecution their parents encounter and the arbitrariness of decisions of the OFPRA. The video moves from one solemn face to another, each child expressing their despair. This video is a direct attempt to combat the invisibility of sans-papiers youth and present them as recognizable children with whom one can identify.



The collection of comic strips *Paroles Sans Papiers*, edited by Michael Galli, tells the stories of different sans-papiers in France and how being undocumented has affected their lives. The work was published in 2007 with the collaboration of multiple authors. Graphic novels in France are a widely popular medium to tell stories and support social issues. This bande dessinée is an effort to raise awareness about the desperate conditions of sans-papiers and a call to action. It features contact information for RESF as well as compelling details about the conditions sans-papiers face. What is interesting about this work is that it uses both images and words to represent sans-papiers. The different stories aim to fill the void of a lack of representation of sans-papiers in popular culture. One of the stories entitled “Esclavage Ordinaire” created by an author under the name of Brūno, presents a commentary on the invisibility of young sans-papiers. The strip tells the story of Mariem, an undocumented girl from Senegal, who is forced to work for her aunt. During the entire comic strip we never see Mariem’s face. Most of the images are of the objects she encounters daily, like cleaning supplies, cooking ingredients and wrinkly clothes to be ironed. Her face never being shown demonstrates just how invisible and hopeless her situation is while at the same time generalizing her story so that she could conceivably be any girl on the street. Mariem has no power, as the title suggests, she lives like a slave. Her story goes unheard because she is being abused by her own family and has no way to speak out because of her status as a sans-papiers. The graphic novel brings to light many other themes and challenges to sans-papiers including the lack of economic opportunity, the suffering endured by those trying to immigrate to France, and the burden placed on children in a sans-papiers family. Publications like these are important because they present the stories of sans-papiers that could easily go untold. They

bring to life the stories of the invisible. At the same time this graphic novel is able to point out that there is an absence of representation of sans-papiers and combat this by presenting their stories and the issues they face.

The film *Le Havre*, released in 2011 and directed by Aki Kaurismäki, is the story of a young sans-papiers boy, Idrissa, trying to reunite with his mother in England. He arrives in a cargo ship from Africa in the port city of Le Havre. Some of the most striking images of the movie are when the group of immigrants coming from Africa in a container are shown for the first time. The camera pans from one expressionless face to another showing each immigrant as if they were pieces of cargo. They neither smile nor frown nor look scared. They are presented as neutral objects. This scene can be interpreted as a commentary on the loss of human dignity immigrants must often go through in order to reach Europe. The movie then follows the main character, a working class man named Marcel as he tries to help Idrissa. Although Idrissa does not say many words or show much emotion the viewer is compelled by the compassion everyone shows towards him. The neighborhood comes together to protect him from the police and help him to raise the money to be reunited with his mother. The movie is important because it is a piece of popular culture that invokes sympathy from the viewer for the situation of sans-papiers and critiques the objectification of immigrants.

### *Media coverage*

One of the most recent controversies concerning sans-papiers to garner mass news coverage is the affaire Leonarda. In October 2013 a 15 year old immigrant from Kosovo was taken off a school bus to be expelled with her family. Students across France mounted protests

to support Leonarda as well as another 19 year old Armenian facing expulsion ("Hollande"). The public reaction to this story was particularly heated because Leonarda belongs to an often persecuted ethnic minority, the Roma and because she was on a school field trip. The Minister of the Interior in the French government Manuel Valls' response to the event was highly criticized by both conservatives and leftists. He offered that Leonarda could return to France without her family. Sans-papiers supporters pointed out that this decision violated principles that protect the unity of a family. The right complained that Valls' decision would encourage more illegal immigrants, and Roma to come to France (Stille). The expulsion was covered by local and international news sources. The image of Leonarda and her family along with personal interviews of the family made the front pages. This story was extremely compelling to many because Leonarda was portrayed as a person to whom many could relate and feel sympathy for. This event serves as evidence that sans-papiers are being humanized in the media and other modern representations. Some would argue however that this humanization has gone too far and that this case resembles a reality television show and that Leonarda was just playing a role (Salles). This critique is specifically referring to the scandals that came out about Leonarda's father. Media sources claimed that he was using his daughter as a means to obtain legal documents in France and that he had done similar things in the past to take advantage of his children such as forcing them to beg on the streets.

Through examining this range of efforts and publications we can see a general trend towards humanizing sans-papiers and especially increasing awareness of children in this situation. This trend is not an accident. Sans-papiers activists, NGO's and the media have worked to combat the invisibility of the undocumented by incorporating them into movies,

graphic novels, the media and literature. In addition to increased visibility, sans-papiers are becoming more and more humanized through these mediums. The invention of the term sans-papiers can be seen as a first step towards making undocumented immigrants seem like people rather than criminals or problems. The work of NGOs to mount protests and support publications about sans-papiers issues are further steps in the direction of humanization. In these representations sans-papiers are portrayed as everyday people who face a diverse range of obstacles because of their status as illegal and their often resultant poverty. Because of these upward trends in visibility and humanization it is becoming harder and harder for the average French person to see a sans-papiers as a foreign object.

### **Issues of representation in children's literature**

The genre of children's literature about sans-papiers is further evidence that they are becoming more and more integrated into French popular culture. This area of literature is especially interesting because it will shape the morals and views of the next generation of French leaders, activists and citizens. Issues of representation in works of children's literature bring to light how concerns such as media coverage, stereotypes, and the need to remain unnoticed could affect the lives of children. These works under examination feature sans-papiers characters from various parts of Africa that all face a different set of obstacles and issues with how they, and sans-papiers as a whole, are represented to French society. Of the four novels studied two are told in the first person from the perspective of a sans-papiers character. The other two feature undocumented characters but are told from the point of view of a French child. They are written for a range of different ages and therefore present the controversial issue of sans-papiers rights with varying degrees of sensitivity. The characters in

selected works of children's literature face news stories they feel are untrue or misleading. They are constantly confronted with the expectations and stereotypes of French society. All the while, they are unable to speak out because they fear drawing attention to themselves and potentially exposing themselves as undocumented. All these works of children's literature both problematize how sans-papiers are represented and portray sans-papiers to youth readers at the same time.

*Clandestine: Journal d'une Adolescente Sans papiers*

*Clandestine* tells the story of a teenage girl, Loriane, whose family fled political persecution in Angola and then struggles to obtain residency papers in France. The novel claims to be based on a diary, written by Loriane K with the collaboration of Christelle Bertrand. It was published in 2008 and is intended for readers above the age of 12. This is the oldest main character in the works discussed and she therefore presents a more complex and self-reflective account of her situation. The novel is in the form of a diary in which the main character, Loriane, writes about the difficulties of being undocumented in France. She describes how her relationships with friends and her everyday life in school and at home are affected by having to conceal the reality of her situation. Her family goes through the process of appealing to the OPFRA to get residency papers and works with RESF through the parrainage system. In the end her sister is able to obtain her documents to become a legal resident. The diary ends on a note of hope that the rest of the family will someday be able to get their papers as well.

Loriane encounters various media representations of sans-papiers as a whole and specifically of her family. She finds certain portrayals more problematic than others. One night,

when Loriane is in the kitchen she sees that her father is watching a news report about sans-papiers on television. She can only see the image on the screen but not hear any commentary. The image is of African women dressed in traditional boubous. She comments “C’est toujours les mêmes clichés qui reviennent...des gens pas du tout intégrés, qui vivent en communauté, souvent dans des squats, qui ne parlent pas français. Je suis certaine que toutes ces images font peur aux gens, que c’est fait exprès pour les convaincre qu’il faut nous expulser. (78). » This remark demonstrates that Loriane does not identify with these images in the media. This common depiction does not represent her or her family. She critiques the media for repeating one single story about immigrants because it perpetuates stereotypes. She believes that these images and stories have adverse effects on public opinion because they portray sans-papiers as unassimilated and different.

Loriane experiences a more personal level of media representation when a journalist aligned with RESF writes a newspaper article about her family. She is upset by how the article presents her family. She admits that everything in the story is true; however, the overall tone and choice of words of the author leave her feeling misrepresented. “J’aurais préféré qu’elle écrive ‘les membres de la famille habitent à l’hôtel’ au lieu de ‘s’entassent’ et ‘Maria ne sort pas’ plutôt que ‘vit cloîtrée’ (208). » It seems that Loriane’s disapproval comes in part from embarrassment; however she is also concerned that the article is over-dramatized. From Loriane’s perspective this article misconstrues their situation and paints their family as having a miserable existence. This is an example of how even well-intentioned portrayals of sans-papiers can be problematic. Even though the reporter clearly wants to help the family and is basing her work on interviews with them, the article is not self-representation because it is from the

perspective of an outsider. While this could be a critique of newspaper articles about anyone, it is especially problematic when concerning sans-papiers because they cannot speak out for themselves.

In contrast to Loriane's experience with the journalist and television news report, she is very pleased by a letter by Nicole Borvo, an actual senator during this time, written to help the family to obtain their documents at the prefecture. By using the real name of a political figure the author adds a note of authenticity to her story, supporting the claim that the book is an actual diary. Loriane remarks "Elle parlait de nous, des efforts qu'on avait fait pour s'adapter à la France, de l'attente insupportable, c'est comme si elle nous connaissait.(260)" Loriane favors this letter because it focuses on the positive steps the family has taken and how they have been mistreated by the French bureaucratic system. Borvo does not try and dramatize the situation of their family. This example demonstrates that Loriane wants to be portrayed as deserving of documentation, not pity.

In addition to feeling that media stories do not accurately represent sans-papiers, Loriane K also notes that coverage of their protests can be dehumanizing. Reporters represent subjects solely as being sans-papiers. All too often other parts of their identities and lives are left out of the story. Loriane's reaction to a large protest in support of sans-papiers rights demonstrates this feeling of dehumanization. She writes "Pourtant, parfois, j'ai la nostalgie de l'époque où personne ne parlait de nous... maintenant j'ai l'impression que les gens qui nous connaissent et qui sont au courant de notre situation ne nous considèrent plus que comme des sans-papiers. (165)" This quote shows that Loriane is uncomfortable with how she and many other undocumented immigrants are being talked about. She feels that she is being seen as just

a sans-papier, not as a complete and complex person. Because of these protests, being undocumented is taking over her and her family's identity in the eyes of the media and the rest of French society.

While Loriane is upset by and critiques media coverage of sans-papiers, she can also see the good in it. At one point in the novel she reads a newspaper filled with articles that tell the stories of various sans-papiers. She writes "Je trouve ça bien que toutes ces histoires cachées remontent à la surface. (176)" The term *histoires cachées* is useful because it describes how sans-papiers cannot speak out and tell their own story. These stories, more often than not, go untold because undocumented immigrants must conceal themselves from authorities and avoid exposing themselves to the rest of French society. It seems that Loriane can appreciate this kind of representation because it shows that sans-papiers have varied experiences, not just one story. Loriane is acknowledging that the media is a useful tool to express the stories of sans-papiers because there are few other outlets for them.

Loriane also feels similarly dehumanized when she considers the procedures and policies of the prefecture. She remarks "on n'est que des chiffres" in a critique of the quotas system of immigration in place under Sarkozy. This statement implies that within the selection system by the OPFRA immigrants are only statistics. Their individual stories are not as important as keeping within the requirements of quotas.

From the various examples in this novel we can see that Loriane has complex feelings towards media representations about sans-papiers. On one hand she can see that increased visibility can be a positive thing such as in the case of the "histoires cachées" revealed in the



newspaper. However, she finds media coverage to be over-dramatized and dehumanizing because it perpetrates stereotypes and tends to only focus on the subjects being undocumented and consequently leaves out the rest of their story.

*Moi, Felix 10 ans sans-papiers*

*Moi, Felix 10 ans sans-papiers* by Marc Cantin tells the tale of a young boy and his family coming to France from the Ivory Coast hidden in a cargo ship. This novel is intended for readers that are 9 to 12 years old and was published in 2007. It is a first person narrative whose narrator is sans-papiers just as in Loriane K. The main character, Felix is an adventurous young boy who is frustrated by the constraints of being undocumented in France. The family lives in their relatives' apartment where Felix is not allowed to leave for fear of being reported to the authorities. Eventually he is allowed to go to the corner market to pick up some food for his aunt. There he attracts the attention of a neighbor who turns him and his family in to the authorities. The rest of Felix's family is deported when policemen show up at their house. Felix is able to narrowly escape and stay in France by himself. He then takes a journey to go to live with distant relatives in Rennes, a two-hour train ride away. He is roughed up on a train and then helped by a nice French family. At the end of the book the reader is left wondering what will happen next to the boy alone in France. This novel is one in a series of three that follow the life of Felix.

A recurring theme in this novel is the gaze of French society. This includes all of the preconceived notions, stereotypes and expectations of people when they see Felix and his family, as immigrants, sans-papiers and Africans. During the whole novel Felix must avoid being

seen by anyone and try his hardest to make his appearance negate these expectations. Even when Felix first arrives in France he is still very aware of what France thinks of him based on his appearance. While Felix and his family are searching for their relative's apartment Felix notices him and his family's reflection in the window of a store. He comments "une vitrine nous revoie notre image: il est onze heure du soir, une mère africaine et ses trois enfants se promènent sous la pluie. (32) » This remark reminds the reader of what French society sees when it notices Felix. The distant terms the author uses to describe the reflection show us that when onlookers see this family they do not see their story they simply see an African mother and three children, and all the stereotypes and assumptions that come along with it. This imagery takes the French reader away from the storyline and makes him or her consider if they have ever seen a family like Felix's and made any assumptions about them. It is a reminder of what the admirable main character, Felix, looks like and how he would be perceived by onlookers. This common image of an African woman and her children invokes a certain emotion in the reader of fear, suspicion, pity and ultimately difference. The average French child when confronted with this picture would not feel a connection with it. The piece of imagery changes what the reader sees. Instead of just seeing four Africans, he or she sees Felix, a courageous and kind little boy trying to help his family. This story alters how the reader interprets and relates to this common image of sans-papiers. It critiques the assumptions French society makes when they see people like Felix and his family in the streets or represented in media.

In this novel there are many different stereotypes that are presented and then broken. Stereotypes can be seen as issues of representation because they show how society thinks about sans-papiers and are often a result of how sans-papiers are portrayed within popular

culture and media representations. One stereotype that we see in this novel is that immigrant parents do not take good care of their children. One of the officers who comes to take away Felix's family makes the remark "Ces gens-là ne savent pas s'occuper de leurs enfants. (99)" While the officer who says this is reprimanded for his comment by another, it indicates a stereotype of sans-papiers immigrants. The reader of this novel knows that this stereotype is untrue. Felix's mother is very caring and watchful over her children. Disproving these stereotypes is important because it teaches the young readers of this novel not to believe in them and gives them another story besides the harmful images.

Another example of stereotyping comes into play when Felix is at the corner store buying groceries for his aunt. A customer described as the man with square glasses is immediately suspicious of Felix when he sees him in the store. He believes that his sister has just lost her job to Felix's mother. He tries to trick Felix into leading him to his house. He is the one who reports Felix's family to the authorities and has them deported. Instead of seeing Felix as a polite young boy, as does the grocer, the man with square glasses sees him as the cause for his family's problems. Felix represents all the problems that are associated with sans-papiers. The man does not feel any compassion or empathy towards the little boy but rather hates him because of how he feels about undocumented immigrants.

Every day Felix faces the consequences of stereotypes and assumptions that are based on him as an African and undocumented. Society views him and his family a certain way. This view is based on media portrayals and politics surrounding immigration issues. The novel works to combat these stereotypes by telling a story that proves them to be untrue and bringing to light just how common and pervasive they are.

*Minusman et les 100 papiers*

*Minusman et les 100 papiers*, written by Nathalie Brisac and illustrated by Magali Bonniol is the story of a little boy named Minusman who tries, with the help of his friends, to defend their sans-papiers classmate Kouik. The short novel was written for readers age 6 to 9 and was published in 2007. It is part of a series of children's books all about the little hero Minusman. One day Kiouk is taken from class by two police men to be expelled with his family. In order to help their classmate they write letters to the president, talk to their parents and create artwork of leaves. The idea to use leaves comes from the French word *feuille de papier* or leaves of paper. It is a rather clever play on words that only a mature reader, like a parent, would understand. Minusman and his friends go on an epic journey to get the assistance of a wizard to help Kouik get the papers he needs. Minusman is a hero, like superman who has access to magical powers. They eventually are able to appear on the national news program and tell viewers to throw leaves out of their windows to support Kiouk. In the end, their actions are able to save him and he returns to class to be welcomed joyously by his classmates.

The author of this book portrays the lack of self-representation of sans-papiers throughout this story in multiple ways. The most striking commentary on sans-papiers representations exists in the first and last illustrations in this book. In the first picture all we see is the back of a young boys sitting in a chair (12). From the words of the story we can tell this is an image of Kiouk, the quiet and smart sans-papiers classmate. The next image of Kiouk shows him being taken by the police. This image too is of only the back of his head and body. It is not until the end of the book, after Kiouk has been saved by his classmates that we finally see his face. These images demonstrate that Kiouk gaining his documents has given him the ability to

express himself. It has given him a face. Before he was just a figure of a student, now he has a story and an identity. The choice of the illustrator to conceal Kiouk's face establishes that as a sans-papiers student Kiouk was not able to represent himself to the rest of the class, he was confined to hide his story and try to blend in.

Brisac reiterates the point that Kiouk cannot express himself because he is undocumented by showing that all along he seemed to have a secret. After the teacher explains that Kiouk is sans-papiers and what that means Minusman notes that "On s'est rendu compte qu'il gardait à l'intérieur de lui un énorme secret; personne ne s'en doutait dans la classe. C'était peut-être pour ça qu'il ne parlait beaucoup, li n'avait pas peur de ne pas tenir sa langue. (18-19) » Minusman is noting that Kiouk is quiet and reserved because he is sans-papiers. He cannot express himself to his classmates because he must conceal a huge part of his identity from them.

Minusman is finally able to help Kiouk after the wizard Yapa tells Minusman and his friends to go to the television station and make the prime minister cry in order to save Kiouk from being deported. The wizard tells the kids that there is power in a team. This is encouraging collective action to support Kiouk. French society strongly believes in the power of protesting to support a cause. This part of the story teaches the young readers that the media can influence politics and other social issues. How the media portrays sans-papiers in the story is ultimately what saves Kiouk. It is worth noting is that it is not Kiouk, the sans-papiers character that is speaking out, it is his documented classmates. This portrayal points out that Kiouk and other sans-papiers children cannot in many circumstances speak out for themselves. This occurrence further underlines Kiouk's loss of voice as a result of being undocumented.

*Minusman et les cent papiers* is clearly intended to introduce the topic and concept of being undocumented to young readers. The story gives a brief description of what it means to be sans-papiers and how to help. It is likely that a book like this would make the reader more sympathetic towards his or her classmates who may potentially be undocumented. This book shows sans-papiers children as being silent as a consequence of being undocumented. It contrasts this silence with the strong power and voice of Minusman and his friends to show the importance of being able to speak up and represent yourself fully.

#### *Pense aux jours heureux*

*Pense aux jours heureux* is a short novel written by Guy Jimenes and published in 2007. The story is intended for readers age 9 to 12. It tells the story of Ludovic a white French boy who develops a strong friendship with a sans-papiers girl from Senegal named Fatouma. One day the girl is sick and stays home from school so Ludovic goes to her house to deliver her homework. On his way there he meets Fatouma's family and sees her neighborhood. Soon after this encounter Fatouma disappears from school and her apartment without warning. Ludovic is extremely upset by this and does not understand why Fatouma would leave without contacting him. Eventually Ludovic's parents find out that Fatouma's family is undocumented and had to suddenly move away for fear of deportation. Ludovic does not fully understand why she would need to leave France. In his eyes Fatouma is just as French as he is. Eventually Fatouma returns to school, but she does not seem like her old self. She looks disheveled and is even quieter than normal and not friendly towards Ludovic.

The story of *Pense aux jours heureux* points out racial divides and tensions in French classrooms. This is an issue of representation because sans-papiers can often be identified either correctly or incorrectly by their skin color. Especially for immigrants from sub-Saharan Africa, like Fatouma, having dark skin adds another layer of problematic visibility. Jimenes writes “Dans notre école, des enfants noirs comme elle (Fatouma) il y en a d’autres, mais ce n’est pas la question. (9)” This shows us that Fatouma’s skin color affects how her classmates view and treat her, yet she is not really like the other black children since Ludovic points out that there is something else that makes her different. It is conceivable that this difference comes from her being from another culture and being undocumented. Even though Ludovic likes her for more than her skin color, we can see in this quote that her race is a large part of her identity. In school sans-papiers of color deal with racial discrimination from their peers more than they do discrimination based on their lack of legal documents because many children at this age are unaware of sans-papiers issues.

Another trend we see repeated in this short novel is that the role of the sans-papiers character is to be quiet and reserved. Just like Kiouk from *Minusman et les cent papiers* and Loriane from *15 ans clandestine*, Fatouma keeps to herself and cannot fully express herself. Ludovic describes her as “Une fille discrète, on ne remarque rien, elle se laisse oublier (9).» This quote shows us that sans-papiers children are urged not to draw attention to themselves. This holds them back from standing out or being themselves. Instead they are cast into a forgotten quiet role in the classroom. Whether this is a realistic portrayal or not is hard to tell. Surely these traits do not apply to all undocumented children. However, it is certainly an evident theme in all of the novels studied here.

## Going beyond the narrative

A novel is comprised of much more than its plot. There are many other ways that these works depict sans-papiers and critique how they are represented in society. Elements such as authorship, intended readership, cover images and tactics aiming to raise awareness all contribute to the effectiveness of a book. In creating a cohesive work about social issues it is important that these outside factors are consistent with the overall message and themes of the work. Looking at authorship and readership will help to assess whether or not these books tackle the lack of self-representation of sans-papiers. Next the balance between a realistic portrayal and sensitivity towards the reader's age achieved by each author will come into question. Examining the proposed ways to fight for the cause of sans-papiers rights in each novel will highlight how the authors view the role of readers in supporting sans-papiers issues. Lastly, noting the issues of representation depicted in the cover images and titles of the works will point out how the authors choose to present their works to the public.

### *Authorship and self-representation*

One of the most evident themes in this set of works is the absence of voice for sans-papiers youth. While these novels do an excellent job of pointing out this lack, none of them can be considered self-representation. In this case, self-representation would be a sans-papiers author writing about sans-papiers characters based on his own experiences and knowledge. Marc Cantin, the author of *Moi, Félix 10 ans sans-papiers* is a French-born citizen writing the story of a young boy from the Ivory Coast. Guy Ginemes, author of *Pense aux jours heureux* was born in Algeria then, at age 9, moved to France. He tells the story of a French boy and



Senegalese girl. Nathalie Brisac, the creator of the series about the young hero Minusman, is a French writer who believes children's literature should help children find their place and dream big ("Nathalie Brisac"). The authors of *Pense aux jours heureux* and *Minusman et les cent papiers* are writing from the perspective of a French character and therefore leave the sans-papiers figures with an air of mystery. This is a way to acknowledge that the author does not know completely the plight of sans-papiers children.

The most complicated of these works in terms of authorship is *Clandestine* which claims to have been written by Loriane K with the contributor Christelle Bertand. The story is supposedly a copy of Loriane's journal. It is difficult to assess the level of involvement of this contributor in influencing the work. However, from a critical point of view it does not seem to realistically be the diary of a young teenage girl. This fictionalized first-person account is potentially intended to reference *The Diary of Anne Frank*, a famous novel written by a young Jewish girl hidden away during the Second World War. *Clandestine* reads almost as a guide or manual for sans-papiers on how to navigate the experience of being undocumented and trying to get papers. A short interview with Loriane K was featured on *Marie Claire* magazine's website in which she promotes her book and briefly talks about her family being regularized. However, the source seems fairly unreliable and is the only one of its kind. There is no way to definitively determine the legitimacy of this author but it seems questionable at best that this work is more than loosely based on a young undocumented immigrant's journal.

The assertion that these works are not self-representation is not intended to discredit these authors for writing about sans-papiers characters. They are all well-intentioned and are effective at raising-awareness about issues of immigration. It is indeed the beauty of being an

author to be able to explore and write about characters that are different from you. However, even in this niche of children's literature about sans-papiers there is a lack of sans-papiers authors. Having French writers, with the potential exception of Loriane K., speak for or about sans-papiers is a slippery slope towards misrepresentation. Each novel examined in this study successfully points out that sans-papiers are not able to speak out for themselves. Because the authors themselves are not sans-papiers they are not directly combatting this problem. Given the reality of being sans-papiers in France today it would be very difficult and rare for a sans-papiers to become an author because of a lack of resources and power. Giving sans-papiers a voice in children's literature could be a very effective step towards increasing self-representation for sans-papiers and influencing the next generation of French society.

### *Finding a balance*

Because these works are addressing such a bleak topic but also writing for a young reader, the author must find a balance between representing reality and respecting the sensitivity of the young reader. The works we have examined all fit into a category of children's literature that is trying to raise awareness of social issues to children. It is a delicate balance the authors must try and create. They do not want to idealize or fantasize being sans-papiers. However, they aim to create characters that are compelling and storylines that are exciting. The level of realism in each of these four books varies greatly. Loriane K portrays the problems of poverty and alienation the most realistically because it is written for an older audience. For example, Loraine's family cannot afford basic healthcare or to send their children on school trips. The author balances this sad reality by leaving the reader with some hope that the family will obtain their documents after the success of Loraine's sister. *Minusman et les cent papiers*

seems to be the most positive portrayal in that it is from the perspective of a French boy who is able to succeed at helping his classmate avoid deportation. Also it has the added element of a helper with superpowers complete with a magic broom. *Moi Félix 10 ans* could be considered the most idealized representation because, while the character faces discrimination, persecution, and confinement, the story overall is presented as an exciting adventure with a courageous main character that the readers are confident will succeed. *Pense aux jours heureux* has perhaps the most complex balance because in the end the Diallo family is not deported, at least until the summer, however Fatouma is still sad and doesn't act like herself. All of these authors seem to find an adequate balance between reality and idealism. Each author treats the subject with sensitivity to the reader but also aims to raise awareness of the obstacles and discrimination sans-papiers face.

### *Call to Action*

One important facet of the balance authors work to establish is demonstrating how the reader can get involved and help support sans-papiers. Often this call to action is used to give the reader hope for future and a way to channel a desire to help sans-papiers. These authors portray some of the dismay of being sans-papiers but at the same time leave the reader feeling empowered to support the cause they are confronted with. It helps the reader to grapple with the sad reality the book presents. The most blatant call to actions in these works would be the references to RESF and their protests in *Loriane K* and the mentions of collective action and the power of the media in *Minusman et les cent papiers*. In *Pense aux jours heureux* Ludovic's parents work with an association that defends the rights of sans-papiers and Ludovic participates in a meeting at the school with this association. In *Moi, Félix 10 ans sans-papiers*

the call to action is more subtle. The family that saves Félix at the end of the story serves as a helping character to which the reader can relate. These calls to action work to raise interest in the question of sans-papiers rights and encourage sympathy for schoolmates that might be in this situation. Small steps are presented that children can actually undertake to help fight for sans-papiers rights.

Carol Hugon, a scholar who has researched and analyzed children's literature about sans-papiers, suggests that while calls to action in this genre of literature promote certain morals, there is a downside to them in that they only defend the most justifiable cases and do not encourage radical change in the immigration system. She points out that this kind of appeal for action encourages a case-by-case system of politics (Hugon). This means that the stories tend to promote helping these characters because they are good and likable instead of suggesting that all sans-papiers deserve certain rights, regardless of their character traits or level of assimilation. The novels do not fundamentally question the systems of immigration that are in place or suggest the radical changes that many think should occur. While Hugon makes a valid point in this argument, it is debatable as to whether children's literature is the place to make such a radical argument.

### *Cover images and titles*

The cover image of a work is what attracts the reader to a book. It awakens the interest of the reader, or in this case the reader's parent or teacher who makes the decision whether to purchase the book or not. Generally the cover presents a theme of the book and gives you an idea of what it is about. It, along with the title, provides a snapshot of the book. Many of the

titles and covers of these books comment on or allude to issues of representation that are expanded on in the works. This demonstrates that issues of representation are topics of interest that can be used to attract potential buyers.

The cover of *Moi Félix, 10 ans sans-papiers* depicts Félix and his family in front of a French flag. This juxtaposition shows the relationship between French society and this family. The title of the book tells us that they are sans-papiers and this is a large part of their identity that contributes to the inherent tension. Everything from the clashing of the colors of the mother's bright patterned outfit compared to the French flag, to the look of despair on the family's faces demonstrates this clash. The picture of an African woman with multiple children is a very common image that recurs time after time in discourse about immigration in France. The contrast with the French flag and the look on the faces are what make the representation unique and indicate that this novel tells a different story.

The picture on *Minusman et les 100 papiers* shows two children, Minusman and his sidekick, dancing happily with leaves and papers falling around them. On a surface level this image looks like a typical happy children's book. After reading it we find out that these papers and leaves represent the papers needed for sans-papiers to live in France legally. This comparison through the eyes of children shows how these documents are, in the end, just sheets of papers. As an adult reading this book this image points out how arbitrary these papiers are. It is unlikely that a child reader would come to this conclusion on his own. The play on words of the title would also most likely go unnoticed by a child reader, but the parents, who make final decisions about purchasing, would recognize the pun and understand the subject of the novel.

The cover of the diary *Clandestine* shows the hands of a girl clutching what appears to be a journal. This is meant to allude to the claim that this work is actually an autobiographical journal. The fact that this image shows her hands and the journal and not the rest of her body suggests that this notebook is her only way of expressing herself. She is voiceless and faceless except for this journal. The title of the work, *Clandestine*, clearly indicates that character is undocumented. The use of the now outdated term references the illegality and persecution experienced by sans-papiers.

*Pense aux jours heureux* shows a young French boy in the foreground and a somewhat smaller African girl smiling at each other. The boy is clutching a foreign looking object in his hand that arouses the reader's curiosity. The girl has an air of mystery because of her position in the background, the look on her face and her hair blowing in the wind. The girl is dressed in western style clothing and both children are standing in front of a French style city-scape. This may suggest that the sans-papiers character in this story is well assimilated into French society and allows the reader to relate to her. The title of the work indicates to the potential reader that the book covers an unhappy period. One could infer that the differences between the boy and girl on the cover could have contributed to these sad times.

The presence of issues of representation on the cover pages and in all other aspects of these works shows how important this theme is. The covers depict lack of voice, societal tensions, and arbitrariness of documentation. Not only are these themes relevant in these stories they are also seen as compelling to potential buyers of these works. Cover pages, along with all of the other outside factors comprising these novels work together to present the

problems undocumented immigrants face in a manner that is sensitive and empowering to a young reader.

## **Conclusion**

Children's literature is a powerful medium that has the potential to influence the moral viewpoints of a society. The trend towards increasing the visibility of sans-papiers in French popular culture has produced a genre of children's literature featuring young sans-papiers characters, giving them faces, histories, personalities that go well beyond stereotypical representations. By putting them into contexts that young readers know, such as school, stores, trains, or parks, they are presented with a reality that is comprehensible and allows for self-identification. These stories and characters shape the ethical responses of the next generations to decriminalize and humanize undocumented immigrants.

Using child characters and young supporters of sans-papiers is especially effective because children are easily seen as innocent victims and uncorrupted observers. The young main and supporting characters that are French represent positive elements of French society. French readers can identify with them and learn how to help sans-papiers. Undocumented characters help to shape children's views of their classmates who may be in the same situation and encourage them to be kind and sympathetic towards them. They break stereotypes because they are smart, hardworking and familiar. These novels for young readers give a voice and a face to what otherwise might be invisible children and raise awareness in the French reader that they have a role to play in helping to regularize their situation.

It is difficult to predict if this trend of children's literature as a means of social change will continue to help fight for immigrants' rights. Will children's literature be able to keep up with the constantly changing face of immigration? Today the question of Roma immigrants is much more prevalent than the sub-Saharan Africans described in the works studied. It is very possible that children's literature will not be written to help this commonly despised ethnic group or that other mediums will become more popular and effective to reach out to children. The development of this genre of children's literature about sans-papiers demonstrates that working to influence the viewpoints of young children through a variety of different methods and mediums can be a powerful way to work towards social change.



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