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Electronic version

URL: <https://journals.openedition.org/fixxion/11421>

DOI: 10.4000/fixxion.11421

ISSN: 2295-9106

Publisher

Ghent University

Electronic reference

Alec Hargreaves, "Writing Back from the *Banlieues*: in Search of Refamiliarization", *Revue critique de fixxion française contemporaine* [Online], 16 | 2018, Online since 15 June 2018, connection on 21 August 2023. URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/fixxion/11421> ; DOI: <https://doi.org/10.4000/fixxion.11421>

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Writing Back from the *Banlieues*: in Search of Refamiliarization

Alec Hargreaves

- 1 In a world where distances constantly seem to be shrinking, perceptions of the *banlieues* of French cities constitute a striking anomaly. Situated only a few kilometers from the heart of France's major population centres, the *banlieues* are often regarded by those who live outside them as irremediably alien places. This perceptual distance was vividly evoked following the jihadist attacks carried out in Paris in January 2015, which Prime Minister Manuel Valls linked to "la rélévation péri-urbaine, les ghettos – ce que j'évoquais en 2005 déjà – un apartheid territorial, social, ethnique, qui s'est imposé à notre pays"^[1]. Valls's use of the word "apartheid", the official term for the policy of state-led racial segregation pursued in South Africa prior to 1989, was a striking illustration of the chasm that is often felt to separate the *banlieues* from the rest of France. It was also an implicit reminder of the colonial origins of the immigrant populations who are densely concentrated in the disadvantaged neighbourhoods currently evoked in everyday usage of the word "banlieues", which, in contrast with prior usage referencing suburban areas as a whole, has narrowed to become a synonym for ethnic ghettos^[2]. While the children and grand-children of immigrants associated with these stigmatized spaces are natives and citizens of France, they are frequently treated as outsiders with no rightful place in the former colonial metropolis, and writers originating among these populations have encountered similar difficulties in the reception of their works, which have often been treated by French academics and journalists as "Francophone" (of French expression but foreign) rather than as truly "French". Proficient in writing only in French, with limited knowledge of their parents' native tongue and country of origin, and aware that the minority populations in which they have their origins are not generally regarded as commercially viable, authors of postcolonial immigrant descent commonly seek mainstream French publishers for their works, which need by the same token to cater for majority ethnic readers. Publishers' marketing blurbs and media presentations of these writers routinely frame them as native informants offering access to an "elsewhere" similar to the postcolonial exotic space theorized by Graham Huggan with reference to writers associated with

former colonies, but now transposed from distant ex-colonies into metropolitan France^[3].

- 2 Keenly aware of this perceptual distance, writers of postcolonial immigrant descent have variously sought to subvert, efface or circumvent it. Lia Brozgal has noted, for instance, how the novels of Rachid Djaïdani “either minimally stage [downtown] Paris as problematic, deny its authority, or deliberately ignore it”, tending “toward the creation of a new center on the margin”, and “inviting a presumably Parisian readership to venture into the periphery”^[4]. In this article, I examine two other strategies widely employed by authors of North African immigrant descent in attempting to overcome the othering of the *banlieues* and of the populations associated with them in majority ethnic eyes. Both involve reworking well-worn conventions associated with the travel narrative. The first operates by a near-absence of movement, ironizing in places upon the idea of distant travel, and attempting to efface ethnicized barriers by suggesting that the differences between minority ethnic *banlieusards* and “white” readers in more affluent neighbourhoods may be as slight as the physical distance between them. The second explores the capacity of spatially distant places to reframe people associated with the *banlieues* in ways that can help to strip away ethnicized prejudices back in France. Both of these strategies seek to achieve an effect which, adapting Shklovsky’s notion of “defamiliarization”^[5], we may term “refamiliarization”. Where Shklovsky focuses on the artistic use of language as a way of refreshing the reader’s everyday perceptions so as to distance these from ordinary life, the writers studied here present the reader with viewpoints and experiences that may at first sight appear unfamiliar and extraneous to dominant notions of Frenchness but that reveal far more commonality than is often thought between those inside and those outside the *banlieues*.

Nearly but not quite

- 3 The banalisation of an ethnically stigmatized space is a central dynamic in the first narrative by a writer of postcolonial immigrant descent to have gained widespread attention in France, Mehdi Charef’s *Le thé au harem d’Archy Ahmed* (1983)^[6]. With its seeming evocation of mint tea in a distant harem, the title may appear at first sight to offer a promise of exoticism. Any such expectations are quickly dispelled, with the opening page of the novel plunging the reader into a run-down *cité*^[7] in the northern *banlieues* of Paris where the multi-ethnic cast of young, working class characters – “white” as well as “Arab” and “Black” – featured in the narrative share essentially similar dead-end lives against a backdrop of poverty and unemployment. Asked about his anticipated readership, Charef remarked: “J’ai voulu que le lecteur soit impliqué. J’avais toujours l’impression qu’ils nous regardaient de loin. C’est comme si je disais aux gars de l’extérieur, aux Français: ‘On n’est pas des bêtes, nous aussi on cherche quelque chose, on veut vivre’”^[8]. In seeking to overcome the distance created by ethnicized perceptions of the *banlieues*, Charef set out to show that, irrespective of their ethnic origins, the inhabitants of these disadvantaged areas share in many ways the “ordinary” concerns and ambitions for social betterment that are the norm among the majority ethnic population in the rest of France: “Je voulais simplement montrer que dans une famille française et une famille immigrée, on vit toujours la même chose”^[9]. In line with this, *Le thé* features dual protagonists, the minority ethnic Madjid and his

“white” buddy, Pat, high school drop-outs struggling to find jobs who support each other through thick and thin. While differences of ethnicity, gender and age often feature in the text, sometimes in divisive ways, these are portrayed as being of secondary importance compared with the shared position of practically all of the characters at the lower end of France’s class structure. Similarly, although the text contains an oft-quoted passage in which Madjid expresses frustration over tensions between the cultural expectations of his Algerian parents and the social norms he has internalized while growing up in France (TH 12-13), it would be misleading to suggest that he faces a crisis of cultural identity in the novel. On the contrary, Madjid and Pat share basically the same values and aspirations: the enjoyment of consumer goods, Western pop culture, camaraderie with their peers, and sexual gratification, none of which could be said to be remotely out of the ordinary for young French adults, though the realization of these aspirations is often frustrated by economic precarity. By the time the novel reaches its dénouement with Madjid and Pat being taken into police custody after they drive with several buddies in a stolen car to the seaside resort of Deauville amid marijuana-induced fantasies of sexual conquests among wealthy women on the Côte d’Azur, Madjid is seen far less in terms of his foreign origins than of his position *within* the class structure of French society.

- 4 The Frenchness of Madjid is attested not only by his values and aspirations but also by the ways in which he and his buddies express themselves and by the interface between this and the voice of the narrator. The borrowings not only from “immigrant” languages such as Arabic and Berber but also from Anglophone (especially American) popular culture that pepper the many passages of dialogue in the novel attest to the here-and-now vibrancy of the French in which the characters speak. Throughout the novel, the unnamed extradiegetic narrator transitions seamlessly between this streetwise everyday French and a *français soutenu* typified by use of *the passé simple* and a more formal lexical register that is characteristic of classical French literary norms. Often the narrator sits astride these two modes, relaying through the *style indirect libre* the hard-nosed and sometimes crude terms in which young *banlieusards* speak while simultaneously adding a poetic and even lyrical dimension to the text, as for example, in the evocation of “le béton” as the quintessence of the *banlieues* (TH 57-59). The ease with which the narrator moves back and forth between these registers, frequently fusing them through use of the *style indirect libre*, implicitly invites the reader to similarly embrace *la tchatche des banlieues* not as the language of a foreign place but as part of a linguistic continuum in which the social and ethnic specificities of today’s *banlieues* fuse with more familiar marks of Frenchness.
- 5 In Magyd Cherfi’s *Ma part de Gaulois* (2016)^[10], many similar transitions between slang-filled dialogue, *français soutenu* and *style indirect libre* help to draw the reader into the *cité* in the northern *banlieues* of Toulouse where the story is set. But there are also significant differences between *Ma part* and *Le thé*. The most important of these revolve around the educational success of the young protagonist, Magyd, and the fact that, unlike *Le thé*, where events are recounted by an unnamed extradiegetic narrator positioned close in time to them around the beginning of the 1980s, Cherfi recounts his own story more than thirty years later^[11]. Unlike Madjid and his friends, who are school drop-outs, Magyd is one of a handful of young “Arabs”^[12] in his neighbourhood who do well at school, and who band together to help each other and other youngsters achieve success through the French educational system. Compared with *Le thé*, *Ma part* is a

much more demonstrative text, with the young protagonist and his friends constantly seeking to demonstrate their Frenchness to real or imagined majority ethnic listeners such as teachers and examiners, appealing explicitly in places for acceptance into French society, while the older narrator laments to the reader (clearly assumed to be situated outside the *banlieues*) that such aspirations have all too often fallen on deaf ears because of prejudices rooted in the colonial past which, far from fading, have become ever more salient with the passage of time.

- 6 Most of the action takes place during Magyd's final year at secondary school in the summer of 1981, when he becomes the first high school student in his *cit * to pass the baccalaur at exam. In the *banlieues*, where school drop-out rates were and are well above the national average, attainment of the bac was commonly seen in immigrant families as almost literally beyond their reach, akin to reaching for the moon. When Magyd returns to the *cit * after learning that he has been awarded the bac, on seeing admiring looks on the faces of teenage girls he draws an ironic comparison between the step he has taken and the distance traversed by one of the most iconic figures in Western travel literature: "Oui mes P n lopes, c'est Ulysse qui revient, il vous promet la lune [...]. Un bac dans la cit  d passait l'imagination, c' tait l'homme qui marchait sur la lune, l'inaccessible  toile, l'affaire des Blancs" (MP 208-209).
- 7 Thoughts of this kind show how the distance at which the inhabitants of the *banlieues* are held from mainstream French society becomes internalized within those inhabitants themselves. Not only that: many of Magyd's "Arab" peers, convinced that they are doomed to exclusion because of racist attitudes inherited from the colonial period, act as self-appointed guardians of the barriers separating them from mainstream French society, branding as traitors co-ethnics such as Magyd who seek success on French terms. Indeed, in Cherfi's narrative this fracture *within* the *cit * is often more directly present than open conflict with outsiders, for the overwhelming majority of the text is set within the *cit *, with only occasional forays into downtown Toulouse. Even outward-looking people such as Magyd and his buddies internalize this frontier. "On parlait des Franais comme les Franais parlent des Martiens" (MP 127), Cherfi recalls, before reminding himself (and the reader) that he and other descendants of immigrants are in fact French citizens, though they are so used to being treated as foreigners that "Franais" has for them, as for other *banlieusards*, become a synonym for "whites".
- 8 This divide seems so wide that Magyd and his friends often adopt an ironic posture towards both themselves (for seeking inclusion within a society by which they feel rejected), and towards the "French" (i.e. whites) who brandish grandiose promises of equality while failing to honour them. No matter how hard they try to demonstrate their Frenchness, they feel trapped in a condition akin to that theorized by Homi Bhabha as "mimicry", in which colonized subjects seeking equality through assimilation find themselves condemned to remain treated as "nearly the same, but not quite" and by the same token as permanently inferior^[13]. Fears of this lead virtually to a self-fulfilling prophecy in a climactic scene in which one of Magyd's "Arab" friends, Momo, an aspiring actor, auditions unsuccessfully at the Conservatoire de Toulouse. In rehearsal in front of his *banlieue* peers, Momo gives an inspired performance as Cr on in a scene from Anouilh's *Antigone*, but in front of the all-white jury in the city centre, emblematic of the gatekeepers controlling entry into elite levels of French culture, his

performance falls well below par, marred by self-consciousness as a perceived outsider and fears of unfair treatment that lead insidiously to his overacting.

- 9 In the final scene, Bébert, a white friend of Magyd's, pays him an impromptu visit in the *cit *, where Bébert is roughed up by neighbours who are suspicious of "French" outsiders who venture into their territory, prompting another ironic comparison by the narrator with "[le] p riple d'Ulysse" (p. 258). It turns out that Bébert brings the news that an amateur rock band in which he plays and for which Magyd has written a song has won a talent contest, opening the doors to a professional career. Bébert explains:

– Y a quarante dates qui nous attendent, l'aventure du rock'n'roll commence, c'est parti Madge [i.e. Magyd], tu peux dire adieu   ton quartier tout pourri,   nous la gloire,   nous les filles,   nous la France.

On est mont s un matin dans une estafette, je n'en suis plus jamais redescendu. (MP 258)

- 10 Readers of *Ma part* familiar with Zebda, a Toulouse-based multi-ethnic band mixing rock, punk, rega  and other musical forms, will recognize in this scene an allusion to the beginning of the highly successful career of Magyd Cherfi as the band's singer-songwriter. Until this point, Magyd has resisted the tendency, widespread among *banlieue* youths, to embrace Anglophone, and especially American popular culture, priding himself on the purism of his fidelity to French cultural models. Through its global circulation, Anglophone popular culture, typified by rock and roll, has long been a core feature of youth culture in France as in many other countries, simultaneously displaying its American roots while undergoing constant reinvention and cross-fertilization in interaction with multiple cultural forms originating in other countries and localities. In France, as elsewhere, Anglophone imports are now so embedded in youth culture that they are in a very real sense an integral part of modern France. To minority ethnic youths in the *banlieues*, these imports offer access to an alternative space outside the either/or choice often pressed upon them between their parents' home country and their country of settlement, and at the same time place them on a cultural continuum with their majority ethnic peers, for whom "naturalized" Americanisms are part of being French. Thus, after failing to close the gap by presenting himself as purely and perfectly French, it is by associating himself with a cultural model deriving much of its prestige from a space located outside the Hexagon that Magyd, like many other young people in *banlieues*, sees his best chance of gaining success within France.

There and back

- 11 Richly polyvalent, with white and black strands associated respectively with the excitement of material abundance and inspirational movements for equal rights, the United States has long served not only as a powerful source of creative models for minority ethnic artists in France but also a destination of choice for those given the opportunity to travel there. Among postcolonial writers associated with the *banlieues*, none has explored this avenue with greater brio than Azouz Begag, whose globe-trotting career has enabled him to draw extensively on his experiences in the U.S. in two of his recent novels: *Dites-moi bonjour* (2009)^[14] and *La voix de son ma tre* (2017)^[15].

- 12 Like all of Begag's narratives, *Dites-moi* and *La voix* are heavily autobiographical in inspiration, albeit with liberal doses of creative license. In other works by Begag, the close similarities between the narrator, protagonist and author are reflected in the fact that all three share the same name. Even when those similarities are mildly camouflaged by having the narrator-protagonist speak anonymously (as in *Dites-moi*) or under a fictional name (as in *La voix*), they remain a more or less constant feature of Begag's *œuvre* at the levels of both diegesis and narration. Typically, the protagonist, like the author, is a native of Lyon, raised there by Algerian immigrant parents, initially in a *bidonville* on the banks of the river Rhône and later in a *cité de HLM*, and as an adult he gains prominence as a sociologist, writer, and political figure. The voice of the narrator, like that of the author, is very similar in most of Begag's works, characterized by multiple forms of hybridity drawing upon his mixed (Franco-Algerian) cultural roots and a fascination with the Anglophone world, informing an endless flow of word-play and other forms of humour, often self-deprecating in nature, that seek to defuse the tensions often associated with ethnic differences.
- 13 At one level, *Dites-moi* is unusual among Begag's *œuvre* in that, unlike most of his other narratives, which are presented in a broadly realist mould, it is cast rather in the form of magic realism. Far from cutting across the spirit at work in Begag's other narratives, the magic realism of *Dites-moi* serves in many ways to amplify the dynamic of hybridity that is fundamental to his *œuvre*, since it permits him to jump freely across distances of time and space. Thus the group of huts in which the protagonist is brought up in poverty by uneducated but loving parents who are looked down upon by inhabitants of more affluent neighbourhoods is readily recognizable as the *bidonville* where the author grew up on the banks of the Rhône in an outlying part of Lyon, but here the river is named the Mississippi, and later we learn that the shores of the Mediterranean, another recurrent reference point in Begag's *œuvre*, now reach the outskirts of the city. Most of the characters encountered by the protagonist carry the names and physical appearance of animals, whose folkloric associations incarnate their personalities. About a third of the way in, the text reaches a crescendo when the child protagonist falls asleep dreaming of a balloon that his father is too poor to buy for him. In his dream, he is carried in a montgolfière across the ocean, where from high in the sky he sees the United States, implicitly posited as a land of opportunity. After he enters "[le] Royaume du temps" (DM 56), his lucky star prepares him for his return to earth, where she promises to guard over him during what the narrator describes as an Odyssey that is replete with hazards akin to those of Scylla and Charybdis. The remainder of the text takes on the form of a dystopian travel narrative peppered with Homeric allusions in which the adult protagonist finds that the land in which he was born has fallen prey to the worst excesses associated with American consumerism, which a sociologist (playfully nicknamed "le Sorciologue" and "Le Savant de Marseille") theorizes as "la Satiété de consommation" or more succinctly as "XXL", leading the narrator to remark: "maintenant j'étais un étranger" (DM 61). In this way, far from being a mark of foreign origins, the foreignness felt by the narrator-protagonist on his return from afar arises from his rootedness in his native land, which is seen to be threatened, not by immigrant hordes from former colonies, but by the false gifts of an American Trojan Horse (DM 70).
- 14 It is true that the New Order is governed by a leader plainly modelled on Nicolas Sarkozy who is obsessed with frontier and identity controls targeting young men

(transmuted in the text into herons) corralled in stigmatized “Zones Urbaines Sensibles” (ZUS), a technocratic term for disadvantaged *banlieues*. But this kind of ethnicization is presented by the narrator as a trick played upon gullible citizens who fail to see that the true threats to their well-being come from elsewhere. Significantly, unlike in other texts by Begag, in *Dites-moi* the narrator-protagonist’s father is not identified as an immigrant but simply as someone from an impoverished background “[qui] avait passé toute sa vie dans la forêt où peu de gens parlaient la langue des Francs” (DM 16). What matters is not the father’s ethnicity but the love and wisdom that he transmits to his young son, who is devastated to learn on returning as an adult from his magic balloon ride that his father has died. During the story of the returnee’s experiences we are reminded of the pull of the protagonist’s family through references to Du Bellay’s reworking of Homer’s *Odyssey*, in which the Renaissance poet savours his good fortune on returning from the palatial grandeur of Rome to the simplicity of his native village in France, declaring :

Heureux qui, comme Ulysse, a fait un beau voyage,
Ou comme cestuy-là qui conquit la Toison,
Et puis est retourné, plein d’usage et de raison,
Vivre entre ses parents le reste de son âge ! (quoted in DM 89)

- 15 In associating himself with the spirit of this poem, the narrator-protagonist of *Dites-moi* presents himself as anchored not only in his native France but also in the wisdom learned in a loving family that ultimately transcends all contingencies of time and space.
- 16 In *La voix*, Begag returns once again to these familial ties, which weigh increasingly on his mind from the distance of a sojourn in the United States that occupies most of the text. In a pluri-cultural piece of word play typical of Begag’s work, the title of the narrative, *La voix de son maître*, alludes simultaneously to the allure of American popular culture – associated in the mind of the narrator-protagonist, a French sociologist named Samir Ajaar, with “His Master’s Voice” (HMV), the Anglo-American brand name of the TV set he first watched as a child^[16] – and to the counter-voice of his late father, an Algerian immigrant who from beyond the grave is heard constantly warning his son against the dangers of American imperialism. Significantly, the book is dedicated to the author’s father (V 7), and in the opening scene the father of the narrator-protagonist hums the following song to his new-born son, warning him against the illusions of distant travel :

Hé petit, si tu crois que la France
c’est pas le paradis,
tu vas la quitter et partir divaguer
vers un ailleurs bien éphémère.
Alors sois averti !
À coup sûr, tu ne gagneras pas un radis,
tu t’épuiseras dans l’errance
et rentreras au pays,
comme tous ceux qui, avant toi, sont partis... (V 11)

- 17 In a more down-to-earth fashion than du Bellay, the illiterate father thus shares from the outset with his son what in essence is the same wisdom as that imparted by the revered French poet, whose well-known reworking of Ulysses’s journey is quoted later in the novel and cited above. After the excitement of arriving in the U.S., which he believes to be a land of unlimited opportunities, Ajaar becomes increasingly disillusioned and is soon relieved to leave the country so as to return to those he calls

“les miens”. As these consist essentially of his children and the Algerian side of his family, as distinct from his divorced French wife and in-laws, this could perhaps be read as a sign of him taking up an ethnicized position hostile to France. Yet this would in many ways be a superficial reading of the text. It is true that when Ajaar yearns to leave the U.S., he speaks not of returning to France but rather to his loved ones, as if France itself were not of the same importance to him. But this does not mean that he would prefer to “return” to Algeria, which is not, after all, the land of his birth. Paradoxically, memories of the words sung to him as a child by his fiercely patriotic Algerian father remind him that, having been born in France, Ajaar would be wrong to imagine that any other country could ever be his true home. The novel ends with Ajaar fondly addressing his deceased father, thanking him above all for teaching him the value of hospitality and tolerance. Thus in returning to “les miens”, Ajaar is returning not to an ethnic group but to a system of moral values learnt from his father that he in turn shares with his children in which familial love is implicitly posited as a transcendent model for social relations as a whole. And what could be more recognizable and familiar to most readers, whatever their ethnic origins, than the texture of familial ties?

- 18 Nadir Dendoune, a French journalist of Algerian immigrant descent, paints a similarly admiring and loving picture of his parents in *Un tocard sur le toit du monde* (2010)^[17], in which he recounts his ascent to the summit of Mount Everest. Amid the poverty and discrimination to which he is exposed by virtue of his birth to immigrant parents in the *département* of Seine-Saint-Denis, Dendoune fears that he will never be fairly treated in his native country, leading him to spend much of his adult life seeking fulfilment and valorization elsewhere: in a round-the-world bicycle ride that takes him to Australia in 1993; in Iraq, where he volunteers to serve as a human shield during the U.S.-led war of 2003; and in the ascent of Everest, which he undertakes in 2008. In these distant places, he finds liberation from the socio-historical conditions that define and taint perceptions of his ethnicity in France, becoming instead an “ordinary” Frenchman: “J’ai quitté la France en 1993, pour un raid en VTT jusqu’à Sydney. Et c’est là que ma vie a changé. Un vrai déclic quand on m’a considéré pour la première fois comme un Français à part entière, un type normal”^[18]. In climbing Everest, Dendoune seeks similar liberation, together with an opportunity to “montrer à la France [meaning French people outside the *banlieues*] qu’on peut être né du mauvais côté du périph, dans les HLM du 93, être le fils d’un Algérien illettré et réussir un exploit que bien peu de gens seraient même capables d’envisager (*TM 12*)”. The narration of Dendoune’s exploit in one of the most remote spots on the planet is thus framed between recurrent reminders of his point of departure in the HLM tower block where his parents live and the anticipated reception of his text among majority ethnic readers located elsewhere in France.
- 19 Climbing to the summit of the highest peak on earth is in multiple senses virtually far as can be imagined from the *banlieues*. Mountaineering of this kind requires not only a tenacious appetite for travel and exceptional levels of personal endurance but also the mobilization of resources on a scale far beyond the means of the world’s poor. As Dendoune observes, the norm in enterprises of this kind is that “pour être un aventurier, il faut être blanc”^[19]. It is no accident that the first man to reach the summit of Everest in 1953, the New Zealander Edmund Hillary, was a white member of a (by the standards of the day) high-tech British-led expedition supported by the manual labour

of locally recruited sherpas in Nepal, where living standards were among the lowest on earth. When news of the successful ascent was released on the morning of the coronation of Queen Elizabeth II, it was hailed in London as a triumph for the Empire and Commonwealth over which the British monarch presided. While hundreds of mountaineers now scale Everest each year in organized groups, the costs are such that these expeditions are still composed overwhelmingly of whites from the global North; climbers from relatively humble backgrounds such as Dendoune are very much in a minority among the members of such groups.

- 20 During the ascent, in the course of which Dendoune thinks frequently of his mother, phoning her when possible on expensive equipment borrowed from other climbers, he often compares the expedition's sherpas with Algerian immigrant workers such as his father in France. But he himself is generally treated as a Westerner by sherpas and mountaineers alike, for the ethnicity that condemns him to stigmatization within the Hexagon goes virtually unnoticed outside France. Few among the Nepalese have even heard of Algeria, and for his fellow mountaineers, including the legendary British explorer Sir Ranulph Fiennes, he is simply French. At close to 30,000 feet, such rivalries and divisions as exist owe far less to differences of ethnicity than to those of class (cash-strapped, Dendoune is less well equipped than most of the group), and as the party struggles to reach the top, individual differences of personal temperament and physical endurance become paramount. Thus as the oxygen becomes rarefied, so too do differences of ethnicity, enabling Dendoune – who succeeds in getting to the summit while other members of the group fail – to achieve a remarkable feat that demonstrates the injustice of the ethnicized barriers that all too often deny equal opportunities to the inhabitants of the *banlieues*.
- 21 At the summit, Dendoune thinks first of his mother and then of his father, followed in turn by the rest of his family, “le 93” (the administrative number that has become a colloquial way of referencing the *département* of Seine-Seine-Denis), and “toutes les banlieues et les cambrousses sans réseaux” (TM 210-211). Then he pulls out of his backpack a heart-shaped piece of cardboard bearing the handwritten number 93, which he brandishes proudly while the sherpa who has accompanied him to the summit takes photographs of him. One of the resulting pictures features on the cover the book, in which it is hard to not to see a half-ironic echo of one of the most famous mountaineering photos of all time, in which Edmund Hillary is seen standing on the summit of Everest holding aloft a Union Jack that stands out at the very pinnacle of the image against a dark blue sky^[20]. Compared with the imperial grandeur of Hillary's pose, the piece of cardboard clutched by Dendoune seems at one and the same time almost pitifully humble in its referent (“le département le moins aimé de France et l'un des plus pauvres” [TM 212]) and yet an intense source of pride.
- 22 Dendoune also carried in his backpack two flags - those of France and Algeria - with the intention of bringing together his two national identities by planting them side by side on the mountain top. He proudly takes the Algerian flag out of the backpack ready to plant it in the ice but hesitates over the French flag, fearing that it is too stained by the racism of those for whom BBR (an allusion to the “bleu-blanc-rouge” colours of the French tricolore) has become a byword for an exclusionary vision of France. It is unclear from the text whether he overcomes these misgivings to complete his planned gesture of reconciliation.

- 23 On the way down from the top, Dendoune reflects bitterly on the barriers placed in the way of *banlieusards* by French elites :

Les vrais communautaires, ce sont “eux”. “Nous”, on ne demande qu’à faire partie de leur cercle privé. En vérité, une partie de mon mal-être vient de là : depuis mon enfance, on me renvoie à la gueule que je suis un imposteur, un tocard. Pas assez français. Pas vraiment français. Je ne changerai pas mon faciès pour autant, ni ne mentirai sur mon lieu de résidence : banlieusard et fier de l’être. (TM 217)

- 24 Thus even after he has conquered the highest peak on earth, Dendoune finds himself staring at a glass wall that brands him as “nearly the same, but not quite”. This is the same glass wall that Magyd and his friends encounter while growing up in the *banlieues* of Toulouse, the awareness of which insidiously embeds itself within their own consciousness as a nagging source of self-doubt and distrust towards others. Just as Magyd’s friends come to feel that they will never get a fair hearing from the jury members of the Conservatoire de Toulouse, so Dendoune fears that no matter how powerful the demonstration of his worth, he will never be treated as truly French.

Conclusion

- 25 Shortly after the publication of *Ma part*, Cherfi was invited to participate in an edition of the France 5 TV literary talk show “La Grande Librairie” in which the line-up of guests consisted essentially of “Francophone” writers, i.e. authors born outside France, mainly in former colonies, who, although they write in French, are regarded as foreigners even when they move to France and become French citizens. By a cruel irony, this positioning of Cherfi – a native and citizen of France – in a “francophone” frame implicitly plays into precisely the kind of misperceptions against which *Ma part* rails. Seated next to the Congolese-born author Alain Mabanckou, Cherfi regrets that with the passage of time “le rendez-vous manqué” between France and its *banlieues* has engendered disillusion and despair among minority ethnic youngsters born in France who – in contrast with those, who like Cherfi, sought to gain entry into mainstream society by demonstrating their Frenchness – see no point in trying to be part of a country that rejects them. In an allusion to young men from the *banlieues* who in recent years have joined Middle East-based jihadist groups and committed murderous attacks in France, Cherfi laments that thirty years after the events described in his narrative, “à force de ne pas trouver sa [sic] place, on voit des mêmes aujourd’hui qui cherchent des refuges ailleurs”^[21]. The extreme nature of the “ailleurs” to which French jihadists have turned is a disturbing reflection of the depth and dangers of the fissures within French society which the writers examined in this article have striven, against the odds, to bridge.

NOTES

1. “Manuel Valls évoque un ‘apartheid territorial, social, ethnique’ en France,” *Le Monde*, 20 January 2015.

2. Because a literal translation of “banlieues” as “suburbs” would carry misleading connotations in English, the term is retained here in French so as to reference the meaning currently foregrounded in French usage.
3. Huggan’s *The Postcolonial Exotic: Marketing the Margins*, London/New York, Routledge, 2001, refers mainly to Anglophone authors associated with territories formerly colonized by Great Britain. For similar arguments relating to the marketing of texts by “Francophone” authors and writers of North African immigrant descent respectively, see Richard Watts, *Packaging Post/Coloniality: The Manufacture of Literary Identity in the Francophone World*, Lanham, MD, Lexington, 2005, and Kathryn A. Kleppinger, *Branding the “Beur” Author*, Liverpool University Press, 2015.
4. Lia Brozgal, “La Banlieue to the Moon: Rachid Djaidani’s Displacement of Paris”, in *Contemporary French Civilization*, vol. 35, no. 2, Summer 2011, p. 87-109; quoted material, p. 100-103.
5. Viktor Shklovsky, “Art as Technique” (1917), in Julie Rivkin and Michael Ryan (eds), *Literary Theory: An Anthology*, 2d edn, Oxford, Blackwell, 2004, p. 15-21.
6. Mehdi Charef, *Le thé au harem d’Archi Ahmed*, Paris, Mercure de France, 1983 ; henceforth TH.
7. In the context of the *banlieues*, the word *cit * typically denotes a neighbourhood dominated by a large expanse of HLM (social housing), often in the form of tower blocks.
8. Personal interview with Mehdi Charef, 17 September 1987.
9. *Ibid.*
10. Magyd Cherfi, *Ma part de Gaulois*, Arles, Actes Sud, 2016 ; henceforth MP.
11. To the extent that the protagonist, narrator and author of *Ma part* all bear the same name, the text falls within the broad category of autofiction. For clarity, the young protagonist is referred to here as Madjid, whereas the narrator and author are referred to as Cherfi.
12. Like many other immigrant families from North Africa, Magyd’s family is ethnically Berber, but in majority ethnic perceptions they are commonly seen as “Arabs”.
13. Homi Bhabha, “Of Mimicry and Man: The Ambivalence of Colonial Discourse”, in *October*, vol. 28, Spring 1984, p. 125-133.
14. Azouz Begag, *Dites-moi bonjour*, Paris, Fayard, 2009 ; henceforth DM.
15. Azouz Begag, *La voix de son ma tre*, Geneva, La Joie de lire, 2017 ; henceforth V.
16. Best known as a sound recording label, HMV has also been used intermittently as a television brand name in France and elsewhere.
17. Nadir Dendoune, *Un toc ard sur le toit du monde*, Paris, Jean-Claude Latt s, 2010; henceforth TM. A movie based on Dendoune’s narrative, *L’ascension*, was released in 2017.
18. Remarks by Dendoune in an interview with Fabrice Drouzy <www.liberation.fr/auteur/4365-fabrice-drouzy>, 8 June 2009, consulted 11 March 2017.
19. *Ibid.*
20. The ice axe on which the Union Jack was mounted also bore the flags of Nepal, the United Nations and India, but in the best known of the 1953 summit photos only the British flag can be clearly discerned.
21. “[La Grande Librairie](#)”, France 5 TV, 1 September 2016, consulted 6 November 2017.

ABSTRACTS

Dans un monde o  les distances semblent constamment se r tr cir, les perceptions des banlieues des villes fran aises constituent une anomalie frappante. Situ es   quelques kilom tres

seulement du cœur des grands centres de population français, les banlieues sont souvent considérées par ceux qui n'y habitent pas comme des lieux irrémédiablement étrangers.

Cet article examine deux stratégies largement employées par les auteurs descendant d'immigrés maghrébins pour tenter de surmonter la marginalisation des banlieues et des populations qui leur sont associées dans les yeux ethniques majoritaires. Les deux impliquent de retravailler des conventions associées au récit de voyage. Le premier opère par une quasi-absence de mouvement, ironisant par endroits sur l'idée du voyage lointain, et essayant d'effacer les barrières ethnicisées en suggérant que les différences entre les banlieusards ethniques minoritaires et les lecteurs «blancs» dans les quartiers plus riches peuvent être aussi légères que la distance physique qui les sépare. La deuxième explore la capacité des lieux spatialement éloignés à recadrer les personnes associées à la banlieue, ce qui peut contribuer à gommer les préjugés ethniques en France. Ces deux stratégies visent à obtenir un effet qui, en adaptant la notion de “défamiliarisation” de Shklovsky, pourrait être une “refamiliarisation”.

INDEX

Mots-clés: Banlieues, récit de voyage, littérature post-coloniale

Keywords: Suburbs, travel writing, post-colonial literature

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