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## Beur in Name Only?

### A Comparison of *La Honte sur nous* by Saïd Mohamed and *Le Gone du chaâba* by Azouz Begag

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#### Abstract

*This paper compares the narrator-protagonist in *La Honte sur nous* by Saïd Mohamed to the protagonist in the paradigmatic work of Beur fiction, *Le Gone du chaâba* by Azouz Begag. I argue that Mohamed's protagonist does not have a hybrid identity as traditionally defined by Beur fiction. Even so, he is automatically relegated to the margins and assigned a hybrid identity by society, although he does not have the necessary profile. In closing, I ask if Mohamed's work can be classified as Beur fiction given the weak parallels between the works.*

#### Introduction

Hybridity, being neither the one nor the other, is an important theme in many works of Beur fiction, or literature written by the children of Maghrebi immigrants to France. Ultimately, hybridity is a question about belonging—an interrogation of personal identity and the community to which one belongs. For this reason, it is natural that Beur literature would express and struggle with the concept of hybridity. Hargreaves further explains how Beur literature is linked to the Beurs' daily lives:

[T]he Beurs have, however, been compelled to migrate constantly between the secular culture of France and the traditions carried with them by their Muslim parents from across the Mediterranean [...] [Beur literature] focuses on the key problematic which has preoccupied Beur writers: the articulation of a sense of personal identity, forged in the particular circumstances which are those of an ethnic minority in France.

(1)

Beur literature, then, is a unique form of minority discourse. While members of this community are part of a minority because of their ethnic origins, many of them also identify with the ideals of the majority due to being educated in France. The minority discourse offered by Beur literature is a hybrid one.

Minority literature attempts to speak for a minority community. In the case of Beur literature, the authors are attempting to highlight problems of identity

and social issues that the community faces. It is not enough to have a coherent group that does not identify, either wholly or partly, with the majority in order to have a minority group. A minority group is an unrepresented unit that is seeking representation. Harrison (2003) defines a minority group in more detail:

[I]n practice minority groups are “unrepresented” in a democracy, if by “minority group” one understands a number of people with some significant attribute in common whose worldview and/or interests as a group are inevitably consistently ignored or rebuffed by the majority from which, as a group, they differ and sometimes dissent... The term “minority group” may serve, then, as a vague and euphemistic way of describing a section of the population that could be described more precisely as disenfranchised or oppressed, through the effects of a concrete political history. (99, author's emphasis)

Kastoryano (2002; 2010) describes the Maghrebi community in France in the above light—a community that is in the process of negotiating its identity with the State in order to gain greater representation. Likewise, Begag (2004; 2007) discusses identity in the process of negotiation.

One of Beur literature's primary goals is to expand the idea of what it means to be French. Present in many of the texts is ambivalence between holding onto one's ethnic origins and family heritage, and the desire

to succeed in French society—“a desire for acceptance and integration into the dominant culture and a desire for resistance to that culture” (Lay-Chenchabi 140). While protagonists often struggle with this either-or conundrum, many of the authors do not necessarily view it as choice between two opposites; rather, they attempt to “use their ambivalent position to their advantage” (Lay-Chenchabi 140). Their writing showcases their cultural hybridity and the struggles associated with it. Showcasing hybridity—or making the presence of a hybrid known—resists against certain elements of the dominant culture while adopting fundamental elements of that dominant culture, thereby working to expand the membership of the nation to include their minority community. In other words, showing hybrid identities is a way of critiquing the larger society, in effect pushing for a more inclusive national vision of citizenship.

This article will examine the narrator-protagonist in *La Honte sur nous* by Saïd Mohamed. The first section will place him within the larger socio-political context and debate over integration. Bhabha’s theory of hybridity and its subversive potential will be of particular importance. Next, Mohamed’s work will be compared to the textbook example of Beur fiction, *Le Gone du chaâba* by Azouz Begag. This paper will argue that many parallels between the works one would expect to see are weak. Finally, the conclusion will ask if Mohamed’s work can even be classified as Beur fiction given these weak parallels.

### **The Narrator-Protagonist in Context: Hybridity and Integration Challenges**

French identity, like identity in other Western nation-states, has traditionally been binary—that is, an “us vs. them” understanding of citizenship and political identity. The “us vs. them” paradigm may have worked before immigration and globalization, when populations were separated by geography. However, as the former colonial subjects immigrated to the metropolis, they confronted legacies of colonialism and muddled identity distinctions. Just as in the colonial era, hybridity became an important identity-effect (Bhabha 170). This new population was neither the one nor the Other, and became a minority population within national society. This section will examine the integration challenges posed by hybridity. Specifically, immigration, Islam, and racism, and the presence of these integration challenges in *La Honte sur nous* will

be discussed.

Bhabha explores the impact of immigration on the postcolonial world, and explains that “[m]igrant communities are representative of a much wider trend towards the minoritization of national societies” (221). As already discussed within the context of France, many traditional national societies are founded upon the idea of a common people, an identity that links the whole community. The minoritization of these societies is thus problematic for any narrative of identity used to build national pride, unity, and identity.

The effect of this process should not be overlooked. Just as in the colonial era, hybridity supplants claims to cultural authority. That is not to say, however, that hybridity seeks to destroy a culture. Rather, “cultural enunciations in the act of hybridity” are simply in “the process of translating and transvaluing cultural differences” (Bhabha 252). The goal is to allow the presence of difference in the community, thereby allowing the members of an immigrant community to become a part of the nation.

For many Beur authors, including Azouz Begag, economic migration during *les trentes glorieuses*, or thirty years of Post-War economic expansion in France, is the reason their families came to France. Their fathers went to France to work from the Maghreb (a region in northwestern Africa, much of which was colonized by France), and the family followed later. Some writers were born in the Maghreb, and others were born in France. Regardless, the setting for most works of Beur fiction is in the *banlieues*—the impoverished projects at the periphery of the city where immigrants lived and where many of their descendants continue to live.

The setting remains the same for *La Honte sur nous*, although, interestingly, while the narrator’s father was indeed an immigrant worker, he was not part of the wave of immigrants during *les trentes glorieuses*. His immigration was earlier, during World War II. After having worked for the French colonists in Algeria as a laborer, he was recruited into the French Army during the war (Mohamed 185). For the French army, the Second World War was brief, and so *le vieux*, the narrator’s father, found himself in the German Army. He tells the reader that he did not work as a soldier, but as a laborer building the Atlantic wall (Mohamed 2000, 186). After the defeat of Germany by Allied Forces, *le vieux* returned to France where there was a great need for laborers to rebuild the country. He eventually left France and his children behind and returned to

Morocco when the narrator was younger, only to find that his friends had immigrated as well (Mohamed 189). *Le vieux's* story does not fit into a common narrative of immigration from the Maghreb. Even so, this inconsistency changes neither the narrator's nor his father's situation; both face the same challenges as many other immigrants.

The reader does not know too much about the narrator's childhood. It is clear that the narrator's parents were not a strong or positive force in his life. The character of *la mère* in the first part of the novel is not the narrator's biological mother. *Le vieux* reveals that the narrator's mother abandoned her children. In turn, *le vieux* gave them over to the custody of the French state: "Puis elle [la mère] m'a laissé seul avec vous. Si je compte bien, vous trois et les trois autres, ça fait six qu'elle aura lâchés à l'Assistance publique" [Then she [the mother] left me alone with you. If I count well, you three and the three others make six that she turned over to the state] (Mohamed 187). The narrator's mother left for a simple holiday, and *le vieux*, who knew she was leaving for good, shut his eyes and did not ask any questions (Mohamed 187). In short, the narrator's family life was far from stable.

The narrator's situation does not improve. He is not accepted into a beaux-arts program, so he goes to a trade school to learn to be a typographer (Mohamed 19). He does not like his work: "Et il suffisait de quelques secondes pour réduire le travail à néant" [It only took a few seconds to reduce the work to nothing] (Mohamed 22). He does not have much hope for his future, nor much confidence in his ability to do what he wishes: "Moi, seule l'usine m'attendait" [In my case, only the factory was waiting for me] (Mohamed 35). His true passion is reading and writing; this is an escape for him. He always has a book with him, and takes advantage of every idle moment: "Lire pendant dix minutes, c'est passer une journée avec un écrivain" [To read for ten minutes was to spend a day with a writer] (Mohamed 46). Much of his day is dedicated to reading and writing (Mohamed 62). In the end, it is only his love for reading and writing that drives him to travel in order to find himself and gain experience.

Another integration challenge faced by France is Islam's relationship with the Republic. Islam has always had a tenuous relationship with the Republic dating back to the colonial era. Bozzo notes, "La situation coloniale a créé un rapport incontestable de domination sur l'islam" [The colonial situation created

an incontestable relationship of domination with Islam] (81). Frankly put, France did not trust Islam or its adherents, and feared that Muslims could be incited to overthrow the colonial administration on religious grounds (Bozzo 81). In fact, a system of control was put in place in the name of security well before the Third Republic (1870-1940) to counteract this supposed threat (Bozzo 2006, 81-82). For instance, Bozzo notes that Muslim clergy were considered public functionaries, and that the Republic created *medersas*, or colleges to train Muslim clergy (*écoles supérieures musulmanes*), "pour y former un personnel 'fiable'" [in order to form there a 'reliable' staff] (82). For that reason, the 1905 law on *laïcité*, or the strict separation between Church and State, could not be applied in Algeria despite its status as a *département*<sup>1</sup>, "sauf à remettre en cause tout dispositif de contrôle" [except by undermining every device of control] (Bozzo 82). Thus, the people of Algeria, many of whom would immigrate to France later, were not acquainted with the foundational principle of *laïcité*.

In the present day post-colonial world, Islam's relationship with the Republic continues to be tenuous. Specifically, the compatibility of Islam and *laïcité* is a central issue in the debate on integration. Kastoryano argues that "[t]he issue for states is negotiating the ways and means of including the descendants of immigrants into the political community" (4), though she notes that in France this pragmatic negotiation is sometimes juxtaposed against rigid, pro-republican political rhetoric. The crux of these negotiations is the debate around *laïcité* (Kastoryano 6). Just as *laïcité* was never implemented in Algeria before independence, it has yet to be fully and satisfactorily implemented in France today:

Parallèlement, dans l'ex-métropole coloniale, où les musulmans de France sont pour les trois quarts algériens, l'exigence d'une authentique séparation de la religion musulmane et de l'État, dans l'esprit de la loi de 1905 sur la laïcité, n'a pas encore trouvé pleine satisfaction à ce jour [In the same way, the demand for a true separation of the Muslim religion and the State in the spirit of the law of 1905 on *laïcité* has yet to be fully implemented to this day in the ex-metropolis, where three-quarters of French Muslims are Algerian]. (Bozzo 83)

In this debate, a religious and ethnic identity is falsely and automatically assumed; Muslims are always assumed to be from the Maghreb, and Maghrebis are always assumed to be Muslim (Kastoryano 25). This community, ethnic and religious, is antithetical to the French model of republicanism, for “France, heir to the Revolution, does not recognize any ethnic or religious community” (Kastoryano 34). Because of this, “Islam eventually came to signify an entire culture in its own right” (Kastoryano 88) instead of a part of, though slightly different from, the larger culture. As such, Muslims and Maghrebi immigrants have been cut off from French culture. Additionally, the identity of Muslim has been muddled with the identity of Arab among some groups, and with that identification comes a host of assumed negative identities, including delinquent and even terrorist (Deltombe and Rigouste 199).

The *laïcité* debate is directly tied to the immigration one, and in many cases they seem to be one and the same; there is a concern among the larger French body politic that Islam—and by extension Muslims—is inassimilable into French culture. Indeed, the word “*assimilation*” has largely been reserved for immigrants from other European countries, while the word “*intégration*” has been reserved for immigrants from states where Islam is a strong force, especially states in the Maghreb (Kastoryano 31).

In *La Honte sur nous*, Islam is not important—in fact, it is barely mentioned. This is a stark contrast with many other works of Beur fiction in which Islam and faith often play a central role. Most protagonists come from Muslim families, even if the protagonists themselves are not practicing or particularly devout. In Mohamed’s work, however, there are few references to religion. *Le vieux*, the narrator’s father, is Muslim, which is unsurprising given he was a first-generation immigrant and has since returned to Morocco. *Le vieux*’s identity as a Muslim is clear from the start; when he recognizes his son, he cries “Fatma!” repeatedly (Mohamed 165). By contrast, the narrator explains that he would pray to Jesus Christ as a child:

Je connaissais toutes les prières, je les avais apprises au catéchisme, le jeudi matin, dans l’arrière-salle du bistrot. Laquelle, pour l’occasion, se transformait en lieu d’enseignement religieux. Je demandais de l’aide au seigneur Jésus, juste un coup de main quand la vie sentait le roussi. Je joignais les

mains et le priais de ne pas nous laisser orphelins [I knew all the prayers; I had learned them at Catechism on Thursday mornings in the back room of a bistro. This room, for the occasion, would transform itself into a room for religious instruction. I would ask the Lord Jesus for help, just a hand when life was beginning to go bad. I would fold my hands together and pray to him to not make us orphans]. (Mohamed 194-195)

The fact that religion is not a major theme but only mentioned briefly is important. The narrator, instead of sharing the religious identity of his father and wider Maghrebi immigrant community, is by and large secular, but was raised identifying with Christianity. The *laïcité* debate does not concern him at all.

A final important postcolonial issue to consider that has implications for identity is the issue of racism, around which the “Beur Movement” was born. In 1983, *La Marche pour l’égalité et contre le racisme* [The March for Equality and against Racism], or simply *La Marche des Beurs* [The March of the Beurs], occurred. Reeck refers to this moment as “the Beur generation’s political coming-of-age” (5). The march was in response to the election of an extreme right, xenophobic candidate of *Le Front national*, as well as to increasing tensions between young people in the *banlieues* and police forces (Reeck 5). It was organized by a small neighborhood group called SOS Avenir Minguettes in Lyon, and it would end up being “France’s longest and largest demonstration march” (Reeck 5). It ended in Paris on the steps of the Elysée Palace, where demonstrators were met by socialist president François Mitterrand. Among other things, the President promised to make the improvement of the *banlieues* a priority. Soon, however, the Beur movement fractured and fell apart, and the President’s promises were not kept (Reeck 5-7).

The identity as an immigrant, especially an immigrant from a former colony, and the presumed identity, whether correct or not, of Muslim are targets for the extreme right. The definition of the extreme right in France, as one might expect, varies depending on the time period one considers. Winock says that while the extreme rights is “trop vague, trop empirique, trop vaporeuse” [too vague, too empirical, too vaporous] (238), it generally can refer to multiple philosophies and political movements, including “ultracisme, nationalisme, fascisme, pétainisme, national-populisme, nazisme [...]—dont il est malaisé de préciser le dénominateur commun” [ultra-racism,

nationalism, fascism, Petainism, national populism, Nazism [...]—of which it is difficult to specify the common denominator] (Winock 238).

Today, the most powerful extreme right group is without question *Le Front national*, a party founded by Jean-Marie le Pen in 1972 (Winock 154). The timing of the party's rise to prominence is not a surprise. The economic downturn in the late-1970s, coupled with the liberal immigration policies during *les trentes glorieuses*, made the party's platform of economic populism seem attractive to a larger swath of the population. The party's "war horse," according to Winock, has been immigration (155). Part and parcel of its platform of economic populism and positions on immigration was its xenophobic positions. As Winock explains:

S'il y a du chômage en France, il n'y-a-qu'à renvoyer chez eux les étrangers: ce "n'y-a-qu'à," réponse toute simple aux maux du jour, est typique de l'univers mental de l'extrême droite [If there is unemployment in France, *the only thing to do is* to send foreigners to their native homes: this "the only thing to do is" overly simplified response to the evils of the day is typical of the intellectual universe of the extreme right]. (247)

The scapegoats during recent times of economic downturn have been immigrants, notably immigrants from the Maghreb. Economic populism is thus coupled with xenophobia, which is linked to Islamophobia. In the end the product is racism, both within certain institutions and in interpersonal relationships.

Unsurprisingly, *La Honte sur nous* and many other works of Beur fiction reflect the above realities. In an episode early in the novel, there is a discussion among a couple of characters about the risks of carrying drugs on them. The narrator's friend, Mollets de Coq, persists that there will not be a problem. When asked what will happen if he is stopped by the police, Mollets de Coq replies, "Est-ce que j'ai une sale gueule ? Tu as plus de chance d'être contrôlé que moi !" [Do I have an ugly mug? You have a greater chance of being stopped than I!] (Mohamed 37). While there is no explicit indication that the characters are discussing racial profiling by the police, the assumption that the narrator has a better chance of being stopped may indicate the presence of the discriminatory practice.

In another episode, the narrator is hitchhiking across Spain. When the narrator tells the trucker with whom he is traveling that he is going to Morocco, the driver freely gives his opinion on the country and counsels the narrator to stay in Europe:

A mon avis, [le Maroc] c'est un pays de sauvages ! Là-bas, ils dépouillent père et mère. Je connais les Marocains pour les avoir vus à l'œuvre à Barcelone. Ils nous ont bien aidés contre les bolcheviques. Mais ce sont des violeurs. Des tueurs que rien n'arrête ! [In my opinion, [Morocco] is a country of savages! They skin fathers and mothers over there. I am familiar with Moroccans because I saw them at work in Barcelona. They helped us a lot with the Bolsheviks. But they are rapists. Killers which nothing can stop!]. (Mohamed 138)

The narrator stops listening to him: "Je n'écoutais plus" [I was no longer listening] (Mohamed 139). This is the only time the narrator does not give his driver the courtesy of listening, seemingly encouraging the reader to stop listening and to disregard the driver's comments, as well (Reeck 112).

The reader sees a reversal, however, towards the end of the text. Instead of police from France, it is the border security in Morocco with whom the narrator has problems. The border security thinks he is a terrorist and that his passport is a fake: "Vous êtes Libyen ! Vous parlez arabe ! Votre passeport est faux ! [You are Libyan! You speak Arabic! Your passport is fake!]" (Mohamed 155). The narrator admits that he appears to be from North Africa, and that it must be strange to the guards that he cannot speak Arabic despite what he looks like (Mohamed 154). He explains to them that he is indeed French: "Mais je suis français ! Je suis né en France, ma mère est française, et je ne parle que le français ! [But I'm French! I was born in France, my mother is French, and I only speak French!]" (Mohamed 155). The officials do not believe him, however, and continue to accuse him of being a terrorist. He is allowed to pass after he asks to contact the French consulate and is made to sign a form.

In a diverse and multi-cultural France, the old narrative of identity is being challenged; yet these officials on both sides of the Mediterranean Sea are guards of the old, binary narrative of identity. Similarly, the preservation of this identity narrative is a central

concern of the modern political right, both moderate and extreme (Winock 172, 182). Many on the right today believe that immigrants—and in France that term carries the connotation of Muslims—are trying to undermine traditional identity and institute a pluralistic society. To them, this would be tantamount to destroying French cultural identity, which is dependent on shared History and memory” (Oscherwitz 189). Foreigners are thus regarded as the enemy within, and are predictably treated with contempt by some in society.

The above narrative of a republican vision of identity versus a multicultural vision of identity is too simplistic (Oscherwitz 189). Certainly France is multicultural, and many advocate for a vision of identity that will take that into account. However, *La Honte sur nous* seems to promote a more inclusive vision of national identity. This is in line with many other works of Beur fiction. The protagonists are not asking for an entirely new France; they are asking to be included as a recognized part of France. This notion agrees with Oscherwitz’s observation that “[the multicultural model of citizenship] seems in many ways to be a national model, and in that regard, to accept many of the basic principles of the Republican model (most notably an insistence on the importance of the collective past and of collective memory)” (189). Mohamed’s *La Honte sur nous* simply asks France to reconsider that collective past and collective memory, especially including the sometimes violent colonial era and postcolonial issues, to make them more representative of the varied histories of its diverse population. While History may be straightforward, histories are often more nuanced and complicated. Throughout *La Honte sur nous*, the reader sees these histories, including the narrator’s own. Ultimately, *La Honte sur nous* and other works are looking for a working definition of French identity instead of a static definition of who is French.

### **A Comparison of *La Honte sur nous* and *Le Gone du chaâba***

*Le Gone du chaâba* by Azouz Begag is one of the foundational texts for Beur literature; the text is one of the more well-read works in the corpus, and the author is a leader of the movement in concrete ways. For that reason, one should compare *La Honte sur nous* with Begag’s work when assessing if it can fall under the category of Beur fiction.

Begag employs many strategies for showing cultural hybridity, all of which have been well-documented and studied by scholars (e.g. Hargreaves; Reeck). In the text, the narrator-protagonist is a young child, and because of that he faces particular challenges. He struggles with the French language, for instance. Indeed, this is a critical problem he faces, and is the most overt symbol of his hybrid identities. Azouz, the protagonist, is forced to migrate between his two linguistic cultures quite literally; the walk to school is a symbolic bridge between his different lives. His family life represents his ethnic origins and heritage, while his school life represents his life as French. This truly is a unique challenge for second-generation immigrants. It is unique because neither the protagonist’s parents nor his children will have to face the same struggle with the language.

Azouz’s Arab parents are illiterate. The responsibility of translating school documents falls to the children, specifically to Azouz’s older sister. The reader also sees that Azouz has inherited linguistic patterns from his parents. The writer attempts to show these differences to the reader; for example, *monsieur* and *madame* to Azouz is *m’sieur* and *m’dame* (Begag 69). Begag even includes a glossary of terms in the back of the book, as well as an explanation of the father’s speaking patterns to help the reader along. Moreover, the very title of the novel is a mixture of French and Arabic, reflecting the protagonist’s bi-cultural identity (Hargreaves 39).

The malaise caused by this constant migration between his family’s ethnic world and the world of French society understandably leads to intense frustration on the part of the protagonist. Azouz now feels foreign in his own ethnic community. He is rejected by many of his family friends from the shantytown because of his academic success. He is also unsure about how to navigate his two communities. For instance, when the police come to investigate claims that Azouz’s uncle has been illegally slaughtering sheep, Azouz gladly helps the officers while the rest of his community feigns ignorance of the French language. Additionally, when his class discusses hygiene practices, Azouz reveals his family hygiene standards in the shantytown, much to the embarrassment of his friends. Later, he manipulates his identity to fit in at school. Azouz pretends to be Jewish to make friends, and acts as if he does not see his mother when she comes to pick him up from school in order to keep up the charade. It is only when a new teacher who

taught in Algeria takes an interest in Azouz's life, even teaching him how to write Allah in Arabic, that Azouz begins to feel at home in his bicultural persona.

*Le Gone du chaâba*, however, is much older than *La Honte sur nous*, which was published in 2000. Because of the time difference, Mohamed's work is very different, even if it, too, is set in the 1980s. As already discussed, the unnamed narrator does not have to migrate between these two worlds of family and of French society. His father, a Moroccan, is absent in the novel until the narrator chooses to visit him in Morocco. While *le vieux* was in the narrator's life when he was a child, the text does not deal with the problems of navigating a bicultural world. The narrator's mother is French and the only mention of the narrator's religious history is in reference to Christianity.

Another major difference between *La Honte sur nous* and Begag's work is that the narrator does not struggle with the French language; it is the only language he knows. In fact, the narrator comments on those who do not speak correct French. He describes the personnel at the cleaning service he works at before trade school: "Pas un seul, à part le chef, ne parlait correctement le français. Quelques Portugais, des Yougoslaves, des Espagnols et moi partagions l'honneur de la tâche" [Not a soul, except for the boss, spoke French correctly. A few Portuguese, some Yugoslavs, some Spanish and I shared the honor of the tasks] (Mohamed 2000, 40). For him, language—specifically the French language—is an important element of his quest: "Je voyageais en poursuivant ces buts: écrire une histoire, toucher du doigt l'amour et atteindre la félicité *par la parole*" [I was traveling while pursuing these goals: to write a story, to experience love first hand, and to attain bliss *through words*] (Mohamed 136, emphasis added). There does not seem to be a parallel between the language hybridity of Begag's narrator and that of the narrator in Mohamed's work.

And yet, the greatest parallel between the works is arguably how the French language is used by the authors. While they use language in a slightly different manner, they use it unconventionally. Begag interweaves French, slang from Lyon, and Arabic to express the narrator-protagonist's identity. The very title of the novel, *Le Gone du chaâba*, is a reflection of the narrator's bi-cultural identity. The title follows French grammar rules; "gone" is a slang term from Lyon meaning kid or boy; and "chaâba" appears to come from Arabic, although no precise translation is

given by the author in the glossary of terms (Hargreaves 39). This occurs within the text, as well. For example, Azouz refers to his mother as "Emma," the Arabic term for mother. Azouz's language is also a mix of French and Arabic, though not to the extent of his parents' who still have a strong accent. In other words, language is a tool for expressing the cultural hybridity of the narrator-protagonist.

*La Honte sur nous* takes a similar approach. Mohamed mixes classical French with slang. The use of slang may be seen as a perversion of the French language—a language which is highly regulated by The French Academy. Changing the language may also be a strategy for expanding the vision of the nation. As discussed in Mbembe, the French language may be seen as the daily incarnation of the Republic; the two are intrinsically linked (151). In short, by expanding acceptable vernaculars, both works expand the range of acceptable narratives of identity. Just as Bhabha theorizes, hybridity, or in this case the deliberate subversion of the language, subverts cultural authority. The parallel between the works ends there, however. Whereas Begag's novel puts a premium on ethnic differences and cultural hybridity, Mohamed's work does not. The reader notices that his speech patterns are not exclusive to him or an ethnic community; rather, they are indicative of his social milieu. His friends—whether they are Maghrebi or not—share his speech patterns and seem to understand the narrator-protagonist without difficulty.

Like Azouz, the narrator certainly does live at the margins of society; however, the parallels between the works are strained at best. By virtue of age difference, Mohamed's narrator faces very different challenges than Azouz. The novel opens by explaining that he is a delinquent: "La plupart des profs me prédestinaient à un avenir à ne pas piquer des ortolans. Selon eux, j'étais mûr pour Fleury-Mérogis" [Most of the profs had predestined me to a future of failure. According to them, I was ripe for Fleury-Mérogis] (Mohamed 7). Additionally, the narrator's community is dangerous. Several scenes show harsh realities the narrator must face. In one instance, he and his friend Hector are threatened by a drunken shop owner with a gun, and escape unscathed thanks only to the owner's wife (Mohamed 73). In the scene immediately thereafter, the narrator and Hector discover that Hector's roommate has committed suicide at a nearby hotel (Mohamed 75). The narrator also discusses the criminal history of

*le petit*, a quasi-brother of the narrator's. His offenses include punching a bartender in the stomach, who subsequently died of a burst liver. After serving his jail sentence, *le petit* became drunk and stole a car (Mohamed 63-64). The narrator later comments that primal and tribal violence is the path to manhood in the *banlieues*: "Triste époque, les mômes des banlieues n'ont plus que le rodéo du samedi soir et les gyrophares pour devenir des hommes" [A sad time, the kids of the *banlieues* have nothing more than *le rodéo*<sup>2</sup> of Saturday night and the flashing lights of police cars to become men] (Mohamed 150).

It is no wonder the narrator wanted to quit this community and go on a quest. More than that, however, Begag explains that it is necessary for a *rouilleur* (someone stuck in the community) to literally travel in order to become a *dérouilleur* (someone from this community who is ultimately able to exit the vicious cycle and succeed): "...for I am convinced that it is only when you move, when you travel, that you find yourself. You become free when you step outside your inner walls" (125). The narrator's quest is necessary for the development of his identity. The narrator explains it in terms of learning about the world: Mais si je me sentais capable de parler de l'éternité de l'amour, l'expérience me manquait. Comment raconter ce que je n'avais pas vécu puisque je n'arrivais pas à aborder le réel? [But if I felt myself capable of talking about the eternity of love, I was lacking experience. How could I tell of something I had not known since I was not able to reach reality?] (Mohamed 69). The narrator feels he must gain experience in order to be able to write.

The above does not mean that the narrator rejected the whole of his community. To the contrary, he is typically happy when he meets friends from his former community at Chez Nicole. He even comments that Chez Nicole was a haven for him: "Il n'y avait qu'auprès de la bande de 'Chez Nicole' que je trouvais ma part d'existence, un semblant de sérénité intérieure" [It was only with the patrons of 'Chez Nicole' that I could find my share of existence, a semblance of inner peace] (Mohamed 70). Even so, the narrator here is not in Azouz's position; he does not feel the need to reject one community and its traditions for another.

The inclusion of other communities and the telling of untold histories are more important in *La Honte sur nous*. The narrator is not concerned with being a part of the larger French society like Azouz. In a way, Mohamed's protagonist is moving from

one periphery to another; however, Azouz is being pulled from the margins to the center. In addition to being part of a marginalized community, the narrator is removed from the traditional education system and placed in an experimental remedial program; he joins the Communist Party in the beginning chapters; he works as a cleaner, printer, and sweeper; he travels with truckers, hearing unheard war stories from World War II and the colonial conflicts, which for him is "not antithetical to telling history" (Reeck 113); and his quest is from the marginalized *banlieues* to a former colony. Reeck notes that Mohamed's goal is "to speak silence, to unblock censorship, to tell history" (106).

The narrator is perceived as a hybrid. He shares some characteristics with the textbook example of Azouz, namely a similar setting (social milieu and time period), similar parentage, and similar socioeconomic statuses; however, the unnamed narrator's life does not have many parallels with Azouz's. Most notably, he speaks perfect French and is not Muslim, the two most contentious issues in debates on immigration and integration.

His ethnic appearance and where he lives are the only things that can account for his status as an outsider. While all hybridity is imposed by society (and in that way forced), this situation is different. Instead of hybridity based on legitimately being neither the one nor the other culturally and being forced to migrate between two worlds, this hybridity is based on nothing except appearances. This is a sort of forced hybridity—an automatic relegation to the marginal Third Space solely because of perception.

## Conclusion

The above differences then raise the question: Can *La Honte sur nous* be considered Beur fiction? On many counts, the answer seems to be yes. For one, the setting is consistent with other works. The narrative takes place in the 1980s, and the action is primarily in the *banlieues*. Like many other works, the novel recounts a journey, and then ends with the narrator embarking on another journey. Finally, several themes are similar to other works within the corpus. Identity, both individual and cultural, is a primary concern of the author. And similar to some other works, the narrator remains unnamed, although it is clear to the reader that the novel is a work of autofiction or autobiography. The reader also sees themes of distrust toward the police

and French State (Hargreaves).

The work does not entirely fit the traditional template, however. The primary difference is the unnamed narrator in *La Honte sur nous* does not feel a need to navigate or travel between two cultures—the distinctive feature of Beur fiction (Hargreaves 1). In truth, the narrator never seeks to travel from the periphery to the center; rather, he travels from periphery to periphery, from the *banlieues* in France to Morocco to visit his estranged father. In that respect, Mohamed's work is more similar to works by third-generation Maghrebis in France; and since Mohamed published the work in 2000, it is unsurprising that a more contemporary style and viewpoint are represented. Additionally, like third-generation Maghrebi authors, the author does not shy away from portraying the violence of the *banlieues*. But one also sees an emphasis on poetry throughout the work, much like more contemporary works. Indeed, one leader of third-generation Maghrebi authors believes that "poetry speaks louder than the language of violence" (Reeck 163).

In the end, *La Honte sur nous* may be a bridge between the second and third generation Maghrebi authors in France, connecting Beur fiction to recent Maghrebi fiction. As a bridge piece, Mohamed's work shows the reader the struggle that immigrants from the Maghreb continue to face in French society; as Reeck demonstrates, the promises of President François Mitterrand have yet to be fulfilled. On the flip side of the coin, Mohamed's work also shows the changes within the Beur movement. Like Azouz in *Le Gone du chaâba*, the narrator-protagonists of the 1980s once reflected the desire of second-generation immigrants to be accepted fully into society despite their hybrid identities—to move from the periphery to the center. However, as the unnamed narrator-protagonist in *La Honte sur nous* shows us, the third-generation Maghrebis today are intensely frustrated, and are much less interested in moving to the center, instead, they move from periphery to periphery, discovering and recounting their own untold histories along the way.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> A *département* is an administrative unit in France, similar to a province, and may be contrasted with a territory or colony. But, in fact, there was more than a binary department/colony distinction. After WWII, there was a complex system of classification:

(1) departments in the French metropolis; (2) the old colonies, like those in the Caribbean; (3) the new colonies; (4) Algeria, whose territory was part of the French Republic (thus making Algeria a department), but whose inhabitants could be either citizens *or* colonial subjects; (5) protectorats; and (6) mandates (Burbank & Cooper 2008, 515). Algeria, then, while a department and part of France, was also characterized by *Other-ness*.

Fleury-Mérogis is France's largest maximum security prison.

*Le rodéo* is a rite of passage for many male adolescents living in the poor *banlieues*, and is a way for them to manifest their presence to the outside world:

The idea of taming and subjugating the object of this attention is omnipresent in this sacrificial ritual, as is the idea of death. This new-style rodéo is very precisely orchestrated. A young ethnic, alone or with accomplices, brings in his catch from the outside world, a powerful automobile in which he races up and down at high speed between the apartment blocks lining the avenues, screeches the tires, heats up the motor, shifts gears so as to break the gearbox (and your brainbox with it!), and, when the ceremony is over, smashes the car against a wall or some other obstacle before setting fire to it. The best is, thus, branded and subjugated [...] Seeing the police arrive in force in the hood after a rodéo or riot, as if entering a battlefield, is a way of demonstrating one's existence on the spot. (Begag, *Ethnicity and Equality* 41, 51)

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