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BEURS IN THE HOOD: COMING OF AGE IN THE BANLIEUE

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Abstract:

In November of 2005, riots broke out throughout the housing projects located in the suburbs of the major cities of France. This focused worldwide attention on the largely Muslim immigrant communities in France, and on the failure of the French government to fully integrate individuals of foreign extraction, namely Beurs. The term "Beur" is the French word "Arabe" reversed by language called Verlan that plays on French in much the same way that Pig Latin plays on English. Today "Beur" refers to the children of North African immigrants living in France who are, for the most part, isolated to the housing projects of the banlieue (suburbs).

This article elaborates on what it is to be Beur through analysis of semi-autobiographical works by Beur authors, films focused on Beur characters, and newspaper and journal articles on the subject. In the media, Beurs have been portrayed as foreigners angry with France, and radical Islamists struggling against the West. However, these characterizations are not corroborated by primary sources. In reality, Beurs are trapped between two cultures, rejected by the French for their cultural background, and rejected by the first generation immigrants of their communities for abandoning traditions they have a hard time understanding, and acculturating to a more secular way of life within France.

Introduction:

I chose the topic of *Beur* literature and culture without really knowing what I was getting myself into. I suppose I was a little more knowledgeable than the average person on the street; I had at least heard the term "*Beur*" in my French Civilization course and had seen *La Haine* in the same class. I associated the term with the film and with the headscarf controversy that troubles the French educational system, but I went into this project without a coherent definition of what it means to be *Beur*. I had no idea how difficult and controversial such a definition would be.

The word *Beur* comes from *Verlan*, a language that plays on French in much the same way that Pig Latin plays on English. The syllables of words are reversed so that *Arabe* becomes *Beur*, but the word does not mean Arab. It is used to describe the French children of immigrants, particularly North African immigrants, but as I learned in the course of my research, the term does not apply to all individuals of this particular background, nor does it seem to apply solely to these individuals.

When I began this project its relevance was not as clear as it is today. Most people had no interest in the meaning of *Beur* prior to seeing the gangs of youths burning cars in the suburbs of France's major cities last November, and could have cared less about *H.L.M.'s*, *Habitation à loyer modéré*, rent controlled public housing, or their inhabitants. Suddenly amid all the media scrutiny, what it is to be *Beur* has become important. The youth of the *banlieue*, the French suburbs where most *H.L.M.'s* are located, were portrayed as everything from mere hooligans to Islamic extremists taking part in a worldwide clash with the West. The truth is far more complicated than that.

In gathering resources to formulate my definition of *Beur* literature and culture, I discovered that the majority of works by prominent *Beur* authors contain an auto- or at least semi-autobiographical element. These individual works are too

personal to paint an objective picture of what it is to be *Beur* on their own, but by finding common elements, similar circumstances, attitudes, and means of coping, one sees that the outline of a culture begins to emerge. I chose *Kiffe kiffe demain* by Faïza Guène because it is a current and extremely popular novel written by a fifteen year-old girl, herself a *Beur*, about a teenage *Beur* girl. *Béni ou le paradis privé* by Azouz Begag, one of the most prominent literary and cultural figures among first generation Frenchmen of Algerian extraction, was chosen because its plot centers around the experiences of a boy of a similar age and background as Doria, the narrator of Guène's book.

The films treated in this paper seem broader in their scope. The absence in the films of a first-person narrator, present in all the novels discussed here, paints a more generalized picture. *La Haine* seemed an obvious choice, since its plot mirrors the story of the riots, and also because it was the film that introduced me to the topic. *Camping à la ferme*, the story of juvenile delinquents from the *banlieue* sent to a country village to work as an alternative to incarceration, was chosen because the screenplay was written by Azouz Begag, and it provided a more up to date view of the issue, having been released just last year (*Béni ou le paradis privé* was published in the 1980's and is set in the 1970's). I chose *Samia* because I had seen it on *The Independent Film Channel* sometime before, not really understanding the significance of what I was watching. The film paints a clear portrait of a family of Algerian origin living just outside Marseilles. After watching the film again I discovered the novel, *Ils disent que je suis une beurette* by Soraya Nini, on which the film is based. The film focuses on the family, but the book addresses most everything from the family, to the neighborhood, the schools, and most every social institution through the highly critical eyes of its teenage narrator, Samia. Although Nini collaborated in the making of the film, the two differ greatly given that the book covers five years of Samia's life, and the film covers only one summer.

In order to put this all in context I looked at several journal articles and newspaper reports on everything from *Beur* literature and music to the state of Islam in France. The most valuable resource for this task proved to be *Francoscopie*, a book of demographic figures and commentary about sociological issues in France today. *Mémoires d'immigrés*, a history of North African immigration into France by Yamina Benguigui, also offered some insight. Much of what is said in the creative works is supported by statistics from the nonfiction. None of the sources written in the original French have been translated to English. The translations provided here are my own.

I questioned my task repeatedly, wondering how well a middle-class college student from Arkansas could really understand the situation of the children of immigrants living in housing projects a continent away. But after discovering the multitude of different ideas on the subject even within France, I decided that my distance from the situation might even work to

my advantage. In this paper I address the interactions of *Beurs* with various religious, cultural, social, and political institutions in order to ultimately define what it is to be *Beur* in the context of today's France.

Beur Youth and Religion:

The French take great pride in their successful efforts at secularization since church and state were officially separated in 1905. But a pragmatic attitude toward religion in France can be traced even further back to Henry IV's "Paris is worth a Mass" and events like the Babylonian Captivity, when the Pope was moved to Avignon. Today the French hold to tradition with 75% of the population declaring that they have a religion, but only 50% declaring themselves believers (Mermet 271).

Catholics represent the religious majority in France today: 62%, with Muslims coming in a distant second at 6%. Protestants account for 2% of the population declaring an affiliation, and Jews account for 1%. The broad category of "other religions" makes up 2%, and the other 26% are said to be without religion (Mermet 271). These numbers, though, are somewhat deceptive. Of France's declared Catholics, 47% attend Mass only on holidays and special occasions, 24% attend from time to time, 7% one or two times per month, and 10% never go. The trend is even more pronounced among Jews; only 15% practice regularly, and only 4% practice occasionally (Mermet 273).

Islam suffers from the same lack of enthusiasm among its adherents in France. Estimates place the number of individuals of Islamic origin living in France at around 4 million. Of those 4 million, only 1.5 million declare themselves to be observant believers and only 20% report that they worship regularly ("Islam in France"). Islam's difficulties in France may be a result of the differences between the clergy and their prospective congregations. Of the 900 imams in France, more than 90% are foreign, educated on the Koran at universities in North Africa and the Middle East. The interpretation of the Koran taught in those areas often differs from the attitudes of French Muslim communities (Mermet 272). According to the article by Milton Viorst, the debate centers around the tendency of foreign-educated imams to advocate a religious government, and the tendency of those born or educated in France to reject such a notion in favor of secularism.

Youths of Muslim origin living in the *banlieue* seem to have a very cynical attitude about Islam and religion in general. Religion becomes the ill-explained and misused tool of authority figures. The young recognize that when it comes to piety, what the neighbors may think counts for more than genuine faith. And the double standard in place for girls and boys does not lend credibility to religion's cause. This phenomenon is well illustrated in several works, and directly articulated in *Ils disent que je suis une beurette* by Soraya Nini. In discussing what it is to be a woman in her family, and arriving at why her sister was disowned

immediately for the habitual offense of her brothers, going out unaccompanied with members of the opposite sex, Samia, the teenage narrator of the story offers this:

Il paraît que c'est la religion qui veut ça, et que chez nous la femme n'a pas le droit de faire telle ou telle chose, en bref, de vivre normalement! "Ça ne se fait pas chez nous," c'est la phrase magique pour dire qu'il lui faut absolument rester enfermée! De tout façon, il n'y a rien qui se fait "chez nous"! [Nini 123](It seems that it's religion that wants this and that at our house a woman doesn't have the right to do this or that, in short, to live normally! "That isn't done at our house," are the magic words to say that she absolutely ought to stay shut away! At any rate, there's nothing that's done "at our house"!).

She obviously hates the lifestyle, but the thing that really offends her is the lack of explanation behind it.

C'est trop facile! On ne nous a jamais parlé de la religion. C'est vrai que mon father et ma mother prient, mais jamais on n'a su ce que cela voulait dire. Aucune explication, aucune histoire racontée sur la religion. Et d'un coup, on nous dit que c'est la religion qui nous interdit de vivre comme on le voudrait!... Pour moi, ce n'est pas ça la religion. Je ne sais pas vraiment ce que c'est... [Nini 123](It's too easy! They never talked to us about religion. It's true that my mom and dad pray, but we never knew what that meant. No explanation, no story told about religion. And all at once they tell us that it's religion that forbids us to live the way we'd like! ...For me this is not religion. I don't really know what it is...).

It seems that, in the *banlieue*, religion is more about the forbidden, avoiding sin, than it is about belief, or avoiding hypocrisy. In Faïza Guène's *Kiffe Kiffe Demain* the young narrator tells us of an occasion during which her father responded violently when she displayed inappropriate interests and then justified his actions with religion. She recalls her friend giving her a poster of a boy band heartthrob and the reaction from her father when he found it hanging in her room.

Le soir mon père est entré dans ma chambre. Il s'est mis dans tous ces états et a commencé à arracher le poster en criant: "Je veux pas de ça chez moi, y a le chétane dedans, c'est Satan!" C'est pas comme ça que je l'imaginai le diable mais bon... Sur le mur vide il restait juste un tout petit morceau de poster avec le tétou gauche de Filip. [Guène 28](That night my father came into the room. He worked himself up into one of his states and began to tear down the poster crying: "I don't want any of this at my house, there's the devil in it, it's Satan!" I didn't imagine the devil like that but okay... On the empty wall only a very small piece of poster remained with the left nipple of Filip.).

A lack of direct religious instruction in the families depicted in the stories discussed here contributes to an objectification of

religious belief among the young narrators. In the film version of Nini's book, *Samia*, the parents are depicted as praying often, though always alone in the bedroom, while the children watch television in the living room of the apartment. The only attempt at an explanation of religion is directed from the visiting Algerian aunt to the youngest son and daughter of the family. As she is preparing food in the kitchen she speaks of sin, and tells them that the path to god is narrow, like the blade of the knife she is using. The adolescent boy mocks and questions her immediately, at which point she tells him he is going to hell and the conversation ends. Later in the film, the title character, Samia, attempts to leave early from a wedding the family is attending only to be dragged back by her older brother. A veiled woman then knocks at the door of the family apartment and tells Samia that she has come, at the request of her mother. Her mother fears that Samia's rebellion will result in the sort of dishonor her older sister brought to the family by running away to live with her French boyfriend, and has asked this woman to come talk to Samia about religion. Samia slams the door in her face, and screams at her mother that she has no right. The cultural difference between generations in the *banlieue* makes it difficult for parents to explain Islam in the context of modern French society, particularly to young girls who view it only as a tool for repression and subjugation and resent the different standards set for each sex in the name of god. The works in question suggest that when religion is not explained, and is instead used as a threat, it loses credibility in the eyes of the young.

Islam can also lose some of its luster or appeal for children when compared to Western Christian spectacles like Christmas. As Béni, the narrator of Azouz Begag's *Béni ou le Paradis privé*, explains in the first paragraph of the novel: "Noël et son père barbu ne sont jamais rentrés chez nous." [7](Christmas and its bearded father never visited our house.). He goes on to list the joys of commercialized Christmas including trees with lights, and chocolate lambs with the baby Jesus, explaining that they got nothing at their house:

Et tout ça parce que notre chef à nous c'est Mohamed. Dans son bouquin, il n'avait pas prévu le coup du sapin et des cadeaux de 25 décembre. Un oubli comme celui-là ne se pardonne facilement. On aurait presque envie de changer de chef, du coup, pour faute professionnelle! [Begag 7](And all this because our own boss is Mohammed. In his book, he didn't anticipate the trick of the Christmas tree and presents on December 25. An oversight like that one isn't easily forgiven. We'd almost want to change bosses, as a result, for professional misconduct.).

Such feelings create more difficulties in Béni's 1970's *H.L.M.* where his father tries more vigorously to retain a sense of Muslim identity. But even Béni gets mixed messages in regard to religion. His father, extremely proud that Béni wins a gift for his knowledge of Christmas Carols at the company Christmas party in the beginning of the story, becomes enraged and beats

his son on the head with his shoe after he cries and defiantly sings a carol in order to convince the family of the need to buy their own Christmas tree. Even when some families take pride in the ability of their children to adapt to their new society, any genuine change, particularly within the home, elicits a violent reaction. As Yacine, the eldest brother in *Samia*, tells his defiant younger sister, Amel, "À la maison, c'est toujours le bled." (In our house, it's still the old country.). This is a popular sentiment among the first-generation characters of these stories, but one to which the protagonists often have a difficult time resigning themselves.

The term *Beur* may be a play on *Arabe*, but Arabs are not the only minority confined to the *banlieue*, and Islam is not the only religion of the suburban French ghettos. With the massive influx of North-African immigrants into France came a massive influx of immigrants from the Sephardic Jewish communities. Economic circumstances forced Jews and Muslims into the same *H.L.M.*'s, and cultural differences mean that the French view both as a threat to secularist identity. Just as cases have arisen challenging the rights of Muslim girls to wear veils in public schools, so too have there been conflicts regarding the rights of Jewish students to miss class on the Sabbath (Shurkin 161). But with only 15% of all those declaring themselves of Jewish origin regularly observing their religion (Mermet 273), Jewish and Muslim youths growing up in the *banlieue* seem to have far more in common than one might suspect. As reported by Glen Frankel in an article called "For Jews in France, a 'Kind of Intifada,'" acts of anti-Semitism in France, which have risen in recent years, are divided into professional acts of terrorism, like the firebombing of synagogues, and those perpetrated at random by gangs of street youths. France's Jews may have to worry about the attitudes of their Arab neighbors, but as the scenes from *Samia* and *La Haine* vividly illustrate, both groups face the same prejudices from the extreme French right and skinheads, and thus have some common ground.

In both *Camping à la Ferme* and *La Haine*, Jewish youths from the *banlieue* are depicted as delinquent, just as their Arab friends are. The boys in *Camping à la Ferme* are totally unaware that one of them is Jewish until they are all asked to work at a Catholic church as part of their community service. Religion does not have much sway on the boys. The only devout Muslim in the group is a Sicilian convert whom no one takes seriously, and apart from their refusal to work for the Christian church, one would not know that religion was even an issue. The response of the priest to their refusal, that they are all "children of Abraham" and so it should not be a problem, loses credibility vis-à-vis the townspeople, who do not react in such a tolerant manner. Religion really only seems to be an issue when a line is crossed, as when the boy's supervisor tries to find *Merguez* (sausage) or some other pork-free meat at the small town butcher, or when Doria's mother's boss denies her a break to eat after dark during Ramadan, and she has to hide dates in her pocket in order to continue to work.

To Samia in *Ils disent que je suis une beurette*, religion becomes convenient when she needs a reason for her absence from a friend's party. Too ashamed to tell her friend that she faces a beating at the hands of her brother, Samia excuses herself by saying that she has to stay home because it is a Muslim holiday like Christmas. Béni also has no problem setting religious significance aside when he presents the object of his affection, a beautiful French classmate, with the gold-pendant inscribed with a verse from the Koran that his mother has given him. She questions the significance of the gift, and we discover that for Béni, the fact that it was gold and valuable factored more in his decision than did the meaning of the verse.

Those who would characterize second-generation immigrants as differing from the rest of French society on the question of religion may be correct in that they do come from a different religious background, but by many accounts they also exhibit an innately French ability to set religion aside in the pursuit of secular goals.

Beur Youth and Surrounding Cultures:

In many cases, *Beur* youths demonstrate an even more skeptical attitude toward the customs and traditions of their parents' countries of origin than they do toward religion. Ideas and practices contrary to equality between the sexes do not sit particularly well with children brought up in the relative *liberté* and *égalité* of the secular French educational system.

The youth of the *banlieue* are for the most part not cultural relativists. As evidenced in the novels and films, the cultural practices and mysticism of their North African parents, many of whom came from rural living conditions where religion or superstition factor into every aspect of life, often come across as exotic and, in the worst cases, as barbaric to their children. Most inhabitants from a Muslim background now living in France reside in the major metropolitan areas, about 90% (Mermet 272).

Their parents' country of origin is definitely depicted as a foreign country to the young female narrators of both *Ils disent que je suis une beurette*, by Soraya Nini, and *Kiffe kiffe demain*, by Faïza Guène. To Samia, Nini's narrator, her mother's Algerian sisters who come to visit the family appear so strange with their facial tattoos and braids that she nicknames them Geronimo and Cochise, because they remind her of Native Americans. She has long been aware of her mother's own less pronounced tattoos, but says of her perceived difference "Je sais pas, c'est pas pareil" [Nini 27] (I don't know, it's not the same.). Samia's mother brings this tradition of physical alteration, on a smaller scale of course, home to Samia and her younger sister in the form of a woman whom Samia calls a *sorcière*, or witch, and who cuts the cheeks of each girl with a razor blade while reciting a prayer and sopping up the blood with a raisin, which the girls are then forced to eat. The experience is extremely traumatic for both girls, who have to be forcibly held down to endure the ritual designed to protect their virginity for marriage. Her mother feels

it necessary after the family's eldest daughter, Amel, tired of beatings so severe from her eldest brother that she, the only gainfully employed member of the family, is forced to miss work, runs away to marry her French boyfriend. At this point, Samia's curiosity about cultural practices like these turns to resentment, and although the preceding episode is omitted from the film version of *Samia*, this resentment manifests itself in the movie when Samia and her sisters are sent to Algeria as punishment after Samia refuses to submit to a gynecological exam in the presence of her mother to prove her virginity.

Doria, Guène's narrator, also fears her parents' homeland, Morocco. During a trip there as an adolescent, a local approaches her mother saying,

Tu sais, Yasmina, ta fille devient une femme. Il faudrait que tu penses à lui trouver un garçon de bonne famille. Tu connais Rachid? [Guène 22] (You know, Yasmina, your daughter is becoming a woman. You ought to start thinking about finding her a boy from a good family. Do you know Rachid?).

Doria is not amused. She has met Rachid and adds that everyone calls him

"Rachid l'âne bête." [Guène 22](Rachid, the beaten ass.). "She is not impressed by the fact that they have proposed to her an illiterate boy who, she tells us, lacks four teeth. To Doria, Morocco is also the country to which her father returned after divorcing her mother to marry a younger woman. He did so on the grounds that Doria's mother had not given him a son. Doria not only wishes to avoid the country on the basis of her own experience, but also because she resents the fact that her mother will not return out of shame for what has happened with her marriage.

It is easy to see why Algeria or Morocco would be sources of resentment for acculturated French girls of North African heritage when Samia's eldest brother, Yacine, tells his sisters in the film, *Samia*, that at their home they are "toujours au bled." (still in the old country). The implications of that statement on the girls' lives at home are grave. In the family's tiny apartment, the girls are required to do all the cooking, cleaning, and household chores. They are even required, to Samia's great annoyance, to clean the rooms of their brothers, none of whom are employed. They risk beatings, always at the hands of Yacine, eager to fill the role of strict Algerian father during the ailing family patriarch's convalescence with tuberculosis, for acts of insubordination such as refusing to serve him at the dinner table after a beating.

The women of Samia's family are not the only ones to live in fear of fathers and older brothers. In *Béni ou le Paradis privé*, Béni's mother also fears corporal punishment after she loses the family's grocery money while shopping with Béni in the market. She becomes hysterical, telling her young son she fears for her life, but manages to escape physical consequences by feigning a depressive illness until she can come up with the money. Although

in this story, the physical aggressions are not directed so exclusively toward the women of the household. Here everyone, with the possible exception of Béni's father, has someone to fear.

In *Kiffe kiffe demain* Doria's upstairs neighbor, whom she hears being beaten regularly by her father and older brother and whom she witnesses being dragged into the apartment by her hair when she comes home late from school, finally disappears from the neighborhood entirely. Later, rumors that she is living downtown with a French boyfriend begin to circulate. Doria is supportive, but much of the talk from the older generation of the neighborhood is disapproving. The people do not directly condone the beatings, but seem to look the other way.

However, *Beur* youth are not alienated from the culture of their parents' home countries only to fall into the welcoming embrace of a hospitable French culture. Religious and class issues guarantee that those who have grown up isolated in immigrant communities are always distinguished as separate. The French Government may strive for secularism, but in a country where Catholics still constitute 62% of the population, someone from a non-Christian background is sure to feel left out. Taking into account that 26% of France's population declares that they have no religion, the number of individuals who are "Christian" by cultural tradition may be significantly higher (Mermet 271). Many atheists may not believe in the meaning of Christmas, but they still trim a tree and buy gifts for their children even if they do not go to Mass.

The distance between the culture of the *banlieue* and that of France as a whole is nowhere more obvious than in *Béni ou le Paradis privé*. Béni fights for a Christmas tree and carols in the apartment only after having attended the Christmas party of his father's company. There is a portion of the festivities during which the event's MC presents the workers' children with gifts. He announces that the band will play a Christmas carol, without words, and that the first child to come to the stage and name the song will receive a gift. Béni sits quietly with his family, never having heard the songs being played until a mother seated in front of him whispers the name of one of the songs to her son who is too shy to approach the stage. Béni seizes the opportunity and heads toward the stage to the amazement of both the crowd and his family. Once there, he announces into the microphone that the title is "Le Sang des cerises" (The Blood of Cherries). When the MC tells him his response is incorrect the crowd pleads his cause and the MC gives him the prize although the actual title is "Le Temps des cerises" (The Time of Cherries) [Begag 16]. At this time, Béni's father is proud, but his son's continued interest in the holiday later makes him uncomfortable.

The culture of religion is not the only aspect to separate *Beurs* from the rest of society. Just as most Americans do not know precisely what to do when they are confronted with a *bidet* for the first time, neither does Béni. He is staying in a hotel room with his older brother and cousin following the death of a family member, and the cousin must explain to him why his excrement

will not flush. When the cousin, perhaps more acculturated than Béni or his brother, Nordine, gets angry and tells Béni he is crazy, Nordine quickly denies having told Béni that the *bidet* was the place to go, disguising his own ignorance.

The French are often heard to complain of the lack of willingness to acculturate on the part of immigrant families, but separated by religious and financial circumstances, and isolated into communities predominately inhabited by other immigrants, opportunities to acculturate outside of school and work are few and far between.

Beurs and Authority: French and Otherwise:

France welcomed the wave of foreign workers who came to ease the country's labor shortages during the post WWII economic boom, but France was ill prepared for permanent immigration. The consensus seemed to be that these workers would arrive, earn enough money to ameliorate their conditions at home, and depart within a few years, returning forever to the place from which they had come. Efforts to acculturate these individuals seemed unnecessary in light of the transient nature of their circumstances. Whether or not they should have, no one anticipated the flood of immigration that came when immigrants brought their families to experience the relative prosperity to which they had grown accustomed ("H.L.M.").

France was even less prepared for the birth of what was termed a second generation of immigrants, particularly after the economic troubles the country suffered beginning in the 1970's. The mere fact that they were called second-generation immigrants illustrates the lack of understanding of their condition on the part of both the French government and the general population. These are children born in France, who speak French, attend French schools, watch French television, buy French products, and by and large want recognition that they are citizens of their country of birth. They may be the children of immigration, but they are by no means immigrants themselves (Benguigui 131).

Perhaps one of the most significant indications of France's lack of preparation for or understanding of its immigrant situation is the creation and maintenance of the *H.L.M.* (*habitation à loyer modéré*) system. The concept of *H.L.M.*'s was born in 1950 to solve the housing shortages created not only by immigration, but also by the baby-boom and a post-war rural exodus that has shaped France's economy and demographic figures ever since. These structures were designed as temporary housing, constructed very quickly in a uniform, perfectly rectangular fashion so that the cranes they used could run along straight tracks, requiring less time and effort for construction. These high rises grew prolifically dotting the landscape of the *banlieue* (suburbs) of most major French cities ("H.L.M").

Conditions in the *H.L.M.*'s have improved somewhat since the implementation of the system, in that the average number of rooms in each apartment has increased, the average number of

inhabitants per dwelling has decreased, and amenities such as private toilets are now standard. But the French are still suffering from the consequences of their faulty planning ("*H.L.M.*"). Alan Riding points out in an article for the *New York Times* that these communities were often so hastily constructed that they lack the proper infrastructure like wide, well lit streets to allow for easy policing. Problems like these become tragically apparent when the *banlieue* erupts into chaos as it did last autumn. That situation garnered national attention when it spread from Paris into other cities in France, and even beyond into other parts of Europe, but it was merely an escalation of regular occurrences in these isolated communities where crime rates are high ("*Banlieue*").

As stated above, this public housing was designed to be temporary, but as of 2003 the average *H.L.M.* family had lived in the same apartment for eight years (Mermet 177). Urban poverty rates, two times higher than the national average, widespread unemployment, and a relative lack of upward social mobility make it very difficult for families dependent on government aid to improve their situations and to move to private residences (Mermet 177, 220).

This isolated environment has bred delinquency. Unemployment is highest among non high-school graduates and young people ages 15-29 (Mermet 294-5), two groups that encompass many *H.L.M.* inhabitants. Here again the government was ill prepared. The problem of juvenile delinquency among the children of immigrants and those living in the *banlieue* did not become apparent until the 1970's. In Yamina Benguigui's *Mémoires des immigrés* one official was quoted on the subject of Beur youth as saying:

Je sentais qu'on avait créé une bombe à retardement, c'est à dire qu'on ne se rendait pas compte que les problèmes étaient posés: les enfants étaient très mal scolarisés et on fabriquait donc des délinquents. [Benguigui 131] (I feel that we created a time bomb, that is to say that we did not count on the problems arising: the children were very poorly educated and thus we made delinquents.)

Unemployment, educational difficulties, and delinquency are themes that are rampant throughout novels and films on the subject of the *banlieue*. All three are evident in *Samia*, and *Ils disent que je suis une beurette*. The film opens with a fourteen or fifteen year-old Samia being asked by a teacher to make a list of three careers she might like to try, since her future must be decided at that point. Samia has a rather hopeless attitude about the whole situation, saying that she really would prefer to do nothing. The situation is far more elaborate in the book, with Samia hopping from school to school, never happy with the attitudes of the teachers toward her, and pained by comparisons drawn between her and her sisters, all far more successful students. As the least academically successful sibling of the family, Samia is drafted by her mother into helping with the housework. Her mother's attitude in the book is thus rather

contradictory. French students are only legally required to attend school until the age of sixteen, but when Samia leaves one school under difficult circumstances her mother demands that Samia not drop out, that she get at least some sort of technical diploma. Then after searching for a new school for several days, she makes Samia late for her first meeting with the director of the school by keeping her home to do housework.

French schools are controversial enough; their treatment of the issue of the right of Muslim girls to wear headscarves to class received almost as much attention as the recent riots. Their attitude about the headscarf is difficult to pin down, with the national ruling not officially banning it, but essentially never resolving the decision as to whether or not such overt religious symbols are “disruptive” to the administration of a school. The issue is so complicated as to merit its own book or paper, but is not even mentioned in any of the books or films treated in this paper. However, it does seem symptomatic of a lack of willingness to compromise culturally on the part of the French educational system, notorious for beginning each history book with “Nos ancêtres les Gaulois” [Ha 103](Our ancestors the Gauls). This kind of environment does not breed parental involvement on the part of immigrant families, but it may account for lower mosque attendance in France than in countries like Germany that, as Peter Schneider reports, permit optional Islam classes in schools just as they do classes on Christianity.

The attitude of teachers toward their *Beur* students in France seems less than welcoming. Doria tells of her school being placed in a sort of lockdown after an attack on a teacher. Samia has a series of teachers who not only quiz her about her family circumstances in front of the entire class, but even go so far as to try to humiliate her for not paying attention by forcing her to come to the front of the class to tell about “her” country, Algeria, a place she really knows nothing about. After the last incident, Samia stops doing homework entirely in an effort to fail and to be transferred to another school.

In this atmosphere that hardly embraces multiculturalism, it is easy for Samia and her siblings to go unsupervised when it comes to their schoolwork and activities. Because Samia’s mother is unable to speak French, Samia can give most any excuse why she does not have homework or need to be in school that day, and her mother cannot verify the truth. The same is true for the activities of her youngest brother, Foued. Of course, his actions are not subject to the same kind of scrutiny that the actions of his sisters endure, but things catch up with him in the novel when the police storm and search the home without warning, looking for and finding evidence that he is part of a group of boys who have robbed and trashed several stores in the neighborhood.

Productive activities appear hard to come by in the *banlieue*. Neither of Samia’s older brothers is able to find work. Yacine leaves for Paris searching for a job, but to no avail. He is also seen

calling to inquire about jobs in the film, but again without luck. The hopelessness of the employment situation results in an attitude of tolerance for petty crime or dubious activities among the characters of the stories. Doria idolizes Hammoudi in *Kiffe kiffe demain*, despite the fact that she knows he is a drug dealer, and she is outraged more by the arrest of Zohra’s son than by the fact that he too was dealing drugs. The tendency to look the other way manifests itself when Samia talks about Malik disappearing for days at a time: “Je ne sais pas ce qu’il fabrique vu qu’il ne travaille pas, mais on ne le voit pas souvent.” [Nini 39](I don’t know what he does seeing that he doesn’t work, but we don’t see him that often.). Even Béni, the narrator who prides himself on his acculturation and stellar academic performance in a way that Samia and Doria would never do, falls in with a group of what one might term street thugs when his family moves to a new *H.L.M.*

Several institutions have been put in place to combat juvenile delinquency in the *banlieue*. As Paul A. Silverstein reports in his article “Islam, Soccer, and the French Nation State,” following the election of François Mitterrand to the office of president in 1981, immigrant associations were legalized and legitimized. These groups offered Islam as an alternative to drugs and crime in the *H.L.M.’s*. They provide services like finding jobs in mosques for the unemployed and organizing summer camps for urban youth, but given the fact that these groups often receive international funding, more specifically from the Middle East, they often incite fear of radical Islam and terrorism among the French.

Silverstein contends that this fear of a step away from secularization and toward foreign influence prompted the French government to create alternative summer camps and build sports facilities in the *banlieue* in an effort to win the hearts and minds of young Beurs. The French promoted urban, or rather suburban, revitalization programs backed by sports stars like the soccer player Zinedine Zidane. The son of Algerian immigrants, Zidane grew up in the *banlieue* outside Marseilles, and after making a name for himself served as a sort of poster-child for acculturation. But with the sports stars came the sponsors and advertising. It seemed that the government, and the international corporations, namely shoe makers like Nike and Adidas, wanted to propose sports as an alternative to religion. The most overt manifestation of this attitude came with a series of ads placed in the Paris Metro that played directly on Islam and its conflict with the French government. Two of the most controversial phrases displayed in the ads, always with photos of athletes hardly featuring the product being sold, were “*Il n’y a pas qu’un Dieu. Il y en a onze.*” (There is not but one god, there are eleven.). This slogan plays directly on the line from the Koran: “There is but one god, and Mohammed is his prophet.” This suggests that on the soccer field the players are the gods. Following the success of the Parisian soccer club, P.S.G., “*Aucune loi ne vous empêche de porter un maillot P.S.G. à l’école,*” which refers to the headscarf

controversy, pointing out that “No law stops you from wearing a P.S.G. jersey to school.”

These programs, both state and privately funded, have experienced varied rates of success. The importance of soccer to the youths in the stories is obvious; it is Béni’s only means of making new friends, and Samia is depicted at soccer games throughout the film. But these programs have also prompted resentment and questions about why athletic instead of academic success should be so vigorously promoted in these areas. In *La Haine*, Hubert, the avid boxer, suffers the direct consequences of this resentment when the community gym he has helped establish is completely burned, most likely by his friends, in the course of a riot that seems all too familiar. Doria, too, resents her family’s social worker, who proposes that she go to one of these summer camps. Not only is she cynical, she is afraid to leave her mother to cope on her own.

When these programs fail to curb crime in the *banlieue*, the French government takes far more drastic measures, calling in the armored riot police now so familiar from photos of strikes and the riots of last fall. After a series of terrorist attacks in the mid 1990’s the government went one step further, adding regular security patrols through these neighborhoods to enforce already legal blanket identity checks for anyone who looks “Beur” (Silverstein 31).

The *Beurs* of these stories are obviously targeted by the police, legitimately or not, particularly the males. Béni suffers from racial profiling after being caught making mischief with his more delinquent friends. He assumes he can speak rationally to the police officer and learns the lesson that his appearance, that of a *Beur*, counts more for police than his words ever will. The boys of *La Haine* feud constantly with the police, and *Camping à la Ferme* illustrates the hypocrisy of the government programs designed to rehabilitate young delinquents from these neighborhoods. One striking example comes in *Samia* when Yacine is forcibly stopped from passing the spot where a young man of African origin is being violently arrested by a group of black-clad police officers.

Problems with the police are symptomatic of the contempt with which most government agencies and representatives treat immigrants and their children. Benguigui’s *Mémoires des immigrés* says that young *Beurs* cannot tolerate their parents attitude: “Travaille et tais-toi.” [Benguigui 134] (Shut up and work.). And while Béni, our 1970’s era *Beur*, reacts somewhat passively to the policemen who mock him when he goes searching through the market for the money his mother has lost, Samia and Doria react with equal contempt to anyone who dares treat their parents disrespectfully. Doria mocks her social worker constantly, resenting even the woman who replaces the despised man who told her that he had never met “des gens comme nous avec un enfant seulement par famille.” [Guène 18] (people like us with only one child in the family). Samia is by far the most assertive

in *Ils disent que je suis une beurette*. She resents anyone who disrespects or talks down to her mother because she cannot speak French. She clashes with everyone from her school principal to a nasty bureaucrat to the police officers who come to arrest Foued.

Who *Beurs* Are, as Opposed to Who They Are Not:

The question of *Beur* identity really emerged in France in the late 1970’s and early 1980’s after a series of equal rights marches, and the establishment of *Beur* media, like *Beur TV* and *Beur FM*, caught the attention of the public. Things proceeded as the next couple of decades witnessed the emergence of *Beur* writers and public figures who made a particular impact with their autobiographical or semi-autobiographical works. But international attention, or at least Western international attention did not really focus on the issue until the terrorist attacks, and rising tensions in the Middle East, described in the article by Milton Viorst, brought *Beurs* to the forefront starting in the 1990’s.

The riots of fall 2005 played out on television screens around the world, and the media were quick to view this as yet another example of Islamic radicals lashing out at the West. A few articles appeared trying to paint a more realistic picture of what was happening and the reasons behind it, including one article by Alan Riding appearing in the *New York Times* with the headline “Artists have been sounding the warning bells for years.” Indeed, the incident that sparked the riots, involving two youths electrocuted while being pursued by the police, mirrored the scene, involving a young man hospitalized in a coma after being beaten by the police, that sparked the violence in *La Haine*, a film released nearly a decade before. But ask most anyone on the street in an average American city about the riots and the typical response will be something along the lines of “Oh, you mean the Muslims.”

But it is most definitely not that simple. The idea that *Beurs* were behind the riots is not at all in dispute, but the question that remains is what exactly it means to be *Beur*. It is not merely *Arabe* backwards. The books and films discussed in this paper, coupled with the statistics on France’s current demographic, make it obvious that being *Beur* is no longer simply a matter of being Muslim or even of being Arab. In France, 15.6% of families live in *H.L.M.*’s, the settings for the books, the films, and the scenes of the riots (Mermet 177). Admittedly, the concentration of immigrants and their children is higher in *H.L.M.*’s, but given the fact that only 6% of France’s population is of Muslim extraction, the idea that the pervasive delinquency and violence of the *banlieue* is merely a Muslim problem bears no credence. Today being *Beur* is a matter of being young, having grown up in a particular set of sociological circumstances, being adapted to that set of circumstances, and ultimately it is a matter of lacking any other suitable label.

In years past *Beur* was applied as a blanket term for all French-born children of Maghrebi parents. The consensus seemed to be that being *Beur* was simply about being trapped between two cultures and belonging to neither. But as the issue of *Beur* identity was further explored, the variety of identities within the immigrant community began to be recognized. An article from *Middle East Report* by Joan Gross, David McMurray, and Ted Swedenberg entitled "Rai, Rap, and Ramadan Nights: Franco-Maghribi Cultural Identities" did a very good job of chronicling the differences among groups within *Beur* culture from those who fully embrace being French to those who still think of themselves as essentially foreign. The same article asserts that the term "*Beur*" is not acceptable to the Franco-Maghrebi population, and indeed "*Beur*" in general is offensive to some; in certain condescending contexts, it is offensive to most.

But for many, particularly now that rap music has emerged as the primary means of musical expression, "*Beur*" is something of a badge of honor. In much the same way that the impact of the "N-word" has been partially weakened by African American artists who have used it often in their music, changing its meaning from insult to familiarity, "*Beur*" has become an identifier for the young, disillusioned, anti-authoritarian youth of the *H.L.M.'s*. In *Ils disent que je suis une beurette* Foued raps about being *Beur*. *Beur TV* and *Beur FM* embrace the word. It seems to be the only adjective that describes the culture of their audience, no longer simply a mixture of French and Maghrebi, but now strongly influenced by foreign, particularly American cultures.

When asked to speak on the *Beur* literary movement, Lotfi Bennour, an English professor at the Université de Belfort in France who immigrated from Tunisia, answered that *Beur* is only used by the youth of the second and third generation born in France, by rappers, or by politicians and those who wish to encourage voter registration; thus *Beur* is not a term can be applied to someone like Azouz Begag, author of *Béni ou le paradis privé*. Begag, a part of the second generation who went on to become an important author, and who today serves as the *Ministre délégué à la promotion d'égalité des chances* for the French government, is someone that a self-proclaimed *Beur* might term a "*Beur de service*," that is to say someone who is integrated and successful within the French system and thus does not suffer the same consequences as others who share the same cultural background ("*Beur*"). To Bennour, *Beur* literature does not exist. It must either be grouped with French literature, given that the authors are French, or as post-colonial literature, given that it is a product of the post-colonial conflict.

But *Beur* culture is not simply the product of immigration or half-hearted integration. The attitudes reflected in the films and novels treated in this paper are part of a larger trend among the youth of France toward what *Francoscopie* terms counter culture with its own coded languages and influenced more by the media than by family or other institutions like schools (Mermet

99-101). When asked about his national identity, Zinedine Zidane always preferred to respond that he came from Marseilles or from the particular neighborhood where he grew up (Silverstein 41). Much like Zidane, the young men portrayed in *Camping à la ferme* identify with the neighborhoods they have come from, offering their neighborhood along with their parents' country of origin when asked where they were from by the film's token French bigot. One of the funniest and most poignant moments of the film comes when the last young man replies simply "France." When the bigot asks incredulously how that could be, the reply he gets is "*Par la chatte de ma mère*." This phrase translates as "through my mother's pussy."

In *Ils disent que je suis une beurette* Samia and her sisters create a coded language, even more specialized and complex than Verlan, tailored precisely to their household, mixing English, French, Verlan, Argot, and Arabic in order to speak freely and operate under the limited radar of their parents and older brother. Verlan has become rather mainstreamed over the past few decades, and so in order to stay on point and still be useful in an exclusionary way, words are even being re-inverted so that for some "*beur*" has become "*reub*" or "*reubeu*" ("*Beur*"). It is clear that this individualized expression is an adaptation to living between two cultures: avoiding the scrutiny of the French teachers, police, and social workers while avoiding the scrutiny of foreign parents and thus avoiding authority in its entirety.

Lotfi Bennour says that some youths object to the idea that sports and music, more specifically rap, are offered as the only means of success for those who have grown up in the *banlieue*. And this may be true, but these stories make it obvious that these kids love their soccer and their rap. Béni is only able to infiltrate the group of friends he meets in his new neighborhood after he shows them a newspaper clipping featuring him winning an award for playing soccer. Samia dances wildly at soccer matches with her friends in the film, and in the book she makes up for the fact that she has to tell her teacher that no one in her family works by saying that her brother is an athlete. Doria ponders the street rappers she encounters at the festival in her neighborhood, concluding that even if the subject matter is violent and not necessarily intellectual, the medium at least does its part to promote equal rights by allowing neighborhood girls to sing back-up.

American culture is everywhere in literature and film concerning *Beur* subjects. The soundtracks may be laced with rap and *rai* but feature American music prominently. And Doria relates everything to American television, from *The X Files* to *Little House on the Prairie*. But French culture is everywhere too. These kids know French literature. They learned it in school. The history of the Revolution and other major events is just as ingrained in their psyches as it is in the psyche of anyone else educated in the French system. They have weak authority figures on both sides competing for their cultural allegiance and thus are free to pick and choose from a variety of cultures to which they

are exposed in defining their own cultural identity. If they had the means to escape the hopeless bubble of the *banlieue* and attain a French standard of success, then we might see a more voluntary acculturation, but most of them do not. By the same token, if they were ready to embrace Islam or the cultural practices of their parents wholeheartedly, we might see a more voluntarily segregation, an outright rejection of alternative cultures, but most of them are not.

Beurs are French by definition, whether they like the French or not, and whether or not the French like the idea. *Beur* literature exists as a part of French literature. Many want to lump it in with Francophone literature, or that literature written in French by and about people living in former colonies, but if it is written in France, by French citizens educated in France, about French citizens living and educated in France, it is logical to consider it French. The existence of *Beurs* may be a consequence of post-colonial policy, but they are at least a generation removed from living in those colonies. They are every bit a part of hexagonal France, even if they are in some ways still excluded. Riots and rage at circumstance are not symptoms of what happened to their ancestors in their countries of origin, they are symptoms of what happens to them daily in France. If the literary authorities cannot abide the inclusion of this genre of literature into the umbrella of French literature, then they need to recognize the genre as something entirely new, a change within France, a literature that in all objective respects is French, not Francophone, but is in some way different. That would mean that France would be officially multicultural, that dirty word that strikes fear in the hearts of many in France. France faces a tough choice about what to do with its citizens living in this situation, and unless they can act decisively to remedy the situation, they face manifestations of discontent larger than what they dealt with, or what they diffused but had not yet dealt with last November. In the last lines of *Kiffe kiffe demain* Doria imagines the revolt she will lead through the *banlieue* against the system that has oppressed her mother and sent her to beauty school against her wishes in the name of education. She recalls the Napoleon quote, "À tout peuple conquis, il faut une révolte." [Guène 188] (For all conquered people, there must be a revolt). But she adds:

Mais ce sera pas une révolte violente comme dans le film *La Haine* où ça se finit pas hyper bien. Ce sera une révolte intelligente, sans aucune violence, où on se soulèvera pour être reconnus tous. Y a pas que le rap et le foot dans la vie. Comme Rimbaud, on portera en nous «le sanglot des Infâmes, la clameur des Maudits.» [188-9] (But this will not be a violent revolt like in the film "*La Haine* where it doesn't finish very well. It will be an intelligent revolt, without any violence, where we all stand up to be recognized. There's more to life than just rap and soccer. Like Rimbaud, we carry in us "the sobs of the infamous, the clamor of the confounded.")

She says, and sounds quite French saying, that she has "de forts élans républicains" [Guène 189] (strong republican urges).

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Mentor's Comments:

Dr. Kathleen Comfort made the following remarks about Ms. Elam's work:

I have known Lauran Elam for three years now, when she was in major-level courses in French that I have taught. Her work has always been outstanding and her grades were consistently the highest in each class. In spring 2005, she took the Business French course for honors credit, for which she wrote a twenty five page research paper, in French, on Wal-Mart's market place in French-Speaking Canada. Her work was truly exceptional, and the amount of research she did was way beyond what I am used to seeing from undergraduates. When she approached me about being a director of her honors thesis, I was delighted because I knew that not only would she do an outstanding job, but that I would benefit from the experience as well. As it happens, I was correct on both counts; Lauran began researching her project last fall, well ahead of her peers, and worked tirelessly to find the ideal presentation of her ideas. Rather than seeking out sources to "fit" her ideas, she found herself calling into question her understanding of France and its people. To my mind, that is the hallmark of the scholar.

What sets Lauran apart from the vast majority of her peers is her work ethic and her desire to produce the best work she possibly can. Her project was by no means easy; the novels and the films she examined contain a large amount of French slang, much of it not found in standard dictionaries. In fact, most of the novels have not been translated into English. What is more, one of the movies, a new release ordered from France, did not contain English subtitles. She did her own translations of the quotations from the primary works, an undertaking that would challenge those with much more experience translating from French into English. Again, her work is on par with professionals in the field.

The originality of Lauran's project lies in her decision

to analyze both novels and films; to date, no scholar in the field of contemporary French literature has brought together these particular novels and films. Lauran's examination of the coming of age novel in *Beur* is, in many respects, groundbreaking. Working from a variety of secondary sources (internet sites such as *Beur FM*, blogs, sociological and anthropological studies, as well as literary criticism articles), she tackled the thorny question of what it means to be *Beur*. I am certain that any one of her chapters could stand alone as articles worthy of publication in professional journals in French literature. It is also significant that Lauran has stated that she hopes expand on her thesis in the future; I can easily see her continuing the project, with other novels and films, as part of a doctoral dissertation.

The topic Lauran chose is a timely one for those who study French language and culture. As was widely reported in the media, France was shaken by several weeks of rioting last fall in the *banlieues*, the equivalent of our inner cities. The cause of the rioting is complex, but at its core is the marginal status of young French citizens of North African extraction. French by birth, they are met with discrimination at every turn based on their ethnicity. The events were a wake up call for the government of Chirac and for French society at large, and opened up a debate on the sensitive topic of race and economic status, topics that have been nearly taboo in a society adheres to the slogan of the Revolution of 1789, *Liberté, Égalité, Fraternité* (Liberty, Equality, Fraternity).

Lauran's thesis invites to draw comparisons to the changing face of Americans, a growing percentage of whom are children of immigrants from Central and South America. Almost every day, there are newspaper articles on the efforts being made to better meet the needs of those from culturally diverse populations. Like the French, Americans must confront the assumptions and stereotypes about culture and ethnicity that are unfortunately all too prevalent.