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INTRODUCTION

***Banlieue* narratives - Voicing the French urban periphery**

In the wake of the severe urban unrest that hit France in the 2000s, the *banlieues* have become the centre of sustained public attention as well as a narrative effervescence. Discourses produced by politicians, journalists, urban planners, social scientists, novelists, filmmakers, hip-hop artists and stand-up comedians have since addressed urban marginality from a variety of angles. In mainstream media and political discourse multi-ethnic suburban housing estates have mainly been depicted as menacing spaces that erode the cohesion of the nation and threaten both French national identity and Republican integrity. In 2005, Nicolas Sarkozy called *banlieue* youth 'scum' and 'riff-raff'. He attributed rioting to the presence of organised gangs and promised to clean the suburbs with a "high-pressure cleaner." Ten years later, in the aftermath of the 2015 terrorist attacks, Manuel Valls spoke about 'ghettos' and 'territorial, social and ethnic apartheid' in the French suburbs. The abrasive tone of these political discourses has contributed to deteriorating the image of *banlieues* in the collective imagination.

Other discourses, on the contrary, have attempted to destigmatise working-class suburbs by establishing a different perspective on identity, communities, local and national belonging and urban renovation. In a context of enduring turmoil and debate it was not surprising to see the emergence of new narratives which undertook to explore the French urban periphery from within, focusing on the experience of those living on the margins and investigating their cultural practices, memory, access to political representation and affective appropriation of the urban space. These narratives, which appeared simultaneously in literature, film, music and other cultural forms, were distinctively original in their tone, aesthetics and aims. Critics acknowledged their novelty by using labels like 'urban' or 'banlieue' in order to differentiate them from the works of previous generations. These designations simultaneously referred to the production's geographic setting, main theme and place of enunciation which coincided in the case of most authors. However, the labels '*banlieue* literature' or '*banlieue* film' have never been explicitly claimed by the creators themselves. Targeting universal rather than exclusively local audiences, they have been cautious about being assigned to a peripheral position owing to their social origins, place of residence or marginal status within the French field of cultural production (Bourdieu, 1993).

Nevertheless, the *banlieue* narrative has attracted considerable scholarly attention, in particular over the last decade. It has been discussed at an array of interdisciplinary conferences focusing on French *banlieues*, such as *Communities at the Periphery* held in 2013 at the Institut Français in London or *The Banlieue Far from the Clichés*, organised in Oxford in 2014. It was also the theme of literary conferences in Bologna (2014) and Genoa (2015) as well as panels at the conferences of the Society for French Studies in Cardiff and Glasgow (2015 and 2016), those of the Association for the Study of Modern and Contemporary France in Southampton and Bangor (2014 and 2017) as well as the 2017 CIEF (Conseil International d'Études Francophones) conference in Martinique. This volume draws on papers presented at some of these panels and conferences. It is interesting to observe that none of these events was held in metropolitan France. Just like *Beur* cultural productions, which have first been studied overseas, *banlieue* narratives have also been mainly conceptualised by international scholars including the authors of this volume, who have worked or studied outside the French academy. This may be a consequence of French universities' reticence to engage with postcolonial literary production or with authors considered as minor because of their proximity to

popular culture, their interest and investment in a stigmatised geographic space, their contemporaneity or attempts to challenge dominant notions of Frenchness.

This volume seeks to examine how, since the mid-2000s, *banlieue* narratives have evolved by exploring new genres and narrative possibilities while tackling dominant perceptions of the suburbs. How do they address issues of marginality, hopelessness, stigmatisation, exclusion, and repressed memory? Do they also evoke solidarity, everyday life, exciting initiatives, success, social mobility and creativity? How do they express new identities? What generic rules and aesthetic codes do they follow? What artistic movements or individual creators do they consider as their precursors? How do they participate in renewing literary genres, subgenres and aesthetics tenets? What linguistic, narrative, visual and political strategies do they adopt and how can they be interpreted in relation to the official discourses produced by politicians and mass media?

The contributors of this volume have probed these questions by looking at different art forms and genres within the rich cultural production that reflects the living conditions and perspectives of *banlieue* residents. Informed by a broad array of theories ranging from postcolonial thought to sociological approaches as well as cultural and gender studies, their papers examine different types of narratives and explore how these have become vectors of a reflection on nationhood, territorial stigmatisation and the contemporary cityscape. They have undertaken various attempts to classify *banlieue* narratives by concentrating on generic categories ranging from more conventional forms such as first-person narratives, testimonial writing, semi-autobiographical narratives, auto-fiction or Bildungsroman to less predictable genres including crime fiction, science-fiction, dystopian writing, anticipation novel, fantasy or poetry. They compare *banlieue* narratives to other literary productions marked by their distance from the centre including migrant writing, such as Francophone literature and the *Beur* novel. They have also examined parallels between *banlieue* narratives in literature, film and rap music, and between French peripheral writing and foreign literary movements emerging from similar situations of urban marginality.

These multiple comparisons have helped the contributors pinpoint some of the specificities which distinguish *banlieue* narratives. They have discerned the category's particular interest in spatial and social exclusion, injustice and collective suffering of postcolonial populations in contemporary France. *Banlieue* narratives also tend to explore the memory and legacy of contested periods in national history including colonisation and decolonisation providing a narrative counter-point to dominant discourses. Authors from less advantaged socioeconomic backgrounds often find inspiration in different forms of popular culture including rap or slam poetry. Due to their distance from mainstream cultural institutions and centres of political power, their works are often dismissed as non-canonical and attributed a lesser artistic value by critics. Their relatively marginal position in the field of cultural production makes them similar to diverse peripheral literatures produced in French language such as Francophone, postcolonial or migrant writing. Marginality, however, also provides creators with a greater degree of freedom to experiment with unconventional forms, genres and aesthetic canons and to explore memory and creativity from a peripheral angle to make unheard voices audible. Many of the authors of *banlieue* narratives explore the possibilities of individual or collective healing and promote debate and reconciliation in a divided society.

Some of the contributions point to a parallel between two marginalities, the one located in the French urban peripheries and the other outside France, in the former colonies, from where many *banlieue* residents' parents or grandparents migrated to France. Isabelle Galichon draws on Foucault's (1983) thought about the writing of the self, as well as the concepts of 'migrant writing' (Chartier 2002), 'memory work-in-progress' (Coquio 2015) and decoloniality (Quijano 2001) to explore how *banlieue* narratives attempt to reconstruct suppressed history, memories and subjectivities in order to resist Eurocentric models and disrupt dominant narratives through the use

of multidirectional memories, testimonial genres and hybrid language. Séverine Rebourcet continues to explore the double marginality imposed on the French *banlieues*. She likens *banlieue* narratives to a 'Francophone literature from within' and uses this analogy to highlight the continuity between subaltern populations living in the former colonies and in the post-migration context in France. She also examines the links between Francophone and post-migration aesthetic models, which have in common the promotion of realist depictions of suburban space as a way of articulating social criticism.

A comparison with other movements is also at the heart of two articles by Bettina Ghio and Christina Horvath. Ghio undertakes a rigorous analysis of the intersecting ways in which *banlieue* narratives in literature and rap represent suburban housing estates. She reveals that the predominant metaphoric and metonymic images and engaged authorial posture have been consistently used in both productions for an extended period - to describe working-class suburbs. She argues that the difference between rap and novels lies in the contribution sound systems and performers' voices and bodies make to reinforcing popular representations of the *banlieue*. Horvath goes beyond the Francophone literary space to draw a comparison between French *banlieue* narratives and the marginal peripheral literary movement simultaneously emerging in Brazil. While both movements tackle stereotypes though similar, their dissimilarities are due to the different ways they have been conceptualised. Horvath reveals that while influences of *malandragem* (a Portuguese term for an idle -, fast living and petty criminal lifestyle celebrated in samba songs) and *poesia marginal* (a prestigious literary movement that emerged in the 1970s) enabled Brazilian writers to see the margin as a space of resistance on which a collective writerly identity can be founded, French writers are more cautious about the risk of being excluded from the French field of literary production because of their association with the periphery.

Finally, this volume is also interested in the mutations and transformations *banlieue* narratives have experienced over the past decade. Some contributors demonstrate the production's perpetual renewal by focusing on evolving narrative models, changing aesthetics and constant exploration of new genres. Rebecca Blanchard looks at the dystopian fiction and the anticipation novel as new alternatives to first-person accounts and semi-autobiographical narratives, which dominated the category at the time of its emergence. She uses Giorgio Agamben's (2005) concept of the 'state of exception' as a lens through which she examines the aestheticisation of spatial and social exclusion. Laura Reeck turns to the fast expanding category of *banlieue* film to investigate how directors are moving away from rigid gender norms and overstated representations of masculinity previously associated with this production. She shows how in recent years female directors and ethnic minority female characters have contributed to disrupting male-centred models of filmmaking by simultaneously feminising, ethnicising and renewing the category of *banlieue* film.

Across all these contributions, the aim of the volume is to highlight the vitality of the French *banlieues* as spaces of cultural production and to stress how vital their contribution is to the renewal of contemporary aesthetic codes and canons. It seeks to emphasise the great diversity of forms, genres, and narrative models used by artists who propose different visions of the *banlieues*. The great diversity of both the *banlieues* and *banlieue* narratives makes generalisations difficult, if not invalid. In order to do justice to this multiplicity, the contributors seek to strike a balance between close readings of single novels, films and songs and attempts to theorise further this exciting contemporary cultural production. They also endeavour to demonstrate that, although working-class suburbs in France are complex and diverse spaces, their representations in various art forms may not always illustrate the *banlieues'* actual state and degree of diversity. In spite of being associated with realism, *banlieue* narratives can sometimes reproduce and reinforce clichés, just as they can deconstruct or subvert them. Although they generally support the claims of peripheral youths feeling abandoned by the state and excluded from political representation and power, individual

artists may also want to pursue aims other than those of bearing witness to socio-economic segregation and stigmatisation in the French urban periphery.

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