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# REMIXING IDENTITY: Language Re-imagined and Voices in Flux in France's Beur Fiction

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REMIXING IDENTITY

Language Re-imagined and Voices in Flux in France's Beur Fiction

By

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## **I. Introduction**

Over the last three decades a new category of literature has sprung up on the literary scene in France. It is not a literature without precedent, for it springs from a group of people whose origins lie outside of France. Certainly, the literature of migration, or of post-migration, is not a new phenomenon in any part of the world. However, this new body of writing, what has been entitled “Beur” literature, so coincides with modern questions facing France and with issues pertinent to the entire globe, that it stands without parallel among the minority literatures in France. Beur literature is, at its most basic level, the writings of those men and women whose parents migrated to France from North Africa, namely from the Maghreb region that includes Algeria, Tunisia and Morocco. This literature encompasses more, however, than the mere biographical aspect of its authors. Beur writing is preoccupied with the social milieu and with exploring how minority youth of North African origin can navigate contemporary French society. It often takes a dissenting tone against certain conditions in France which are unfavorable to a minority or multiethnic status. At the same time, the protagonists of Beur fiction seek out a positive construction of identity, adapting to life among the dominant ethnic majority in France, while also incorporating remnants of their parents’ cultural identity. The contrast between family life and life in the public sphere (beginning with school) is sometimes chaotically stark, yet Beur youth, as portrayed in the fiction, attempt to reconcile the two spaces. One tool by which they can begin this reconciliatory process is that of language. While in a state of cultural and linguistic limbo, the children of North African descent nevertheless use language as a means to construct identity. The language of Beur youth and of the literature written about them is overwhelmingly French. However, it is not a French of the most standard variety. Beur authors highlight carefully the diverse linguistic environment in which Beur children grow up,

showing both the influence of the “mother” tongue (dialectical Arabic or Berber) as well as of the “degraded” French spoken by youth in urban areas (of which Beur children are a part). This paper will explore these linguistic phenomena as they appear in Beur literature, in so far as they contribute to the process of identity construction and negotiation for these writers and/or their protagonists. I will particularly focus on three novels: Azouz Begag’s *Le Gone du Chaâba*, Farida Belghoul’s *Georgette!*, and Faïza Guène’s *Kiffe Kiffe Demain*.

## II. Introduction to the Sources

*Le Gone du Chaâba* is a 1986 novel by Azouz Begag, a French-born author of Algerian parentage, who offers an autobiographical glimpse of his childhood in and around Lyon. Set in the 1960’s, Azouz navigates his experience between the slum where his family lives and the various French schools he attends. While commenting on his cultural heritage and his attachment to the Franco-Maghrebi community, Azouz nevertheless gravitates toward the opportunities of the classroom. He sees learning as a means of escape from a destitute lifestyle, as well as a way to prove his worth to a disdainful and discriminatory France.

1986 was also the year that Farida Belghoul published her novel *Georgette*, though the tone of this work lacks the humor and lightheartedness of Begag. Belghoul’s narrator, a young girl of North African parentage, also straddles the space between home and school and tries to reconcile the two in spite their respective failings. At home, she experiences the disadvantages of an illiterate, working-class family as well as their turbulent, sometimes violent, familial interactions; at school, she undergoes the racism and condescension of her teacher and classmates, and finds herself driven more and more to a state of silence.

Born outside of Paris just one year before the publishing of the previous novels, Faïza Guène joins a newer generation of Beur authors with her 2004 *Kiffe kiffe demain*. Written in the style of a personal journal, this is the story of Doria, a teenage Beur of Moroccan origin, who lives with her mother in a housing project outside of Paris. Her reflections on an absent father and on unsatisfactory living and schooling conditions highlight the novel's dual purpose: to critique both the patriarchal structure of North African society and the disempowering nature of the French political and socioeconomic milieu—especially for those who inhabit, as Brinda Mehta asserts, “the “other France,” namely, Maghrebi Arab-Muslim working-class immigrants and their French-born *beur* children” (173). Before turning to these novels, we will offer a brief glimpse at the context in which Beur literature was born.

### **III. Background**

The history of North African immigration to France has brought with it a host of cultural and linguistic tensions. Throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century, immigrants from the Maghreb region of North Africa, namely Morocco, Tunisia and Algeria, contributed heavily to the labor force in France, peaking in the 1950's and 1960's (Vermes 42). These waves of immigration began in a post-war context, in which France sought to begin reconstruction and strengthen its workforce, recently depleted by war-time fatalities. Then, the numbers of migrants only grew with decolonization in North Africa (Reeck 2). The Algerian war, for example, helped kick-start the influx of migrants to France, in view of efforts to flee the turmoil. However, the greatest gains occurred after the war; at the time of Algerian independence (March 1962), the Algerian immigrant population in France numbered 350,000, but in the months that followed that number would double. Still, France restricted these flows and continued to support a rotating migrant

force. In this, the temporary and primarily male workers could support growing economic sectors in France and, afterward, bring their personal financial gains back “home” to North Africa (Vermes 43). Questions of the migrants’ insertion into French society were rarely addressed (42). The temporary nature of this affair, however, did not unfold as planned. The French government officially ended Algerian immigration (which has traditionally been heavier than that of Tunisia or Morocco) in 1974 and so slowed the flow of other migrants but then two years later set up a policy of family reunification (Reeck 2). This allowed North African families to join their working fathers and husbands in France and spurred the creation of a more established immigrant community. Up until this point, many of the male immigrant workers had been living in shantytowns, or *bidonvilles* in French, on the outskirts of urban centers in France. The government had also seen to the construction of “foyers” or workers’ hostels, to improve upon the slum-like conditions of the *bidonvilles*. In either case, there was little opportunity for the workers to establish themselves and their families. A little before the era of family reunification, France began sponsoring the construction of “Habitations à loyer modéré” (HLM) [Subsidized Housing], clearing the shantytowns to make room for high rise, low-income complexes. These were to help provide housing for incoming immigrants and other working-class persons, and were in the end the main site of reception for migrants’ families. And these “Habitations” still exist today—they are the crowded apartments of the *banlieues défavorisées* (disadvantaged suburbs), housing people of low-income and, frequently, ethnic-minority status. In the early days, the HLM were presented as a feat of urban development and an answer to the demand for inexpensive housing. However, they did little to ameliorate the situation of immigrant communities already facing marginalization from the majority ethnic population. Whether in the *bidonvilles*, *foyers* or these new constructions, immigrants found themselves

relegated to the outskirts of cities and isolated from the cultural practices of the homeland. The majority of Beur literature is situated within the context the *banlieues* and the HLM, so this will provide the setting for most of this paper. However, it is important to note that Begag's *Le Gone du Chaâba*, begins in a pre-*banlieue* setting, where a few families have joined their working fathers/husbands while still in the *bidonvilles*, and later there is a move to a more central urban area with housing probably akin to the *foyers*.

Despite the isolated nature of immigrants' new "homes" in France, they still to some degree must venture in the public sphere. Whether in employment, social activities or education, immigrants and their children faced a dominant French language and culture. France's traditional approach to ethnic diversity leaves little room for minority identity. In the name of unity and the interest of the nation-building project, France has sought to preserve a single linguistic and cultural identity and has favored the assimilation of minorities. Divergent cultural practices or the choice to speak a language other than French could be construed as threats to an "indivisible" Republic. For the Arabic and Berber-speaking, Muslim, and culturally North African enclaves, there is certainly a disconnect between the heritage of the homeland and the unified ideals of the French state. This dichotomy plays out most harshly for the children of immigrants, who grow up truly on the divide between two cultures. Azouz Begag in his 1986 novel "Le Gone du Châaba" describes his own childhood with the imagery of passage; each day he must make a journey from his home in the Algerian *bidonville* to the French school in Lyon and then back. His struggle to straddle these two worlds is what guides the progression of this narrative. The linguist Yasir Suleiman echoes this sentiment in quoting one of his informants, the child of an Algerian immigrant, "En plus de me protéger du monde extérieur, la porte de notre gourbi...me tenait à l'écart de la France, sa culture, sa langue et son peuple. Quand j'étais

chez moi, il n'ya avait rien que l'Algérie...Plusieurs fois par jour je voyageais d'un pays à un autre, même d'un continent à un autre. [In addition to protecting me from the outside world, the front door of our hovel... separated me from France, its culture, language and people. When I was at home, only Algeria existed... Several times a day I would travel from one country to another, even from one continent to another] ” (45).<sup>1</sup>

For the children of immigrants, the contrast in worlds often becomes most obvious in the school setting, for many children the site of initial contact with a majority-ethnic population. Indeed many of the tensions between a dominant and minority identity would play out in the classroom. It became evident that some of these children born of immigration would have trouble keeping up in their classes (Kamli, 57). This, it seems, arose in part from the cultural foreignness of the material learned and in part from their disadvantaged socio-economic context which is rarely conducive to academic progress. Within such a socio-economic context, the parent generation was often illiterate and, therefore, ill-equipped to aid their children. And if, in addition to this, the parents held only meager French skills, this would again compound the difficulty of discussing schoolwork. Therefore, the language rift between home and school would continue to grow. In the 70's, schools began to create some programs for the teaching of maternal languages, but such programs generally fell outside of school hours and were never concerned with the dialectical forms of these languages (Kamli 57). For the children of North African descent, their only option was to study classical Arabic, never the spoken Arabic or Berber dialects they were hearing at home.

With little opportunity to transfer their maternal language and culture outside the home, it is not surprising that these children of immigrants would sometimes experience language loss. Linguists have studied this tendency in communities around the globe, and it is no exception in

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<sup>1</sup> Translation by Suleiman. All translation mine unless otherwise indicated.

France. In his 1994 work *Arabic Sociolinguistics* Suleiman studies the language maintenance of Algerian immigrant families in France. He highlights a certain level of language loyalty among the immigrant children in terms of their identification with Algerian Arabic and their ability to understand it passively. However, when it came to speaking ability, as the age groups become progressively younger, the ability to speak Algerian Arabic steadily declined (Suleiman 48). In one questionnaire, for example, 47.3% of immigrant children aged 26 to 35 answered yes to being able to speak Arabic, whereas only 3.1% of the 10 to 18 age group answered the same. Suleiman attributes this development in part to the maternal language attrition of the first generation immigrants (46). The longer families live in France, the greater the chance that they will begin borrowing from the French language, even if the parents do not use it regularly at home. If nothing else, younger-aged children would have more opportunities to use French inside the home by communicating with their older siblings. Similarly, French was often the preferred language when families would discuss educational and professional subjects; thus, depending on the level of French ability among the parents, this language of prestige might have appeared on a number of occasions within the home.

Beur literature enters this complex linguistic and cultural field in the early 1980's and sets out to explore Franco-Maghrebi identity within this milieu. In attempting to locate and understand identity, the literature, by its very nature, ponders and sometimes contests the societal structure in France. For Beur authors, the national absolutes of French ideology are problematic, and even more problematic is French treatment of Arab-Muslims in particular. According to Brinda Mehta, the residue of colonialism renders Arab identity a perpetual "Other" in France, and the country has difficulty imagining North African-ness entering into the realm of Frenchness. France continues to "locate Arab-Muslims as permanent outsiders; they remain

extraneous to French society as an attempt by France to disengage with its violent colonial past” (175). Thus, Beur literature serves as a paradigm for modern minority literature in France, addressing loudly (or at least, more visibly than other literatures) the dichotomy between “Frenchness” and multiculturalism. Carrie Tarr says, “Beurs have been the most visible, the most stigmatized and the most dynamic ethnic minority in postcolonial France” (3). This fact lends weight to the literature of this community and, to an extent, makes Beurs the spokespeople of a larger multiethnic population.

#### **IV. Language and French Identity**

##### ***A North African Language Heritage***

To fully understand what is at stake in the Beur community, we must interrogate the experience of the parent generation (the actual migrants) and the nature of Maghrebi identity. And we must ask, what the cultural and historical milieu which so sets apart the linguistic situation of North African immigrants from other groups in France? Given its history of colonialism, the Maghreb region carried a self-conscious relationship between language and identity, knowing French as the language of the colonizer and as a symbol of alienation from origins (even though not all North Africans would have spoken French). But there is a further complication noted by N. Jerab in the emerging dichotomy between *classical* Arabic and a dominant French. In an attempt to combat linguistic effacement (and to distinguish a pan-Arab identity, the Maghreb began to elevate this sacred but rarely-spoken language—as Jerab says “Une langue historique, prestigieuse, de culture et de civilisation indépendantes ” (Vermes 33) [a historic, prestigious language of an independent culture and civilization]. Though the relationship to classical Arabic is not a prominent theme in Beur fiction, it still complicates the

linguistic milieu of the protagonists in these novels. Children of immigrants were essentially living between four language varieties: a cherished, formal Arabic, a version of Arabic or Berber spoken at home (rarely studied in written form), a “proper” French learned in school, and a slang French spoken with friends (Suleiman 45). Even if the characters in Beur fiction do not often cite a desire for a formal Arabic education, there is still a recognition of its presence and especially religious signification. In *Georgette!*, for example, the narrator associates her paternal heritage with the holy words of the Qur’an, and she continues to refer back to the religious faith of her father. On a more practical level, if the immigrant children pursued a written Arabic education in France, their only alternative would be formal Arabic as taught in French schools or else in the Qur’anic schools. Thus, whether in learning French or Arabic, Beur children were not a stranger to stigmatism on dialectical speech and to the notion of language “contamination”. On the one hand, they became part of the urban, common-parlance threat to the “integrity” of the French language, and on the other hand the language they spoke at home could be construed as sullyng the words of God (Kamli 192). Or, if they did not fear the religious significance of their speech, dialectical forms of Arabic could still be seen as degraded forms, because they are to some degree “stained” by French influence. Begag describes this well in *Le Gone du Chaâba*: “A la maison, l’arabe que nous parlons ferait certainement rougir de colère un habitant de La Mecque. Savez-vous comment on dit les allumettes chez nous, par exemple ? Li zalimite. C’est simple et tout le monde comprend. Et une automobile ? La taumobile” (213) [At our house, the Arabic we speak would make someone from Mecca go red with anger. Do you know how we say “les allumettes” [matches], for example? ‘Li zalimite.’ It’s simple and everyone understands. And an automobile? ‘La taumobile.’”]

### ***Oral versus Written Registers***

The tension between different language registers plays out clearly in Farida Belghoul's 1986 novel, *Georgette!*. Here the narrator, a young girl, expresses profound linguistic uncertainty particularly through the imagery of "les mains et la voix" [the hands and the voice], which refer to the written and oral registers (Reeck 66). She describes the beautiful hands of her school teacher and the strong voice of her father, both of which she wishes she could incorporate into her own persona. There is the possibility of reconciling these two images, of writing and speaking, when the written word is spoken (or sung) out loud. We see this when the young girl praises her father's recitation of Qur'anic verses through song; she says,

Sa voix est magnifique! Il connaît par cœur des refrains et des chansons. D'abord, il se prépare. Il prend le plus beau livre. Toutes les paroles se cachent là...Et il l'ouvre. Il se trompe pas de sens : il ouvre le livre à l'endroit. Ensuite, sa voix s'enfonce dans l'air, c'est magnifique tellement c'est beau. Même un lion, si j'en avais un, s'endormirait au paradis à l'entendre. (34)

[His voice is magnificent! He knows choruses and songs by heart. First, he gets ready. He takes the most beautiful book. All the words are hidden inside....And he opens it. He doesn't make a mistake: he opens the book the right way. Then, his voice bursts into the air, it's magnificent, it's so beautiful. Even a lion, if I had one, would be sleeping in paradise if it heard his voice.]

Usually, the "hands" of the girl's father prove a disappointment, for he can hardly write or, at least, his knowledge only extends to the Arabic script, and this is a cause for confusion when she tries to learn to write in French. Moreover, she associates her father's hands with violence, as well as the filth of working as a garbage man. In this instance, however, his hands act gracefully, he opens the book the right way, he reads the script and then transforms it into song. The religious association with the Qur'an also serves to highlight the narrator's continuing childhood faith; this "beautiful" book contains words of truth which deserve to be spoken. They are not like the "bêtises" (stupidities) which she hears in the classroom or which even issue from her own mouth (35).

As for the teacher, the narrator admits to hating this woman's voice and often associates it with misunderstanding or frivolous talk. Indeed, the narrator seems to tie her own failed

attempts at voicing her thoughts to the ineffective voice of her teacher—just as her failure to write springs from her father’s failure. Having learned from her father the opposite vector of the Arabic script, she writes her homework on the wrong side of the notebook, leading her teacher to believe that she has done none of her work. Yet she hesitates to correct the teacher at this point, because she has just spilled ink on one of her hands and does not want the teacher to see. The girl then reflects on the beautiful hands of her teacher, hands that write gracefully and which may help save the girl from her “handicap,” that is, her failure to take her hands out of her pockets (28). As the girl comes to understand her father’s mistake, however, it is shame for him and his lack of education that keeps her silent about the notebook. Moreover, whatever confidence she held in her father’s writing ability completely unravels; she says, “Son écriture pourrie c’est des gribouillages. L’écriture à l’envers n’existe pas ! En vérité, il sait pas écrire et il me raconte des histoires debout” (58) [“His rotten hand-writing is just scribbles. Writing in the opposite direction doesn’t exist! In truth, he doesn’t know how to write and he’s telling me a bunch of tall tales.”]

As to the spoken word, the girl increasingly resigns herself to the failures of speech in the classroom. After the girl’s attempt to explain the ink incident is interrupted by another student, who asks to go to the bathroom, she finds her throat tightening in anger. And she returns to the theme of wanting to say only what is worth saying:

Une glotte enflée, un jaune pipi et un caca puant, c’est pas une discussion sérieuse. J’attends une parole importante. Les belles paroles donnent une voix merveilleuse. Elles guérissent la gorge d’un coup. Surtout, ce qui m’intéresse aussi, c’est de lui montrer mon cahier à l’endroit. Je veux que ses belles mains caressent, les uns après les autres, mes beaux cheveux. (56)

A swollen throat, yellow pee, and stinking poo, this isn’t a serious discussion. I’m waiting for important talk. Beautiful words make for a wonderful voice. They heal your throat at once. Above all, what I want to do as well is show her my notebook the right way. I want her beautiful hands to caress, one after the other, my beautiful hair.

This passage like many others in the book demonstrates the flow of images and ideas that characterize our narrator's thoughts. She first imagines that her rigid throat will loosen when she has something important to say, but then she correlates this success with other possibilities of gaining favor with her teacher. Her ability to write will come to the light, and the teacher will shower approval on her with her hands, stroking her hair (which the girl previously describes as her only asset). This moment, however, does not come to fruition. The more the narrator remains silent, the more her teacher pushes her for explanations, suggesting that the girl cannot speak French like her presumed-uneducated father. The girl also experiences a moment of failed expression when she is cut off from telling a story (69-70); after this incident, she discovers that classroom learning primarily concerns imitation, not creativity (Reeck 67). In the face of the mistaken stereotypes of her teacher and classmates and the empty expressions of the classroom, she rejects the spoken register altogether. The story then begins to spiral into a confusing web of inner reflection mixed with fantasy; the reader does not know when the narrator is relating real events and when she is merely inventing scenarios, many of which are tinged with a vindictive violence. Whether in dream or reality, the conclusion of the novel is manifestly self-destructive, as the narrator seeks out her own death by walking into oncoming traffic.

The tension between the oral register and the written sign is all the more significant in light of a colonial past. Reeck elaborates on the exclusivity of the French colonial system in North Africa, its attempts to keep French and Arabic far removed from one another and also to promote a "pure language" of monolingualism, i.e. French (64). She references Fanon with his claim that speaking a language means taking on a culture; says Reeck, "this is of course problematic in the colonial context in which metropolitan French wrote over local linguistic practices." Local oral culture was indeed "written over" in more than one sense, by the written

signs of a proper French education and by a culture that treated orality with disdain. In the postcolonial context, this tendency away from the oral register and toward “pure language” reproduces itself in the French classroom. Reeck claims that in this the colonial power structure is maintained and may have implications for rebellion or failure in the classroom, as the disempowered students refuse to be mastered (64).

### ***Linguistic Identity in France***

The sheer diversity of spoken languages in North Africa complicates the picture of a mere Arabic-French dichotomy. There are national as well as regional dialects, as well as the presence of Berber in some parts (which is linguistically unrelated to Arabic). Thus, Vermes quotes the linguist Hérédia-Desprez in saying that this language environment “ne favorise pas au départ un sentiment d’unité linguistique, surtout dans un pays d’accueil qui, lui, est unilingue et très centralisé et unifié depuis longtemps” (38) [from the start, doesn’t favor a sentiment of linguistic unity, especially in a receiving country which itself is monolingual and has long been very unified and centralized.] The tradition of a monolingual nation is centuries old, with its roots in the French Revolution. Alain Dieckhoff explains that in the wake of the Revolution, the *nation* was to be the symbol of sovereignty, which could no longer maintain a people divided across social, religious, and regional lines. As Dieckhoff puts it, the body of citizens “should reflect the Republic — one and indivisible” (3). Under this Republic a widespread knowledge of French would not only enable the spread of Paris’ revolutionary ideology but would also create a sentiment of belonging to a larger community. The state thus led an offensive against what was at the time a linguistically diverse land, seeking to drive out regional languages in the name of national unity. In the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, the Third Republic strengthened these efforts by creating a national education which was to instill Republican ideals and a uniform culture among the

people (4). Dieckhoff explains, “This nationalization of the mind could only come through a formidable effort of inculcation carried out through its educational system by the State, zealous propagator of the “genuine culture” and tireless dispenser of the “beautiful language”” (4). The sentiment carries on into the modern day, where not only regional but also “foreign,” that is immigrant, languages and identities seem a threat to the notion of an indivisible people. Among other things, we see this in the State’s stance against “communitarianism”, that is its wariness of the formation of isolated communities (Dubreil 141). France has traditionally taken an assimilationist approach to immigrant and other minority groups and encouraged them to embrace the dominant culture. In spite of some changes in moving toward an “integration” model rather than “assimilation,” the argument still rages. As late as 2012, Claude Guéant, the Interior Minister under Nicolas Sarkozy, was quoted in saying, “We reject ... cloistered lives lived along ethnic and religious grounds, those that live by their own laws. The foreigners that we welcome here must integrate themselves. It is up to them to adapt to us, not the other way around” (Corbet). This notion hardly leaves room for any sort of cultural exchange or plurality of identity.

Thus, in spite of the diverse language environment found in North African immigrant communities, French becomes the primary language of expression for the second generation. Not only is its functional use vital each day, but also on the level of artistic expression, there is hardly another alternative. The language of dominance asserts itself in the public sphere, making irrelevant other alternatives for communication (Vermees 47). Moreover, children of immigrants often do not have the capacity to read or write in their maternal tongue, which again makes French the only viable option. Thus, we find Beur literature as a literature of French expression. Though this body of work plays with the standards of French literature, interjecting Arabic

words or phrases and French words written with an Arabic accent, it still is comprehensible to a French readership. This reality does not nullify the struggle of many authors over their language choice. Belghoul, for example, has spoken in an interview about her crisis in writing, especially her choice to write in French. She says, “L’écriture, c’est la mort de la fille Belghoul. En écrivant...je creuse la tombe de la fille de mon père...J’ai l’impression de piétiner mon héritage” (Hargreaves 142 check) [Writing is the death of the daughter Belghoul. In writing...I dig the tomb of the daughter of my father...I feel like I’m trampling on my heritage.] Belghoul’s struggle comes not so much from the colonial connotations of the French language, as from the inaccessibility of a written French (which her parents would have never learned.) In knowing that she is cutting off her parents from this sphere of her life, she too feels cut off from the life and traditions of their generation where, among other things, orality would have dominated storytelling.

#### **IV. Interstitial Spaces in Identity and Language**

##### ***Intermediaries Between Two Worlds***

Belghoul’s crisis in writing, her division between two rich cultural heritages, is something that is reflected in the characters of many Beur novels. Throughout this body of literature, there is a preoccupation with an interstitial, or “in-between,” space in which characters are caught up in the midst of two identities. Language undoubtedly plays a part in this, as we see in the lives of the young protagonists. Among other factors, these children must practice a juggling act between the language spoken at home and that spoken at school. Linguists have often referred to the translator role of immigrant children, who find themselves the intermediary so to speak between two worlds (Reeck 32). Not only do these children literally have to interpret

for their parents or for their schoolteachers, friends etc., whenever these two worlds interact. Even beyond this, they serve as the representatives of their maternal culture to the larger public in France, and conversely they must clarify aspects of French culture for their families. Thus they are neither guests in a “foreign” land, nor hosts to the newly-arrived “foreigners”, but in a sense hold both roles (Reeck 32). In Begag’s *Le Gone du Chaâba*, the young narrator Azouz and his siblings must transfer messages between home and school, often translating written documents for his father. Beyond this, he must also decide how to transmit, or not, the sentiments of his father towards his teachers. In particular, when M. Loubon reveals his background in Algeria and is sympathetic toward Azouz, Azouz’s appreciative father tells his son repeatedly to invite Loubon to their home or to bring him a gift on the father’s behalf. Azouz, however, protests that these actions would not be culturally appropriate in France and continually evades his father’s demands (225).

This unease in relaying messages is one of the many forms of discomfort expressed with regards to negotiating a divided life. We often return to the notion of a conflicted parent-child relationship, which from the child’s perspective vacillates between feelings of love and shame. In *Le Gone du Chaâba*, a young Begag adjusts to his new life near the center of Lyon, by convincing some of his friends that he is in fact Jewish, a less stigmatized identity than Arab. However, the appearance of his mother outside school one day threatens the stability of these new ties: “Soudain, une vision insupportable boucha la cadre de la porte. Là, sur le trottoir, évidente au milieu des autres femmes, le binouar tombant jusqu’aux chevilles, les cheveux cachés dans un foulard vert, le tatouage du front encore plus apparent qu’à l’accoutumée : Emma. Impossible de faire croire qu’elle est juive et encore moins française” (190) [Suddenly, an unendurable vision clogged up the door frame. There, on the sidewalk, sticking out among the

other women, the *binouar* (Algerian robe) falling to her ankles, hair hidden in a green scarf, the tattoo on her forehead even more noticeable than usual: Mom. Impossible to say that she's Jewish and even less so that she's French]. Belghoul offers a similar, if more conflicted, moment in *Georgette!* when the narrator pairs familial affection with symbols of religious identity: "Un jour, ma mère a dessiné dans ma main un croissant de lune et une étoile. Le dessin de ma mère était joli et magnifique. Je suis sortie dehors acheter du pain. Là, je l'aimais plus du tout. Je cachais dans ma poche ma main dégueulassée par la terre rouge" (20) [One day, my mother drew on my hand a crescent moon and star. The drawing of my mother was lovely and magnificent. I went out to buy some bread. There, I no longer liked it at all. I hid in my pocket the hand covered in red dirt.] This about-face moment reflects the sort of bipolar attitude which exists throughout *Georgette!*, by which the narrator feels incapable of translating familial culture to the host culture. The quote from Begag is also in the same vein, though Begag and Belghoul differ in the tone with which they present these moments. The way in which Begag presents the scene with his mother is even tinged with humor, and we learn later that though he tries to ignore her presence at first he later seeks reconciliation. Belghoul's tone, on the other hand, is deeply sober, almost tormented, and does not bode well for the rest of the novel.

### ***Names as Markers of Identity***

Issues of language can also help us to see this dichotomy between the desire to be a part of and the desire to distance oneself from the family community. This is particularly the case with regards to names, and characters' choice to embrace or reject their proper names and, sometimes, invent new ones. In his work on the North African immigrant community in France, Alec Hargreaves explains that, "A proper name is generally thought of as a mark of individuality, but as most names are selected from within a repertoire which is specific to a

particular language or culture, they also serve to situate their referents within such a culture” (36). This makes the issue of names all the more problematic, however, in Beur literature, where authors struggle with naming their characters, for fear that readers should make false, simplistic presumptions about the content of these novels. From the perspective of the actual characters, they encounter a similar struggle, not wanting to situate themselves within a culturally-specific setting with which they may not completely identify. Hargreaves gives an example from another of Begag’s novels, in which the protagonist shortens his seemingly Arab name, Ben Abdallah, to the more French in appearance Béni. It is more complex, however, than a simple rejection of his maternal identity in preference of a French one. The character elaborates the many functions of his nickname: “Béni, c’est moi, “mon fils » dans a langue du Prophète, béni dans celle du Christ, anagramme de bien dans celle du Petit Robert” (Hargreaves 37) [Béni, that’s me, “my son” in the language of the Prophet, “blessed” in that of Christ, anagram of [the French word for] “good” in that of [the dictionary]]. He is thus able to tie his name to the Christian heritage of France and to the Islamic traditions of his upbringing.

This question surrounding names continues in Belghoul’s *Georgette!* in which the young narrator remains unnamed. Contrary to the assumption that she is in fact Georgette, this name actually appears only once, when the young girl imagines taking on a false identity and facing her father’s anger at her choice. He would rant in disappointment, accusing her of lacking intelligence and self-respect. The name Georgette, according to Hargreaves, “serves as a metonym for all that is alien about French culture in Arab eyes and ears. Behind it, we can imagine arguments over hair-styles and boyfriends, sexual independence and religious restrictions...when the girl reaches adolescence” (77). Given the context of the story, that the girl is the daughter of a garbage man and North African immigrant, it is apparent that her name

would not actually be Georgette. Given this fact, Reeck says that “this pseudonym protects the girl’s anonymity by calling attention to its unbelievability, which is further reinforced through the exclamation mark at the end of the title” (57). The narrator comments on her own anonymity in the novel, saying, “Je porterai jamais de nom” (130) [“I will never have a name”]. This namelessness she connects with the idea that neither she nor her family has a piece of land to call their own so, upon death and burial, their graves will have no name. Thus, while in her fantasies, she distances herself from her natural-born name, she also fears its ultimate effacement.

In *Kiffe Kiffe Demain*, Guène’s narrator frequently comments on names, pointing out a broad range of the stereotypes, clichés and even discrimination located in and around names. As for the Arabic side of the spectrum, Doria speaks of her mother Yasmina, whose name is totally overridden in her workplace by an inconsiderate superior. In calling Yasmina “Fatima” and, according to Doria, probably calling every black person Mamadou and every Chinese person Ping Pong, he reduces those of ethnic minority status to their most cliché appellation (14). For him, it is a bit of an innocent joke, but implies the assumption of an invisible, because nameless, “other.” As an ironic reversal of this moment, Doria’s mother also gives a misnomer to her boss, not intentionally but because of a poor accent. His name, Schihont, she pronounces “Schihant,” sounding like the French “chiant” for “a pain” or “really boring” (15). The boss himself interprets this moment as mockery, building off of his already contemptuous and distrustful view of his “foreign” workers. Meanwhile, Yasmina is left in the dark as to her mistake and cries for being reprimanded.

In spite of Doria’s criticism of this reductionist name-calling, she herself does something similar with a few French names. She mocks certain names and even invents a few derogatory nicknames (though she does not share them with their owners). Moreover, for Doria, vapid or

boring names usually indicate vapid personalities. For instance, after her father's departure, social workers start visiting Doria and her mother's home on a weekly basis, and the most recent of these is, according to Doria, a superficial, rather useless character: "La nouvelle, je sais plus son nom. C'est un truc du genre Dubois, Dupont, ou Dupré, bref un nom pour qu'on sache que tu viens de quelque part" (17) [The new one, I don't remember her name anymore. It's something like Dubois, Dupont or Dupré, in short a name that tells people you come from somewhere.] The *du-* prefix in French means "of" or "from" and would, as Doria says, indicate a place of origin and, presumably, a family name of high status. Doria continues to refer to her social worker with a variety of creative versions of the woman's name, most of which are to the effect of "Du-something." By this we see Doria's irreverence toward an established French heritage and the tendency to associate names with power. Later, she shares some thoughts that build on this irreverence. When reflecting back on her childhood knock-off Barbie dolls, Doria says this, "Même leur prénom, c'était de la merde: Françoise. C'est pas un prénom pour faire rêver les petites filles, ça ! Françoise, c'est la poupée des petites filles qui rêvent pas" (41) [Even their first name was crap: Françoise. That's not a name that makes little girls dream! Françoise is a doll for girls who don't dream at all.] On the one hand, these moments seem to some extent to duplicate the reductionist strategy of Yasmina's boss; in the first instance, Doria distances someone she does not know by obscuring her name and, in the second, she groups the mass of French children behind a stereotypically and even redundantly French name—the name Françoise closely resembles the word *français(e)*, meaning "French," and, in fact, in old French *français* was written as *françois*. At the same time, these moments hold some truth for, in the case of the social worker, the woman proves to be a shallow and ineffective character, and her name does little to amend this personality failure. As for the Barbies, Doria may have a point

about French consumer industries' rallying behind an entrenched, mono-ethnic identity, which French children are supposed to imbibe.

This issue of names is particularly pertinent when one considers the name of the literature we are examining: *Beur* literature. The title 'beur' has its roots in a type of slang that is particular to urban regions of France, called verlan. Though we will return to verlan later, in essence it is a sort of code which transforms words by reversing or rearranging individual syllables (Calvet, 281). Thus the word beur is in fact verlan for *arabe*, the French for 'Arab'. The word started being used in the 1970s among the immigrant youth in Paris, but later was picked up by the press in coverage of the Beur marches of the 80's (Hargreaves 29, 30). The clever construction of this word allowed children of immigrants to avoid the stigma attached to the word *arabe*, while simultaneously expressing something about their hybrid identity. They themselves are Arabs, or rather people of Arab origins, who have undergone a process of rearrangement or recreation under a French culture and language.

### ***Language in Transition***

As for the language spoken by Beur youth in these narratives, it is overwhelmingly French, but once again we find that interstitial space of interaction between French and the mother tongue. *Le Gone du Chaâba* is a prime example of this sort of language limbo, both in terms of how the author himself chooses to write and how his characters talk. It is important to note the authorship in this novel, being autobiographical in nature. Thus, the author and narrator are essentially the same here, except that the narrator speaks from the perspective of a young Begag. The voice of the narrator reflects Begag's decisions to highlight certain aspects of the linguistic milieu of his childhood. Though many of the parent-child exchanges would have been carried out in Arabic and are therefore written in French for the ease of the reader, Begag still

leaves behind certain Arabic words. For some words, he explains their significance directly, and for others he offers a small dictionary of “mots bouzidiens” (241) [words of the dialect of the Sétif region in Algeria] at the back of the book. In an article on Beur literature, Crystel Pinçonat clarifies that this insertion of the maternal tongue is not a result of linguistic failure, as in a lack of the correct French term, but an intentional effort to transmit the cultural capital of certain words of the mother tongue (945). It is not a war of words but instead a “mélange apprivoisé” (944) [a tame mixture], in which the author paints emotions through the color of certain words and phrases.

Meouak divides the contact between languages found in Beur literature into several categories. Looking in particular at another of Begag’s novels, he details the many linguistic interactions found within. The categories include: expressions taken from the Algerian dialect, slang expressions in French, French expressions with Arabic pronunciation, and expressions where Arabic words have entered the French language. All of these language interactions exist as well in *Le Gone Du Châaba*, from which we can offer a few examples. Under the first category, words taken from the Algerian dialect, we find several instances of language borrowing, in which words from the mother tongue will be inserted into speech in the dominant tongue. With Begag, this sometimes appears in the speech of the parent generation, trying to speak in French but relying on supplementary Arabic words. Alternatively, the language borrowing sometimes arises from the voice of the narrator, who singles out certain significant words used by his family; for example, he employs words such as “Djnoun,” referring to the Arabic word for evil spirits, or “rachema” for shame, all the while providing a definition for these words (sometimes immediately, sometimes in the back of the book). Yet such words are significant for their emotional and almost spiritual role in his childhood and youth. Beyond these

moments, there are instances where the voice of the narrator and the voice of the child protagonist are confounded and, as from the child's thoughts, a few Arabic words slip out. For example, when Azouz gets the best grade in the class on one of his papers, his inward thoughts take this form: "Par Allah! Allah Akbar! Je me sentais fier de mes doigts. J'étais enfin intelligent" (224) [By Allah! Allah Akbar! I felt proud of my fingers. I was finally smart.] The religious language of Islam is a part of everyday conversation for Arabic speakers of North Africa, and here an increasingly-secularized, French child appropriates its emphatic significance.

Meouak's next category, that of slang expressions, seems to have little to do with the phenomenon of Arabic-French interactions. Yet it is an important part of understanding the linguistic environment of Beur children and their participation in the youth culture in France. Slang has become even more a part of Beur writing in the years following *Le Gone du Chaâba*, as the context for these novels is overwhelmingly the *banlieues*. We will return to this topic in discussing Faïza Guène and her presentation of *banlieue* youth. Even though the context for *Le Gone* is not the *banlieues*, Begag still shows how young Azouz and his friends take part in the familiar speech of French youth. For example, when Azouz resolves to do well in his classes and rise above the French expectations for the "Arabs," he undergoes some estrangement from his Beur friends. They mock him calling him "un con" (a moron) and "un fayot" (a suck-up). Begag also demonstrates the change in slang when Azouz's family moves from the *bidonville* to the city proper. At his new school, Azouz must be initiated to the language of his classmates, even an initiation via his Beur cousins who have lived in the city longer. One scene demonstrates this in particular, where Azouz speaks with his cousin Ali: " 'Qu'est-ce que tu branles, maintenant?' questionne Ali. 'Qu'est-ce que je quoi??' dis-je, surprise. 'Quest-ce que tu fous, quoi?' 'Je vais chez moi...' 'Bon, on va t'accompagner, comme ça tu nous montreras où tu

crèches...’ Je fais une mine étonnée. Ali precise: ‘Où tu habites, quoi...Putain, mais où tu as appris à jacter, toi?’ (185) [“ ‘What are you up to now?’ asks Ali. “What am I what?” I say, surprised. ‘What are you doing now?’ ‘I’m going home...’ ‘Okay, we’ll come with you, so you can show us your crib...’ I make a surprised face. Ali explains: ‘Where you live... dang man, where did you learn to talk?’] It is hard to demonstrate the use of slang in this passage, as many of the French words do not have an English equivalent. It is useful to note, however, that both of the phrases which translate “what are you up to now?” employ slang words, though the first is an expression unfamiliar to Azouz. As for the word which I translated “crib,” this actually comes from the French word for nursery or manger. It is interesting in that respect to see some similarities between French and American slang.

Sometimes Begag makes orthographic changes in French words to reflect the Arabic-like pronunciation; in such cases, we find passages like the following, in which Azouz’s father agrees with their French neighbor that they need to do something about some local prostitutes; he says, “Tan a rizou, Louisa. Fou li fire digage di là, zi zalouprix. Li bitaines zi ba bou bour li zafas” (50). Even for those who do not read French, there is a clear visual difference if written in the “proper” French: “Tu as raison, Louisa. Faut les faire dégager de là, ces saloperies. Les putains elles sont pas bonnes pour les enfants!” [You’re right, Louisa. We’ve got to clear out this filth. Those whores, they aren’t good for the children]. In some instances mispronunciation can lead to mal-interpretation of words. When Azouz’s father sends him to buy some snuff, Azouz only knows his father’s incomprehensible version of the French term; his father orders, “ ‘Le tababrisi! Demande du tababrisi.’ Je suis descendu chez le buraliste de la place Sathonay. Il n’avait pas de tababrisi. D’ailleurs, il n’avait jamais entendu parler de ce produit. Je lui ai précisé que c’était de la poudre que l’on mettait dans a bouche pour fumer, alors il m’a dit en

levant les bras au ciel : ‘Vous voulez du tabac à priser ?’” (179-80) [The ‘tababrisi’! Ask for ‘tababrisi’. I went down to the news dealer at Sathonay square. He didn’t have any ‘tababrisi.’ For that matter, he had never heard of this product. I explained that it was powder you put in your mouth to smoke, then he said in lifting up his arms: ‘You want ‘tabac à priser’ [snuff]?’] In these instances of orthographic change, Beur authors usually reference the speech of the first-generation, whose French is still weak and/or displays a strong accent. Alternatively, authors may choose to insert such words as a signal for French words that have entered the spoken Arabic: words such as “la boulicia” (French, la police) or “tilifiziou” (French, la télévision). Conversely, under the final category we find words which have come from Arabic into accepted French. These are words such as *bled*, which entered France via the French troops in Africa and has been credited in the French language since 1860 (Meouak 163). It signifies more generally *place of origin* but has taken on the pejorative sense of a distant and isolated village. Nevertheless, the characters in *Le Gone* use it repeatedly in reference to the home village in Algeria.

## **V. Vernacularity and Social Protest**

### ***From Marginalization to Activism and Art***

For the first generation of Beurs and, now also, for their children, social and cultural marginalization was and is an ongoing reality. They face a level of difficulty in integrating into French society as well as into the cultural milieu of the parent, or grandparent, generation. Their situation as disempowered, even “second-class” citizens provides them limited resources with which to explore and express their complex identity. Yet in so far as they are able, children and grandchildren of Maghrebi immigrants have found ways of addressing their crisis of identity and

even transcending it, from social protest, to artistic pursuits, to daily speech habits. As one Beur author has noted, “le meilleur moyen de s’affirmer, c’est de s’exprimer” (Hargreaves 27) [The best method of self-affirmation is self-expression]. This, indeed, is what men and women of North African descent have sought to do, whether through professional or everyday pursuits.

One of the earliest forms of artistic expression among Beurs was amateur theatre of the 1970’s, the decade when the children of the first major wave of Maghrebi immigration were reaching adulthood (Hargreaves 27). The 1980’s saw the publication of the first Beur prose writings, but these, like Beur theatre, had a minor sphere of influence—that is, until Charef’s 1983 novel *Le The au harem d’Archi Ahmed* became a bestseller over night. With this novel and others, Beur literature started to reach a wider audience in France, at the same time that Beurs were expanding out into other media. As the Socialist Party came to power in France in the 80’s, so they opened up more avenues for foreigners to organize and to get access to public funds. Among the North African communities, there was an explosion of organizational growth and expressive outlets, including the first Beur radio station. Radio Beur in Paris was in fact the site of the first recorded use of the term “Beur” itself. This decade, however, was also the era of major social protest among communities of North African origin.

As power was shifting from the Socialist Party to the extreme right-wing Front National, the new party, headed by Jean-Marie Le Pen, kept immigration policy a major debate throughout the remainder of the 80’s (Hargreaves 30). The contention gave rise to several public demonstrations on the part of the younger members of the immigrant community. The first of these, in 1983, was officially entitled the March for Equality and Against Racism, but the media took up the title, “la Marche des Beurs” [March of the Beurs] (31). This move troubled some of the protestors, who questioned the use of the word “Beur” when it was no longer merely a self-

designation. Nevertheless, media coverage of the march created greater interest in the entire issue and even helped to promote the publication of *Beur* literature (30).

### *A New Era, New Developments*

As we move into the 21<sup>st</sup> century, *Beur* literature as a genre begins to transform, as does the community of North Africans and their descendants in France. In 2005, riots broke out on the outskirts of Paris and quickly spread across the country, led by descendants of North African immigrants (including the third generation). The riots were a part of the growing unrest in the *banlieues* over poor living and working conditions and continued discrimination and political frustration. Unlike the march of 1983, however, the 2005 riots had a tendency toward violence and were a cause for concern across the nation. At the same time, Laura Reeck points out that both of these events, the march and the riots, “each gave rise to a surge of literary production” (xi). 1983 was the year in which Charef published the first widely successful *Beur* novel, and a new set of authors have sprung up in the years following 2005, including Mohamed Razane and his *Collectif Qui fait la France?*. Yet, as many of the children of the first wave of immigration have reached adulthood and are being overshadowed by a third, and even fourth generation, this raises questions about the nature of *Beur* literature. Some writers argue that the term “*beur*” has become almost obsolete in terms of fiction writing, and instead the authors springing up from North African descent belong to a different categorization. According to these writers, “*banlieue* writing” is this new designation under which the children of *Beurs* may enter the literary world. Dominic Thomas describes the difference between *Beur* and *banlieue* writing in this way: “*Banlieue* writing recognize[s] the pluridimensionality of ethnic struggles in France today (whereas *Beur* literature is predominantly constituted by a Maghrebicentric corpus), and is accordingly working toward articulating a trajectory in which social exclusion and injustice are

denounced, in order to work productively and responsibly in seeking solutions” (35). The notion of identity-in-limbo, divided strictly between two cultures, begins to obscure as the descendants of immigrants integrate further into France. At the same time, these people continue to experience real struggles, both in terms of ethnic identity and social and economic position. In this sense, the new generation of youth of North African descent becomes indistinguishable from a broader spectrum of French youth living in disadvantaged areas, namely the *banlieues*. These areas are generally defined by their low socio-economic status, but they are also largely multi-ethnic, featuring those of (sub-Saharan) African as well as Maghrebi descent.

Does this shift in focus, however, eliminate the usefulness of the term ‘*beur*’? The term is, indeed, still in current usage, and it is important to note that many of the original *Beur* authors continue to write today, including Mehdi Charef and Azouz Begag. Faiza Guène as well, though she belongs to a younger group of writers, is herself only the “second generation,” her parents having migrated from Algeria. Thus, her situation aligns in many ways with that of her predecessors, in terms of their close contact with a migrant and a host culture. If, in addition to the biographical aspect, we define *Beur* literature by a number of issues emphasized in these texts, then it seems this genre of literature has not yet disappeared. According to Myriam Geiser, a majority of readers and many critics consider “*beur*” to be defined by “une posture contestataire ou révoltée face à une situation sociale défavorisée, un langage marqué par l’appartenance à un groupe social, et des sujets issus de la réalité de la vie en banlieue” (121-2) [a posture of dissent or revolt in response to a socially disadvantaged position, the use of language marked by affiliation with a certain social group, and topics arising from the reality of life in the *banlieues*.] For the purposes of this paper, I have chosen to refer to my authors of choice as “*Beur*” authors, considering their personal biographies and the content of their novels.

However, the term “beur” belongs to a field of literature that is constantly in flux, and perhaps it will one day disappear from the language of literary criticism. Still, in the current milieu, where authors of Maghrebi descent continue to write about negotiating a multi-ethnic identity, “Beur” has not disappeared. Furthermore, it seems unnecessary to consider “beur” and “banlieue” as mutually exclusive ideas, and so perhaps some of this fiction can be assigned to both categories. At the very least, some *banlieue* writing presents itself as an expansion or recontextualization of Beur writing, acknowledging its roots (in Beur culture) but engaging larger debates such as issues of inclusion/exclusion, power, and identity negotiation in Western societies.

### ***Terminology in a Changing Environment***

Azouz Begag, one of the best-known Beur authors as well as an active social critic, tries to better describe these changing social structures in France. He adopts the term “jeunes ethniques” (young ethnics), to refer to the children and grandchildren of immigrants from former French colonies—those who most populate the current environment of the *banlieues* (Thomas 36). This is a necessary nuance to make, says Begag, given the confusing array of titles and referents for ethnic minorities. Thomas quotes Begag in saying, “If we review the main terms currently in use, notably in the media...there are around thirty different appellations, riddled with fallacies, contradictions, and ambiguities embodying the unease of the Republic vis-à-vis “citizens” who are not like “us.”” Among these terms, the word “immigrant” is most problematic and, according to Thomas, it “functions as a signifier for a broad range of cultural, political and social issues.” It is a term used to write off whole communities and their issues, bypassing the complexities of a culturally diverse people. And it becomes entirely inappropriate when applied to the children and grandchildren of immigrants, who themselves have not usually migrated anywhere. This tendency in France to overwrite multi-ethnicity and complex cultural

settings carries over into the literary world. A frequent descriptor for Beur literature and other such genres has been “literature of (or arising from) immigration.” Again, this terminology is inappropriate for it implies that the authors are in fact writing from an experience of immigration.

Among the terms used to describe Beur writing, critics speak of a defining characteristic of this literature as being “l’entre-deux,” literally “that which is between two [things, sides, worlds].” In an essay on *beur* literature, however, Myriam Geiser argues that there is something fundamentally amiss in this notion. Those descended from immigrants and writing in France do not write from two separate experiences, the experience of the homeland and that of France (Geiser 127). In fact, they usually have no direct contact with the place of origin, and they are at home, so to speak, in the host country. Thus, according to Geiser, what *beur* and other literatures address is not “l’entre-deux” but “la mixité au sein d’un même espace culturel” (127) [mixing within one cultural space.] Geiser references Homi Bhabha and his concept of a “third space” where a hybridity of cultures and lifestyles emerges. In line with this notion, the literature of this context ought, in Geiser’s words, be renamed “littérature de la post-migration” [post-migration literature], where the emphasis is not on the immigration but the transformation that occurs in the succeeding generations. Indeed, this seems a most appropriate change, given its relevance not only to the children of immigrants but to the generations that follow. Moreover, the notion of hybridity and a mixing of cultures indisputably play a role in Beur literature and in the genres that succeed or branch off from the Beur genre. At the same time, I would contest Geiser’s theory of the irrelevance of the “entre-deux” in Beur writing. Even though Beurs themselves do not write in the memory of the homeland, there is nevertheless in a number of their novels a dichotomy between homeland and host-land. In Begag, if no one else, life in the *bidonville* is

described as fundamentally rooted in (and sometimes even identical too) life in the family's village in Algeria. Certainly, Begag does not know that village life in full, but the difference between his home and the world outside the home was stark enough that he saw them as two different realms and, in his work, uses the language of the in-between. Similarly, Belghoul's narrator vacillates continuously between imagery surrounding her family (mainly the father) and that surrounding her classroom (mainly the teacher). It is her inability to reconcile the two which ultimately drives her to psychological breakdown.

### ***Beur Literature in a Broadening Context***

Despite the continuing existence of a sort of dichotomy or “entre-deux” in Beur literature, I do not think that this disqualifies it from belonging to Geiser's notion of a “literature-monde” (world literature). She makes a useful point that post-migration literature, of which Beur literature is a part, “se nourrit de multiples influences et...transcende les frontières culturelles au même titre que les littératures de *migration*, d'*exil*, de *post-colonialisme* ou certaines formes de littératures multilingues” (129) [“thrives on multiples influences and transcends cultural boundaries in the same vein as literatures of migration, of exile, of post-colonialism or certain types of multilingual literature.”] Geiser references a 2007 collective “Pour une littérature monde” (Toward a world literature), where many writers expressed their vision of a transnational French literature—a literature whose language is extricable from nation. The primary market for literature written in French draws from a literary establishment centered in Paris; minority genres such as Beur literature as well as literature from other Francophone countries have not typically carried much favor from the establishment. Writers in the 2007 collective even compared this imbalance of power between center and periphery to a new type of colonization (a colonization within a country's own borders). Pascale Casanova describes some of these challenges with

regard to Francophone writers, but the same may apply to French authors coming from ethnic minority backgrounds. He says, "...the power of Paris is still more domineering and more keenly felt by Francophone writers for being incessantly denied in the name of the universal belief in the universality of French letters and on behalf of the values of liberty promoted and monopolized by France itself" (Casanova 124).

### ***Language Patterns in the Banlieues: the case of rap***

Not every year has seen so great an amount of public participation from youth of immigrant origin. As for those Beurs who have gained influence in the artistic and literary fields, they characterize an unusual minority among this community. For the large majority of Beur youth, then—for those who are neither taking to the streets in protest nor finding opportunities for higher education— what is their outlet for self-expression? In his work on urban sociolinguistics, Louis-Jean Calvet offers one solution to this question, in the form of the unique speech habits of these youth. Calvet begins with the concept of self-exclusion, explaining that a group facing social exclusion will often experience "une sorte de sursaut d'orgueil" (269) [a sort of burst in pride]. Members of the group will glorify certain special characteristics of the group and may even take pride in their exclusion, as if it were exclusivity. This notion can then spill over into productions in the realm of culture. For these cultural products, Calvet looks first at the importance of rap and then at the popularity of verlan among the marginalized youth in France. Though rap music does not play a major role in the context of Beur literature, it does make occasional appearances and is significant for its similarity with and even incorporation of verlan. As we will explore further, these two phenomena (rap and verlan) help define the notion of vernacularity among Franco-Maghrebis. While "vernacular," when applied to language, refers to the *indigenous*, or more broadly, to everyday speech (as opposed to literary or learned),

this term “vernacularity” goes further. According to Grant Farred, “Vernacularity is the language of the Other that, while conscious of its difference and Otherness, stands as a form of singular intervention” (15) The “Othering” that so obscures Beur identity becomes a part of a self-conscious identity, which in turn attempts to use language to define itself—even through willful dissent. According to Brinda Mehta, As a response to... marginality, vernacularity articulates the language of social protest in popular parlance, a street tongue that undermines the bourgeois standardization of French through linguistic “corruptions...” (195). This vernacularity shows itself in the texts of rap songs and, even more so, in the speech patterns of the groups that consume this rap.

In France, rap appeared on the scene toward the end of the 1980’s, unifying the youth (not merely Beurs) of the “disadvantaged” urban areas (Calvet 269). It built upon a shared frustration with school failure and unemployment, as well as racism and political disappointment (including the failure of the Left to give immigrants the right to vote). It is interesting to note how rap in France appropriated much of the style, imagery and surrounding activities () of American rap and African American identity. Thus, for example, with this explosion of rap came a style of dress that mimicked American rappers as well as a preoccupation with basketball and with black American sports stars. Calvet argues, however, that this identification with an African American style only undergirds the connection between these two cultures and implies that rap is tied to problems of integration (270). By its very nature, rap has historically devalued the melody and has privileged the role of rhythm and of words; it thus signals a “return to the text” and an effort to engage listeners’ thinking (276). Calvet compares this phenomenon to a sort of urban journalism, which draws attention to the plight of the *banlieues* and acts as a different sort of protest. The significance of the text is something that French rappers even cite

within their lyrics; for instance they may comment on their language prowess and inventive capacity, as demonstrated in this song by M.C. Solaar:

Maitre du swing linguistique/ M.C. Solaar du posse 500 one, musicologue et mélomane, pose, compose, recompose, décompose, en linguiste structuraliste de la nouvelle prose.

Master of linguistic stomp/ M.C. Solaar with his gang 500 one, musicologist and music-lover, posing, composing, recomposing, decomposing, as linguist manufacturer of a new prose.

These lyrics highlight a self-conscious effort to reinvent language structures using the tool of rhythm, and even to go so far as to construct a “new prose.” In this respect, rap transcends the spoken register and almost functions as a type of literature—an artistic rendition of the voice of the streets.

### ***Language as Creation: Verlan***

If rap, however, unites artistic composition with everyday inspiration, we must ask what kind of linguistic environments these songs draw from. In so far as rap borrows from the language of the *banlieues* (and even influences this language), we will find a chord which connects this phenomenon to Beur literature and its portrayal of *banlieue* life. To summarize what kind of language tendencies appear in rap lyrics, Calvet provides the following list: terms from older slang, terms from new slang, rare borrowings from Arabic (long recognized as words in French), some Arabic phrases in the titles of songs, some English phrases in titles, other English borrowings (words that are already a part of the popular French vocabulary), and finally terms from the particular type of slang, *verlan* (281). At its most basic level, *verlan* functions by inverting the syllables of a word, though there can be nuances to this principle. It is most easy to see with a two-syllable word, such as ‘*verlan*’ itself which comes from the French word for ‘inverse,’ *l’envers*. Since in French the final ‘s’ of this word remains silent and the first syllable is pronounced l-AHN, one could read the two syllables as lan + ver. Switching these syllables transforms the word into ‘*verlan*’ and also defines the very concept of *verlan*. It has already been

stated that the word ‘*beur*’ is itself a *verlan*-type inversion of ‘*arabe*,’ but another level of “*verlanization*” has now been added on to this. The newer generation of North African descendants sometimes refers to itself under the name “*rebeu*,” a *verlanized* “*beur*.” This new term not only distinguishes its users from an older generation but also contests some of the pejorative usage of the term “*beur*” by certain French institutions (Reeck 4).

According to Calvet, *verlan* is the most productive type of slang in contemporary France. He clarifies that though it appears sometimes in rap songs, it is more frequently used among the *listeners* of these songs, namely the disadvantaged, *banlieue* youth (281). Calvet says that this type of speech works to define its users; he explains, “*parler verlan, ce n’est pas tant vouloir masquer le sens...qu’imprimer sa marque à la langue*” [To speak *verlan*, it is not so much to mask meaning...as to leave one’s stamp on the language]. Speakers of *verlan* even go so far as to “*verlanize*” words that are already slang or that exist in the popular vocabulary. So for instance, the English word “black” becomes “*keubla*,” the slang word for cops “*flic*” becomes “*keuf*” and the already-*verlanized* “*beur*” becomes “*rebeu*.” This latter example points to efforts behind *verlan* to continuously problematize language as well as identity. *Verlan* also functions to give the *banlieue* youth, including *Beurs*, a unique voice and access to a creative space. One linguist gives the following account of a *Beur* teenager she interviewed: “*Saïd prend un plaisir évident à raconter ses ‘petites histoires,’ à manier un langage dont il est maître, à égarer ses auditeurs dans un univers à l’envers ; puis à aller les chercher en retournant ses mots à l’endroit pour qu’ils puissent suivre... Cette fonction poétique est peut-être aussi importante que sa fonction référentielle*” (Hargreaves 29) [“*Saïd clearly takes pleasure in recounting his ‘little stories,’ handling a language of which he is master, misleading his listeners into a universe of reversals; then, retrieving them by turning his words back around so that they can follow... This poetic*

function is perhaps just as important as its referential function.”] Verlan is, therefore, not only a form of self-amusement but also a skill which gives power to its possessors.

### ***Verlan and Vernacularity in Beur Literature: Faïza Guène***

The presence of verlan and of other forms of slang play a large role in Beur fiction, especially as the novels are increasingly rooted in a diverse, but youth-dominated *banlieue* culture. Faïza Guène is a prime example of this sort of writing, emerging herself from a childhood in the banlieues and publishing her first successful novel at the age of nineteen. This book, *Kiffe Kiffe Demain*, tells with a mixture of cynicism and hope the tale of a teenage girl of Moroccan origin living outside of Paris. As narrator and protagonist, Doria points insightfully to the failures of a modern French state and displays an uncommon level of intellectual criticism. On the other hand, her voice is mostly couched in the vocabulary of her generation and social group. Slang, hyperbole and a sometimes biting humor characterize her narration and strike the reader with a convincingly youthful voice. The notion of a child’s brutal honesty emerges as the most effective manner of persuading readers and conveying truth—a idea which the narrator herself promotes (105).

The particular vocabulary used by Doria is like that which influences and draws inspiration from the rap culture. Slang, vulgarities, shortened words, English and Arabic borrowings, and verlan are all present. As is the case with many French rap artists, we see in Doria (and by extension, in Guène) an intentional effort to play with language, to in the same moment undermine its rigidity and render it more colorful and rich. Guène speaks of this very linguistic transformation in an interview; she references a scene in the novel in which Doria’s Aunt Zohra mispronounces certain French words and incites the joking of her children who say that she “fait des remix de la langue de Molière” (Guène 36) [is remixing the language of

Molière]. Questioned on this point, Guène responds, “En effet, je remixe la langue française en lui donnant des couleurs différentes de celles dont on la pare à Saint Germain des Près” (Ceia-Minjares 96) [Indeed, I am remixing the French language by giving it different colors than those we may find at St. Germain des Près [a well-known and wealthier quarter of Paris]].

The “color” of Guène’s language is so present throughout the novel, that it is necessary to examine some longer passages. This first comes from a scene in the classroom, in which Doria incites the ire of her teacher:

Elle m’avait engueulée parce qu’à mon tour de lecture, au lieu de prononcer Job, j’ai dit « Djob ». Je l’ai prononcé à l’anglaise. Et cette vieille folle de Mme Jacques, elle m’a accusée de « souiller notre belle langue » et d’autres trucs aussi débiles. J’y peux rien, je savais pas qu’il existait ce type-là, Job. « Parr votrrre faute, la patrrrimoine frfrançais est dans le coma ! » (156)

[She told me off because when it was my turn to read, instead of saying Job [with a soft French □], I said “Djob.” I pronounced it the English way. And the old madwoman Mrs. Jacques accused me of “contaminating our beautiful language” and other idiotic things like that. There’s nothing I can do, I didn’t know that he existed, this Job. “Because of you, the French heritage is in a coma.”]

This last phrase is written with an excess of r’s, indicating the teacher’s pronunciation to “perfection” of the standard French. In this short quote, Doria reveals some of her frustrations with language, especially within the context of a snobbish educational system. Her teacher continues to perpetuate the ideals of an established, inviolable French language, which is in danger of being sullied. Though the teacher does not clarify, it seems that Doria’s ethnic “other” status or, perhaps also, her status as a youth from the projects makes her a threat to this sacred form of French. It is also important to see how Doria tells this anecdote. As is true of the entire novel, she writes mostly in the informal register and with a tone of exasperation. She uses a number of slang terms, including “engueuler” (which can mean “to tell someone off” or “to give someone hell”), she refers to her teacher as a madwoman, and she continues to omit the standard “ne” of French negation. Some of the same themes continue in the following quote, in which

Doria references Mrs. Burlaud, the welfare worker with whom she meets weekly and who is supposed to help Doria become less “withdrawn” at school.

Elle vient d’un autre temps. Je le vois bien quand je lui parle, je suis obligée de faire attention à tout ce que je dis. Je peux pas placer un seul mot de verlan ou un truc un peu familier pour lui faire comprendre au mieux ce que je ressens...Quand ça m’échappe et que je dis « vénère » ou « chelou », elle comprend autre chose ou bien elle fait sa tête de perf. Faire sa tête de perf, ça veut dire faire une tête d’idiot, parce que les classes de perf (perfectionnement), à l’école primaire, c’étaient les classes des enfants les plus en retards, ceux qui avaient de grosses difficultés. Alors on dit « perf » pour signaler à quelqu’un qu’il est un peu con quand même... (180)

[She comes from another era. I can tell when I talk to her, I have to pay attention to everything I say. I can’t use a single word of verlan or anything slightly familiar in order to better explain what I feel...When something escapes me and I say [the verlan word for] “annoyed” or “shady”, she hears something else or else she makes a “perf” face. A “perf” face means to put on a dumb look, because in elementary school the “perf” classes (perfectionnement) [meaning improvement] were the classes for the kids falling behind, those who had big problems. So we say “perf” to let someone know he’s kind of an idiot....]

This quote firmly situates Doria within the context of a younger generation, which finds it difficult to identify with the older generation—this in turn helps to place the novel in a global context, for such is the generation gap across the world. On the other hand, Doria talks at length of Mrs. Burlaud’s cliché phrases and ineffective tests, which seem directly related to the inefficiencies and detachment of the French welfare system (much like the failures of the educational system). Doria finds a way to get along with Mrs. Burlaud but, as she explains in this quote, she is incapable of using her habitual vocabulary which would go right over the head of Mrs. Burlaud. Doria explains that her use of slang, and especially verlan, is a powerful vector of meaning—even suggesting that the standard French lacks tools as versatile as those in the informal register. In addition to the verlan words Doria mentions in this paragraph, she also gives a sort of dictionary entry for a slang term, which as a shortened form of a French word has taken on an ironic, contradictory sense. Such a moment demonstrates Doria and her counterparts’ creative interaction with language; in this case, by shortening a lengthy word, they twist its meaning and make a mockery of its cliché connotations. Moreover, they are perfectly

able of defining this as an active process, which would challenge the notion of slang as a lazy or degraded form of a “higher,” formal speech.

To give another snapshot of the language color in Guène’s novel, following are some words and phrases that make an appearance in the work, incorporating slang, verlan, English, and Arabic: *relou* (verlan for *lourd* meaning “heavy, serious”), *ouf* (verlan for *fou*, “crazy”), *chétane* (spelling of the Arabic word for “Satan”), “foutre la merde” (meaning “stir up shit”), *overbooké* (Anglicism for “overbooked”), “*Quelle \*\*\*\*\**” (her very own self-censorship in a moment of anger), *toubab* (taken from a West African dialect, meaning “white person”). The latter example highlights the increasing cultural mixing in the banlieues, where there are not only large numbers of those of Maghreb origin but also those of other Francophone African countries. Indeed, even though most of those closest to Doria are of North African roots, the novel takes on a tour of a diverse setting with issues that go beyond that of her experience of North African culture. Even if we may consider Guène a *beur* author, it is not impossible to situate her into the notion of *banlieue* writing as well. One particular scene highlights the diversity of Doria’s environment as well as the rejection of that environment by the dominant culture in France. She describes some scenes from her childhood and her inability to interact with children from the wealthier quarter next to her neighborhood; she remarks, “Ils n’avaient rien compris à la mixité sociale et au mélange des cultures” (90) [“They didn’t understand anything about social diversity or the mixing of cultures”]. More than this, the city has even constructed a stone wall which separates her low-income apartments from the surrounding neighborhoods:

Pire que la ligne Maginot ou le mur de Berlin. Sur la façade du côté de la cité, y a plein de tags, des dessins et des affiches de concerts et soirées orientales diverses, des graffitis à la gloire de Saddam Hussein ou de Che Guevara, des marques de patriotisme, « Viva Tunisia », « Sénégal représente », et même des phrases extraites de chansons de rap à coloration philosophique. Mais moi, ce que je préfère sur le mur, c’est un vieux dessin qui est là depuis longtemps, bien avant l’ascension du rap ou le début de la guerre en Irak. Il représente un ange menotté avec une croix rouge sur la bouche.

It's worse than the Maginot line or the Berlin wall. On the side facing the projects, there are lots of tags, drawings and posters for concerts and different oriental soirées, there's graffiti praising Saddam Hussein or Che Guevara, some patriotic signs, "Viva Tunisia", "Senegal represent," and even phrases from rap songs with philosophical undertones. But what I like most on the wall is an old drawing that has been there for a long time, well before the rise of rap or the beginning of the war in Iraq. It is of a handcuffed angel with a red cross on her mouth.

Here, we see the rebellious, yet ultimately invisible response of the people of the *banlieue* to their disconnection from society; what resonates most with Doria is an image which combines symbols of innocence and health with those of bondage and silence. This quote also begins to illustrate Geiser's notion of world literature, with its representation of culturally diverse community. Indeed, throughout the work, Guène writes from the voice of a child fully exposed to a modern, globalizing world and, particularly, to the effects of popular culture. From this, we see the influence of the English language on the narrator's vocabulary—even more so than an influence of Arabic—as well her constant references to popular media (television, books, magazines). One passage illustrates Doria's exposure to pop culture and her tendency to build dreams for a future life off images she has consumed in the media. In the passage, the family social worker has just come to Doria's house and has insinuated that Doria's placement in a beauty school was a consequence of laziness. Doria writes,

Alors, là, je l'ai jouée hollywoodienne. Je l'ai fixée bien droit dans les yeux et je lui ai fait avec de l'émotion dans la voix et la larmichette au coin d'œil : « Vous en êtes sûre ? » Comment je te l'ai déstabilisée l'assistante électronique là ! Après, elle avait plus rien à dire...

Je devrais peut-être faire ça au fond. Jouer la comédie. Faire du cinéma, c'est la classe quand même. Je connaîtrais la gloire, l'argent, les récompenses... Je me vois déjà au festival de Cannes, prendre la pose et sourire au troupeau de photographes en train de me flasher, habillée comme Sissi dans *Sissi impératrice*. D'un geste nonchalant, je saluerais la foule venue m'acclamer. Non, parce que tous ces gens, c'est pour moi qu'ils seraient là et pas pour Nicole Kidman, Julia Roberts... (145-6)

[So then, I played her Hollywood-style. I looked her straight in the eyes and said with lots of emotion in my voice and a little tear in my eye: "Are you sure?" And that really threw her off, the robot! Afterward, she had nothing else to say...

Maybe I could actually do this sort of thing. Be a comedian. Make movies, it's classy at any rate. I would come to know glory, riches, achievements... I see myself now at the Cannes Film Festival, posing and smiling at the hoard of photographers, cameras all pointed at me, dressed like Sissi in *Sissi Impératrice*. With a nonchalant wave, I would greet the crowd come to acclaim me. Because all these people would be there for me, not for Nicole Kidman or Julia Roberts.]

These sort of hyperbolic fantasies are not uncommon to *Kiffe Kiffe Demain*. They are not the signs of a character who has her head in the clouds, but rather of an imaginative nature which envisions a life different than her own. Though Doria does not ultimately model her life off what she sees in Hollywood, it is nevertheless significant that movie and television stars are her points of reference. This places her in a larger context of youth, primarily in the Western world but also across the globe, who increasingly negotiate identity based on what is seen on the screen and heard through sound bites.

Again, the novel does not end with Doria's pursuing a career in comedy or acting, and instead she must repeatedly face the practical realities of a harsh world. However, these dreams of hers highlight a capacity to envision a positive future. Indeed, as the novel progresses she adopts a more and more hopeful outlook with regards to the lives of her and her mother, a development that is far from present in certain *beur* novels, including Belghoul's *Georgette!*. As the passage above suggests, Doria does not embrace a totally forgiving posture to those around her; her attitude is particularly acerbic with regard to persons in official positions. Yet, she begins to see a more friendly face in the France of her everyday life. New characters appear on the scene who show kindness to her family and a willingness to participate in cultural exchange. Also, the transformation of Doria's mother, who has found a more fulfilling job, begun learning how to read and write, and supports herself and her daughter all alone—this helps Doria to reevaluate some of the positive aspects of living in France and spurs her on to be an active participant in society, not just a critic of it. In the last chapter she even begins to envision a future in politics and social activism, imagining herself leading an “intelligent revolt” out of the *banlieues* (193).

The whole of Guène's novel is defined by an undoing and a recreation of standards or expectations. Doria herself learns to re-imagine her environment and expect more from it and, meanwhile, her character stands in defiance of the stereotypes regarding a troubled urban youth. She is acutely perceptive of the realities around her, even though her response is sometimes cloaked in hyperbole or exasperation. And while the language that characterizes the novel may seem to set it below the level of standard French literature, its creativity cannot be denied. Doria (and Guène through her) plays with the French language and continuously puts it into a more global context. Even the title of the novel is a remix of sorts, taken from a moment when Doria is deciding to change her tune on life. The phrase "kif-kif" is taken from Arabic and has entered familiar French, often couple with the word "demain" (tomorrow) to mean something to the effect of "same old, same old." Doria, however, decides to start writing the phrase differently—as "kiffe kiffe demain," making use of the familiar French word "kiffer" for "to like" or "to love" (192). Even as she makes fun of herself in making this change, it affirms her transformation from an earlier fatalistic outlook. What is unique about Doria's new phrase is the way in which it mixes numerous languages and registers. The original phrase was already a mixture of Arabic and French vocabulary, but in her "remix" she makes it even more French, while still maintaining its original Arabic essence (the pronunciation would remain the same). She also reaffirms the familiar usage of this phrase by choosing to insert a French term that is mostly associated with youthful parlance (as opposed to the traditional "aimer" for "to love.") "Demain," on the other hand, has no particular correlation to slang or familiar speech. In the final phrase, Doria plants her outlook for "tomorrow" in a language concoction that is at the same time formal and familiar, French and "foreign."

## VI. Conclusion

In moving from Begag to Belghoul to Guène, readers can see how differently individual Beur authors approach their work. All three authors certainly reflect on the coming-of-age experience of North African descendants living in France, and on the to-and-from passage across social, historical, cultural and linguistic lines. Moreover, all of them envision for their characters a positive construction of identity *in France* and as participants in French society, even while championing their unique ethnic status. On this last note, it may seem that Belghoul does not see eye-to-eye with the others, for her narrator fails to maintain such a vision of positive identity. Yet, even in the destructive forces at play in this character's life, we can see a desire, though a strangled one, of reconciling opposites, of taking what is good in the classroom and what is good at home and making them both her own. It is also important to note that the characters in the other two novels do not come to a perfect realization of a reconciled identity. The young Azouz finds an outlet for self-expression in the classroom and even begins to address social injustice through his school work. However, Mr. Loubon—the teacher who supports Azouz's writing and encourages him to explore his ethnic heritage—this man is most likely an exception to the rule. It is clear from the last page, when their landlord ask Begag's father when he will be returning to his country, that Azouz inhabits a world which rejects alternative ethnic status. Similarly, in Guène's work, Doria begins to imagine mobilizing the multi-ethnic community around her to demand a fuller integration into France. But this vision implies a certain level of stagnation on the part of France in addressing marginalization, and it also hints at the failure of minority communities to dissent intelligently, instead resorting to violence (for instance in the riots of 2005).

In all three of these stories, nevertheless, protagonists seek to negotiate identity by means of language. *Georgette!*'s narrator attempts to bridge the divide between the orality of her parent's generation and the written education so vital to success in France. Azouz vacillates between Arabic and French-speaking worlds and also must serve as intermediary between a mostly illiterate parent generation and the world of literacy. Even at a young age, he is attempting to appropriate the educational advantages of life in France and write about his experience. Finally, Doria inhabits a space which is perhaps less Arab-centric than that of her predecessors, but the cultural and linguistic milieu of the *banlieues* is extremely diverse. She reflects this multiplicity in her language practices, which are immersed in the vernacular tendencies of her peer group and filtered through the lens of global popular culture. In *Guène*, we see most how the voice of the youth traverses borders and may resonate in the minds of an international community. The widespread acceptance of her novel also reflects an evolution at the heart of French literature which is, if only slightly, beginning to accept the possibility of a multicultural model. This certainly bodes well for the future of understanding minority identity not only in France but also across the world.

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