Two Texts From the Banlieue

Shantytown Kid:
Le Gone du Chaâba

Azouz Begag
Translated by Alec Hargreaves and Naïma Wolf
Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 2007
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Ethnicity and Equality:
France in the Balance

Azouz Begag
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Reviewed by Gretchen Head

Over two and a half years ago, on October 27, 2005, France saw the eruption of a series of riots the likes of which it had not experienced since the watershed events of May 1968. Triggered by the electrocution of two boys, Zyed Benna and Bouna Traoré, who had hidden from the police in a power substation in Clichy-sous-Bois, an eastern suburb of Paris, the unrest quickly spread throughout the country, with almost three thousand rioters arrested before order was restored. It is hard not to see the recent English translations of two important works—*Le Gone du Chaâba* and *Ethnicity and Equality: France in the Balance*—by the French novelist, sociologist, and former Minister of Equal Opportunities Azouz Begag as directly connected to these events. The impetus underlying the translators' decision, however, is of course beside the point. The result is the availability of two books to an English-speaking audience that are immensely topical in light of the pervasiveness of debate around immigration and national identity in contemporary Europe, and that possess the added advantage of being both eloquently written and remarkably accessible.

Le Gone du Chaâba, translated by Alec G. Hargreaves and Naïma Wolf as *Shantytown Kid*, was originally published in France in 1986, where it rapidly became a

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bestseller. Written in an almost hybrid French that includes words from Arabic, Lyonnais slang, and long heavily accented dialogues rendered phonetically, *Shantytown Kid* is, essentially, an autobiographical novel that relates the author's experiences growing up in a cluster of self-constructed shacks on the outskirts of Lyon, France's third largest city. The first part of the novel takes place exclusively within this area, called Le Chaâba, an Arabic word which, in the dialect of Begag's parents from the northeastern Algerian province of Sétif, refers to "a patch of spare land containing roughly improvised dwellings." Le Chaâba, incongruously located on the margins of a major French metropolitan center, is a fundamentally important sociocultural space in the novel that will undoubtedly stand in stark contrast to whatever image the reader already has of France, a country whose basic socio-political position at the forefront of modern Western Europe is hardly debatable.

The discord between Begag's characterization of Le Chaâba and more commonly disseminated literary and cinematic representations of France is something we are made aware of at the very onset of the novel. Le Chaâba is described by the narrator in the following way:

> When you saw Le Chaâba from the top of the embankment that overlooked it or from the large wooden gate at the main entrance, you would have thought it was a lumberyard. Wooden shacks had sprouted up in the garden bordering the original concrete house. The main central alleyway, patched with lumpy concrete, now stood between two enormous stretches of corrugated iron and planks sticking up and out in every direction. (4–5)

This passage is situated between two key opening scenes that serve to both underscore Le Chaâba's centrality in the narrative and give the reader an immediate sense of the shockingly impoverished material conditions of the place. Despite the obvious physical poverty, however, there is not a hint of the despair that we find in a text like Mohamed Choukri's *al-Khubz al-hafi*; rather, events are related with a thoroughly affectionate and light-hearted humor through the voice of the child protagonist bearing the same name as the author, Azouz.

Le Chaâba's conglomeration of dwellings, haphazardly constructed of corrugated iron and misshapen wooden planks, lacks even the most rudimentary signifiers of developed infrastructure; there is no electricity, nor even the most basic plumbing. We realize this as soon as the story commences at Le Chaâba's sole water source, *l'bomba*, a hand pump that, through no small amount of effort, draws drinking water from the Rhône. Azouz begins his story by describing his aunt Zidouma, solidly rooted at the pump, washing her laundry by hand at an agonizingly slow pace while her neighbor and adversary waits behind her for her turn, completely ignored. Eventually, in a scene reminiscent of director Yamina Benguigui's *Inch'Allah Dimanche*, the unnamed neighbor charges, attacking Zidouma and engaging her in a full-blown physical confrontation that several of the other women are quick to join. The curses heatedly exchanged are colorful and the scene theatrical and comical, giving the reader his or her first introduction to Le Chaâba.

This boisterous clash between the women of the neighborhood's rival clans is directly followed by a description of one of the more unsavory aspects of living in Le

Chaâba: "The men of Le Chaâba had recently dug a big hole in the garden and placed in it a large empty heating oil drum, open at the top. Over this tank they had built a shelter from planks. The shantytown now had its sanitary installation" (5). The narrative then moves to a scene in which the young Azouz is forced to venture out to the ad hoc toilet in the dark by himself, without the aid of the oil lamp he would ordinarily bring with him. Some predictably gruesome but uproarious events result, with our protagonist ultimately soaked in the discarded contents of his Uncle Ali's chamber pot.

For the first part of the novel, events like the above are relayed to the reader as the most average experiences intrinsic to the process of growing up; the sense of surprise and wonderment embedded in their narration comes exclusively from the child's perspective from which they are told. It is the universally marvelous quality of childhood that Azouz conveys; the narrator has no consciousness of the "difference" inherent in his situation in these early stages of the novel. By writing what is in many ways a classic coming-of-age story, as reminiscent in spirit of Truffaut's *Les Quatre Cents Coups* as of any works that are specifically Arab or North African, Begag has successfully avoided producing a *misérabiliste* depiction of France's immigrant community. In this way, *Shantytown Kid* stands out from the ever growing genre of *beur* literature that often relies on stereotypical portrayals of immigrants as the passive victims of economic hardship and societal racism.

This is not to say, however, that the socioeconomic problems faced by the North African community in France are absent, or insignificant, in the text. Azouz describes how, as he began to attend the *école primaire* Léo-Lagrange, his awareness of the gulf separating his life from that of mainstream French society began to grow. It is specifically during his daily etiquette and hygiene lesson that this feeling becomes particularly acute:

> [The teacher] started talking about correct behavior, as was his habit every morning since I had moved up to his school. And, as every morning, I blushed as I listened to his words. There was a veritable *oued* (river) separating what he said from what I was used to doing in the street. I was simply a disgrace where correct behavior was concerned. A discussion started between the French pupils and the teacher. . . . We Arab kids had nothing to say. (44–45)

He realizes, uncomfortably, the degree to which his teachers and French classmates would disapprove of life in Le Chaâba. As Alec Hargreaves notes in his introduction, at home, Begag had been learning the moral codes and behavioral norms of his parents' Algerian village. At Léo-Lagrange, he is not only exposed for almost the first time to those codes of behavior understood as correct by the majority ethnic French, but he is expected to internalize and reproduce them as his own. And more than this, he is suddenly made cognizant of significant gaps in his French vocabulary; a surprise to the young narrator, as he was born in France, and it is there that he has lived his entire life. During these lessons, he repeatedly attempts to participate only to fail to be understood because he discovers that there are a number of common everyday items such as "washcloth" for which he only knows the word in Arabic.

Unlike his Arab classmates, however, who react to their feelings of exclusion by banding together and rejecting in full everything transmitted to them by a teacher who forces them to repeat, typically, "We are all descendents of Vercingétorix," the young Azouz determines that the path toward upward mobility lies within an unabashed strategy of assimilation (48). He decides early on that "the teacher was always right. If he said we were all descendants of the Gauls, then he was right, and too bad if my folks back home didn't have the same moustaches as theirs" (48). The two worlds that Azouz then inhabits, that of Le Chaâba and that of Léo-Lagrange, coexist tenuously, dependent upon total compartmentalization and segregation. This is, of course, an impossibility, and the moments in which these two different parts of his life collide are some of the novel's most entertaining and interesting sections.

The novel closes in the fall of 1968, shortly after Azouz's family moves from Le Chaâba. After a brief stay in the old working-class neighborhood of La Croix-Rousse, an area centrally located close to the historic center of Lyon, the French government forcibly relocates them to a new housing project in Vaulx-en-Velin, an outlying eastern suburb. The timeframe of the narrative and its larger context span the history of Algerian migration patterns to France and the trajectories of these families once there. Azouz's father, for example, came to France in 1947 as part of the wave of post-war immigration that brought an unprecedented number of Algerians to the country. In the years immediately following World War II, these workers, who were initially thought to be temporary, were not, in fact, considered immigrants, as Algeria was officially an essential part of metropolitan France. Because of this, and the severe labor shortages suffered by France after the war, they were granted special travel and work privileges. Very little was done to accommodate them once they arrived, however. Neighborhoods like Le Chaâba, referred to as *bidonvilles* and resembling the shantytowns found in any number of developing countries, sprung up throughout France. A report by the Ministry of the Interior, quoted in Richard L. Derderian's *North Africans in Contemporary France: Becoming Visible*, states that in 1966 "these *bidonvilles* housed some 75,000 people—a number that may in reality have been three times higher" (Derderian 2004, 8). Throughout the late 1960s and 1970s, the government began to relocate these communities to public housing projects on the periphery of major French cities, like the one in which Azouz's family is ultimately placed in Vaulx-en-Velin. These are the quarters that have become today's much discussed *banlieues*.

In *Ethnicity and Equality: France in the Balance*, Begag takes on the subject of the troubled spaces of France's *banlieues* and the social inequalities with which their residents are forced to contend directly. As Hargreaves explains in his introduction, just a few days before Begag joined the government as minister for equal opportunities in 2005, he had completed a manuscript analyzing the continuing injustices suffered by France's citizens of North African origin. The subject became undeniably pressing almost immediately thereafter—far more quickly than even Begag himself could have anticipated—when a few short months later the above-mentioned riots began. Directly after the riots, Begag added a preface to the manuscript, establishing the connection of those events to the deep-rooted societal problems explored in his text.

Uncharacteristically available in English translation before even its original French, due to the translator's access to the unpublished text, it is this manuscript that has just been released as *Ethnicity and Equality*.

Despite its often highly sensitive sociological and political analysis, *Ethnicity and Equality* is not an academic study. It is, rather, a portrait of the children, or grandchildren, of France's North African immigrants, for whom Begag has coined the term *jeunes ethniques* (young ethnics). The text is often autobiographical and anecdotal in nature and in many of the book's chapters Begag has little interest in even the thinnest guise of academic objectivity or neutrality. This is neither a criticism, nor particularly uncommon, for even in a text as canonical as Frantz Fanon's *Wretched of the Earth* we find a similar disinterest in the projection of a sense of detachment from its subject matter that would only be disingenuous. In the case of *Ethnicity and Equality*, instead of lessening the text's value, the honestly and forthrightness with which it is written is refreshing.

The text is divided into seven chapters, each dealing with life in the *banlieue* from a slightly different angle. The way in which the first chapter, "Fear of the Police," is structured is typical of Begag's approach throughout the book. He begins with the following admission: "As the son of an Algerian immigrant, I've always been afraid of the police. I always felt a natural, instinctive fear rooted in a distant past that went way beyond me" (7). He then relates two recent personal anecdotes, the first of which involves a random identity check being conducted in the streets of Lyon. This identity check, far from his first, leads Begag to an epiphany in which he suddenly realizes that, as a man who is now fifty years old, he has passed the stage in his life when he had reason to fear the racial profiling that targets younger men and has been known to lead to the kind of police excesses and racist insults that characterized his youth in the housing project of Vaulx-en-Velin. After recognizing that the sense of fear and unease he had always felt when confronted with the state authorities is gone, he observes: "My 'integration,' as the phrase goes, had now entered a new phase. I told myself it was now time to lead the rest of my life free from the burden that I had carried until then of being seen as a foreigner and feeling like a victim" (8).

This feeling of relief is short-lived, however, for a couple of days later he is stopped by a female officer while inadvertently driving with his fog lights on. Though he is hardly subjected to physical abuse during the confrontation that ensues, he is nevertheless subtly insulted, condescended to, and accused of having stolen the car that he is driving. That Begag—an advisor to Dominique de Villepin on strategies to promote equal opportunities within the police force—is still forced to suffer humiliation at the hands of a twenty-five-year old low-ranking police officer, is something that cannot fail to produce a strong physical and emotional reaction in the author. He leaves the interaction feeling sick and agitated, but also wondering what he must represent to her in order to elicit treatment so needlessly contemptuous. It is this question that leads into the essay that comprises the rest of the chapter—a meditation on the historical relationship between Algerian immigrants and the police from the 1960s to the present day. It is, to a large degree, this kind of intermingling of the personal and historical that makes *Ethnicity and Equality* such a pleasure to read.

Like many French citizens of North African origin, Begag feels a keen affinity with the American civil rights movement of the 1960s. A common oversight among scholars and critics who write about *beur* literature in general can be seen in the predominant focus on drawing parallels between the work of *beur* writers and works produced in Arab countries, whether these are written in Arabic or French. What is often neglected is that the key influences for many writers of North African origin in France can be found, instead, within the tradition of African American literature, because it is here that many of them find the experiences that they feel correspond most intimately to their own. Throughout *Ethnicity and Equality* this is a subject Begag returns to again and again. He cites the first book, for example, that for him elicited a strong emotional response rooted in a clear sense of identification; the book was *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, which he read as an adolescent. It is within this text that he both saw the likeness of his father in the poverty-stricken, yet generous protagonist, and recognized himself for the first time as a person of color.

Throughout *Ethnicity and Equality* he is quick to note the resemblances between the historical narratives of these two communities. He points out that while France never institutionalized slavery on its own soil, the practice thrived within its colonies until 1848, a date not significantly earlier than the abolition of slavery in the United States. Further, he sees a strong congruence between the institutionalized racism practiced in the American South until the middle of the twentieth century and that practiced by the French in colonial Algeria until approximately the same time. Even in his father's migration to Lyon, catalyzed by the desire to escape the poverty and injustice of French-controlled Algeria, he finds a parallel with the Great Migration of African Americans who, in the early part of the twentieth century, migrated from the rural South to the industrial cities of the North. He highlights one central difference, however, the effects of which he believes continue to contribute to the problems still in existence in France today: After desegregation and the establishment of policies of integration and affirmative action in the United States, changes stemming from these policies were seen not only in the South, but in the North, where discrimination in other forms had hardly been absent. Here, he finds no such parallel for North Africans in France. While decolonization brought an end to institutionalized racism in Algeria—his analogy's equivalent to the American South—nothing was done to address the problem in France itself.

This is what Begag is calling for today. He points to the absurdity of the current government usage of the word "integration" to describe what should be a straightforward policy of equalization. It is hardly integration that the "young ethnics" of France's *banlieues* need; they are French by birth and already a part of French society, even if they are not recognized as such. But he also rejects the term "positive discrimination," the French translation of affirmative action, which has come to suggest too much conflict between majority and minority ethnic groups. He begins by suggesting something as basic as ethnic monitoring, a practice all but unheard of in France, where, since 1789, everyone has theoretically shared the same status as free citizen, the result of which is that ethnic affiliations are never recorded. Overall, it is a highly sensitive issue for the Republic, which finds itself in the unenviable position of rejecting any form of ethnic

communalism on moral grounds while nevertheless carrying the weight of a history of an often severe racism that continues to affect nearly every level of its society today. As Begag observes, one way or the other, the playing field undoubtedly needs to be leveled. *Ethnicity and Equality* is an admirable contribution to the continuing dialogue on how to achieve that goal. ♦