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Laura Reeck, *Writerly Identities in Beur Fiction and Beyond*. Lanham, Md.: Lexington Books, 2011. xv + 191 pp. Notes, bibliography, and index. \$65 U.S. (cl). ISBN 978-0-7391-4361-2.

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The field of Beur studies that emerged some twenty-five years ago has understandably focused on the social conditions of the *banlieues défavorisées* and the marginalization of the children and grand-children of Maghrebi immigrants in French society. Born out of the struggle for equality undertaken by second-generation Maghrebi immigrants in the 1980s, Beur literature and film (as well as rap and hip-hop culture) have sought to represent, contest, and performatively reverse the marginalization of *banlieue* youth. One of the main agendas of Beur and *banlieue* activists has been to carve out a space within French society, not in order to set up a competing “community,” as some would have it, but rather to point to the paradoxes of Republican universalism and provoke the recognition of diversity within the republic. As these activists often reiterate in their work, in the blogosphere, and in the media, they aspire to achieve a real universalism, premised on equality and difference, rather than cultural homogeneity. Though politicians, commentators, and academics alike have often interpreted their political demands as claims to a distinct identity (what the French call “*communautarisme*”) Beur and *banlieue* activists have consistently countered that their aim is to be recognized as French—with all of their particularities, rather than stripped of them.

Laura Reeck’s *Writerly Identities in Beur Fiction and Beyond* parses the emergence of Beur and *banlieue* voices, poised between the struggle for recognition of particular identities and the desire for an authentic universalism. In this she follows a well-established body of criticism in the multidisciplinary field of Beur studies, ranging from sociologists Abdelmalek Sayad’s and Ahmed Boubeker’s writings on immigration to Alec G. Hargreaves’ seminal work on Beur fiction and Carrie Tarr’s studies of *banlieue* film. [1] Reeck adds a new perspective to this body of work, tracing the political impact of Beur and *banlieue* writers through the emergence of authorial voices in their work: the processes, methods, and *mise en abyme* of writing in Beur and *banlieue* fiction. Without neglecting the central importance of these writers’ social and economic conditions or the political and historical context in which they write, Reeck focuses on the world of their fiction and their writerly itineraries, seen as their principal weapons in the literary struggle for recognition and equality.

Far from downplaying these authors’ socio-political agendas, Reeck’s insistence on the art of writing provides a larger frame of reference in which to read them, placing them within a well-established French and Francophone tradition of political literature. To this effect, she explicitly invokes the legacy of *littérature engagée*, analyzing Beur literature through the lens of Jean-Paul Sartre and Albert Camus (pp. 16-18) and, following the lead of contemporary writers themselves, comparing *banlieue* fiction to socially committed nineteenth-century realist and naturalist authors (pp. 13, 166). By placing these authors within a canonic French literary tradition, Reeck satisfies one of the main demands of Beur and *banlieue* writers, but in the domain of literary criticism: in her reading, their works are an integral part of French literature.

*Writerly Identities* consists of a series of close readings of both well and less well-known writers (Azouz Begag, Farida Belghoul, Leïla Sebbar, Saïd Mohamed, Rachid Djaidani, and Mohamed Razane), chosen for their use of the *Bildungsroman* form and their staging of writing and authorship. Organized in three roughly chronological sections, each of which has a thematic focus (institutions of authorship, writerly itineraries, and writing from the margins) the book begins with early Beur novels and ends with contemporary fiction, spanning three generations of Franco-Maghrebi writers. Two key dates frame this exploration of Beur and *banlieue* fiction: the 1983 March for Equality and Against Racism, better known as the *Marche des Beurs*, which symbolically marked the birth of the Beur movement; and the riots that broke out in October 2005 after the death of two teenagers fleeing the police in a Parisian *banlieue*. Each of these events captures the mood of the *banlieues* at the time, from optimism and political militancy in the mid-1980s to pessimism and violence in the new millennium. Though Reeck acknowledges this shift in tone, which corresponds to the very real deterioration of life in the *banlieues*, she insists on the parallels between the writerly processes of second, third, and fourth-generation immigrants, focusing on “a social strand of Beur fiction” that traverses the entire period (p. 20).

The subtitle of her book, “in Beur Fiction and Beyond,” acknowledges the shifting self-designations by immigrant youth. Reeck analyzes the term “Beur” as an attempt by immigrant youth to reclaim the racial appellation “Arab” in the language of the *banlieue*, the backslang known as *verlan*. Though mainstream appropriations of the term “Beur” quickly made its use suspect, if not illegitimate—leading to an ironic reversal of the *verlan* word “Beur” to the term “Reubeu”—Reeck convincingly argues for its ongoing historical validity as a term coined and initially endorsed by *banlieue* youth, choosing to discard the scare quotes that now frame most discussions of Beur literature (p. 4). Like the contemporary writers she discusses, however, she is more skeptical about the expression “*écrivains de banlieue*,” which, while eschewing the trap of racial or ethnic identification, threatens to permanently relegate this writing to the margins of French culture, countering efforts to pluralize it from within (pp. 12, 148). The expression “Beur fiction and beyond” captures this ambiguity while insisting on the continuities linking Beur authors and contemporary *banlieue* writers—despite the latter’s reluctance to be associated with the former. Though Reeck does not explicitly analyze this generational break, her readings suggest that the appellation “Beur” is overly ethnic or particular for the new generation, and thus counterproductive vis-à-vis its universalist aspirations.

The first two chapters of *Writerly Identities* focus on the question of assimilation and integration, particularly through school, and the difficult coexistence of languages and cultures (French and Arabic, written and oral) in Begag’s and Belghoul’s novels. Though Reeck is careful not to collapse author, narrator, and author-character, distancing herself from the tendency to read Beur and *banlieue* fiction as autobiographical (p. 16), she discusses the fiction of these two authors in relation to their political engagements, as well as their political and literary reception (or lack thereof, in the case of Belghoul.) While Begag has been able to advance his political agenda from within the French government in recent years (2004–2007), Belghoul was involved with grassroots activists in the early 1980s. And though Reeck discusses critiques of Begag—he has been accused by some of betraying the *banlieue*—she highlights his unraveling of the discourse of integration, pointing to parallels between his and Belghoul’s novels without diminishing important narrative and stylistic differences. In her reading of Belghoul, Reeck convincingly deploys Jacques Derrida’s and Frantz Fanon’s analyses of language in colonial contexts.<sup>[2]</sup> Given the colonial genealogy of contemporary discussions of integration in France, as well as the importance of fictional representations of French schools in Maghrebi literature, it is somewhat surprising that she does not discuss such important intertexts as Albert Memmi’s *La statue de sel* in her study of Begag’s novels.<sup>[3]</sup> Indeed such a cross-Mediterranean move would have aligned powerfully with her cosmopolitan reading of writerly

itineraries in the fiction of Sebbar and Mohamed, which are the focus on the next part of the book.

Reeck uses the concept of cosmopolitanism to frame the central part of *Writerly Identities* and, to a lesser extent, the project as a whole. Although somewhat less convincing as an interpretive tool for discussing Beur and *banlieue* writing (despite her insistence on a “rooted” or “vernacular” cosmopolitanism, rather than a global one),<sup>[4]</sup> this concept works particularly well for Sebbar, who self-consciously engages with French Orientalist representations, particularly of Algerian women, and conceives of her fiction and essays as a form of travel writing in between her native Algeria and her country of exile, France. Sebbar is exceptional in Reeck’s corpus in that she does not stage a fictionalized author-persona in her novels, partly, it is suggested because she is not part of the Beur generation she writes about. Raised in colonial Algeria by her Algerian father and French mother, her itinerary more closely resembles that of Maghrebi or  *pied-noir* writers who adopted France as their country of residence after independence.

While Mohamed is also of mixed parentage (Moroccan and French), he was born in the *banlieue* and writes what Reeck calls “extroverted autofiction” (p. xiv). As such he “fits” more squarely in the category of Beur and *banlieue* writing than Sebbar. However Reeck’s attention to differences between author, narrator, and author-character allow her to stretch the limits of these artificial categories. Like Sebbar’s heroine, Shérzade, Mohamed’s author-character embarks on a physical and spiritual itinerary (in Arabic, *al-rihla*—it would have been interesting to explore this genre of Arabic travel writing further) that is both a self-discovery and a confrontation with racism and the history of colonialism in France and across the Mediterranean. Fittingly, these two chapters invite other cross-Mediterranean comparisons: Reeck discusses the importance of the Algerian Kabyle writer Mouloud Feraoun in Mohamed’s work (p. 106), and invokes the Moroccan writer Abdelkebir Khatibi to discuss Sebbar’s principal intertext, the *Thousand and One Nights*—a Moroccan-Algerian literary chiasmus that is particularly fitting given the overarching theme of cosmopolitanism. Given that Mohamed is the only author Reeck studies who has no biographical connection to Algeria, however, one would have expected further discussion of the Algeria-centered focus of the book, either in this chapter or in the general introduction. While it is true that, for a number of historical reasons, Algeria has been central in discussions of immigration and racism in France, this centrality needs to be discussed further rather than taken for granted.

The last two chapters of *Writerly Identities* focus on “*banlieue* writers” Djaïdani and Razane, both of whom reject this appellation and insist that they are exploring universal concerns in their fictional representation of the *banlieue*. Reeck’s analysis of Djaïdani’s novel *Boumkoeur* and the documentary film he made about writing it (interestingly, she describes it as “filmic autofiction,” p. 146) centers again on the question of reception, though here she focuses on Djaïdani’s unraveling of stereotypes of the *banlieue*. She continues her analysis of stereotypes in the last chapter, which begins with the 2005 riots. Though the disenfranchisement and violence the riots represent are a central concern in the literature of the new millennium, Reeck shows that emerging voices are reinvesting the collective through the creation of associations such as Razane’s *Qui fait la France?* in an attempt to reclaim a collective voice in an era of disillusionment. It is important to note, as Reeck does, that the field of *banlieue* writing is larger than that of Beur fiction, as it includes writers of non-Maghrebi descent, enabling transversal solidarities to emerge between differently marked groups and individuals (p. 148).

Not surprisingly, new media play an important role for this new generation of writers, and it would have been interesting to discuss *Qui fait la France?* in relation to other cultural and political collectives, given the fluidity and interoperability of associative work in the digital age (Reeck makes passing mention of *Les Indigènes de la république* in another chapter, p. 72). Though

Reeck considers that Begag's 2004 report on integration, "La République à ciel ouvert," prefigures the socio-political concerns of *Qui fait la France?* (p. 174), I would contend that the contrast between Begag's foray into mainstream politics discussed in chapter one and the new wave of political and cultural activism online could not be starker. Reeck might have productively engaged with the contradictions and even conflicts between these vastly different approaches to politics and culture.

One of the strengths of *Writerly Identities* is Reeck's reliance on personal communications and interviews with authors, which leaves the reader feeling quite close to these authors and their process of writing. At the same time, however, one also wonders if Reeck is perhaps somewhat reluctant to engage the polemical aspects of their work. Though she mentions Begag's role in government and Sebbar's involvement with *Ni Putes Ni Soumises*, for example, she does not discuss the controversies surrounding these more mainstream or mediatic engagements, seen by some as a form of "selling-out" or betrayal of the *banlieues*. A non-specialist reader might be led to infer that the field of Beur and *banlieue* writing is more homogeneous or univocal in its aims and methods than it actually is. In addition, although Reeck outlines the historical context of the emergence of Beur and *banlieue* literature in her introduction and at relevant points in the chapters, a novice reader might not fully understand the colonial genealogy of discourses of integration and assimilation, or the decades-old debates on *communitarisme* and national identity.

The lack of discussion of religious, gender, and sexual differences is also somewhat puzzling, especially given the centrality of identity construction in Reeck's account, and the media frenzy surrounding the multiple *affaires du foulard*, or headscarf controversies, that have rattled France for the last twenty-five years. It is understandable that Reeck should have focused first on the issues raised by her authors, many of whom insist on universalism and thus may have opted to stay clear of issues of religious difference, for example, seen as too threatening to the principle of Republican *laïcité*. However the issue of sex and gender is manifestly central not only in Sebbar's work, but also in the writing of Belghoul and Razane, and the question of the gendered (or non) nature of their author-characters' writing itineraries seems too important to bypass.

*Writerly Identities* provides a nuanced presentation of both established and emerging voices of Beur and *banlieue* fiction, and is best suited for an advanced undergraduate course or graduate seminar on Beur and *banlieue* film and fiction. The main strength of *Writerly Identities* lies in Reeck's sophisticated close readings, however, and her focus on the practice and politics of writing in the *banlieue*. As such, it constitutes an important and original contribution to the field of Beur and *banlieue* studies, providing a welcome break from the autobiographical interpretations that prevail in the mainstream reception of these works--when they are read, that is. Reeck makes a convincing case for including Beur and *banlieue* writing not only in French literature, but also in *la littérature-monde* (pp. 14, 21), and it can be hoped that her book will contribute to give these authors, particularly the less well-known ones, the universality to which they aspire.

## NOTES

[1] Abdelmalek Sayad, *La double absence: des illusions de l'émigré aux souffrances de l'immigré* (Paris: Seuil, 1999); Ahmed Boubeker, *Les mondes de l'ethnicité: la communauté d'expériences des héritiers de l'immigration maghrébine* (Paris: Balland, 2003); Alec G. Hargreaves, *Immigration and Identity in Beur Fiction: Voices from the North Africa Immigrant Community in France* (Oxford and New York: Berg, 1997); Carrie Tarr, *Reframing Difference: Beur and Banlieue Filmmaking in France* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2005).

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[2] Jacques Derrida, *Le monolinguisme de l'autre, ou, la prothèse de l'origine* (Paris: Galilée, 1996); Frantz Fanon, *Peau noire, masques blancs* (Paris: Seuil, 1995).

[3] Albert Memmi, *La statue de sel* (Paris: Gallimard, 1966).

[4] Reeck borrows the notion of “rooted cosmopolitanism” from Homi Bhabha and “vernacular cosmopolitanism” from Kwame Anthony Appiah (p. 173). Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London and New York: Routledge, 1994); Appiah, *The Ethics of Identity* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005).

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