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Stève Puig, *Littérature urbaine et mémoire postcoloniale*, Paris: L'Harmattan, 2019. 262pp. Notes and bibliography. 27.00€. (pb). ISBN 978-2-343-17300-9.

Review by Anna-Louise Milne, University of London Institute in Paris.

What sort of category is “*banlieue* literature”? Stève Puig’s study has the merit of asking this question from a number of angles, setting it up within its proximities to “*beur* literature” and “*urban* literature.” Puig drives this discussion towards a preference for “*urban* literature,” which he justifies in part by a putative emergence of the adjective “*urban*” in a number of contexts around the period that will be his focus, i.e. the early 2000s (“*violences urbaines*,” “*émeutes urbaines*”; p. 13), and in part because it is less negatively connotated than the word “*banlieue*,” which, he claims, tends instantaneously to evoke images of gratuitous violence and burning cars. In so doing, he evacuates much of the complexity that his own study proceeds to explore, and the extensive treatment he accords to discourses explicitly anchored in references to the *banlieue* is evidence that he knows this. This is a characteristic feature of this book, which contains much interesting material and represents a useful contribution to a field that is still underrepresented in French-language criticism, but nonetheless remains in search of its primary argument.

The latter, he seems to suggest, is that something new happens in literary writing in the wake of the 2005 riots and that this phenomenon can be approached as “*urban* literature.” This something would be related not only to the riots themselves, about which he ultimately says little that is not well known and repeatedly summarized in the book, but also and more broadly to the emergence of increasingly forthright demands to address and redress “*postcolonial* memory,” the second component of his title. He writes quite extensively of this process, ranging across work carried out in a number of contexts—political, as well as academic and artistic—since the early 2000s, to remedy deficits in representation and recognition that are part of the ongoing legacy of colonialism in France and its former colonies. These sections of the book, which form the third part of his study, offer a useful survey of the emergence of postcolonial studies in France, which he carefully splits between the more theoretically informed “*post-colonial*,” where he claims the influence of critics such as Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak and Homi K. Bhabha has been important, and the more historical category “*postcolonial*” (p. 103). [1] Little of this material is new as such, but this part of the book brings a variety of critical interventions since the 2000s into purview, including the work of Pascal Blanchard, Nicolas Bancel and Sandrine Lemaire through the ACHAC research group [2], as well as Jean-Marc Moura and Marie-Claude Smouts [3] in order to establish that the *banlieue* is “*une postcolonie interne*” (p. 110) and that “*littérature urbaine*” is “*une riposte postcoloniale*” (p. 114). This position is affirmed specifically in this part of the volume with systematic reference to the presence of colonial memory within the texts by authors Sadri Khiari,

Leila Sebbar, Jean-Eric Boulin, and Ahmed Djouder. Yet if we can discern the contours of a literary movement here, and undoubtedly we can, it is unclear why the frame of reference would not extend to a much broader and more complex configuration of writers. Thus, Puig finds himself having to reach back to Yacine, Glissant, and Sédar Senghor, while he also touches on Didier Daeninckx and Jacques Derrida. Clearly, the phenomenon of the resurgence of postcolonial memory is much more multifarious than its manifestation in “urban literature” by “*les enfants de la décolonisation*.” So if it is to serve as a meaningful category, the latter needs to be anchored in greater specificity. But it never comes entirely clear throughout this book whether Puig wants to claim that his early 2000s corpus is an example or a new departure, and this difficulty is further compounded by the way in which the reference to literature is handled throughout.

Puig moves fluidly between novels, tracts, manifestos, blog interviews, and sociological discussions, tracking the ebb and flow of expression of postcolonial identity. In itself, this helps establish some of the new forms favored by the voices he is interested in. But he also seems to hold on to something specific about the role of literature, which anchors these “new” voices within the realm of literary prestige: “Plus qu’une tendance sociale, la littérature urbaine s’est donc imposée ces dernières années comme un vrai mouvement littéraire avec ses figures de proue, un manifeste et un style qui lui est propre” (p. 83). There is plenty of reason to agree, and Puig’s book cites passages that could serve to illustrate this claim. But his own treatment of these passages systematically pulls them back to their sociological condition, despite his critique of media tendencies to corral these authors into categories whereby they can only speak for their subaltern origins. To address this danger, the study needed to spend a lot more time with the texts themselves, to allow key authors to emerge in their singularity through the complex negotiations in which they are engaged. This would inevitably mean addressing the place of affirmatively literary writing within a broader swathe of cultural and political expression (from documentary filmmaking to rap and sports). That literature might be just one space of transformation for the writers in question—a right to be the new bearers of “*la poésie de la France*” as the manifesto for the collectif *Qui fait la France* puts it (p. 82) is both implied and skated over. In the section dedicated to Yasmina Benguigui, this equivocation between “art” and “sociological survey” even allows Puig a slippery way out of the criticisms leveled at Benguigui’s 2008 documentary *9/3 mémoire d’un territoire* when he claims that what Alain Faure deplored as “*le plus classique misérabilisme*” could be justified by the fact that Benguigui does not position herself as a historian, but as someone sociologically marked by the *banlieue*. How much mileage we can gain from this distinction remains unclear, but it certainly doesn’t get us started with what might be specific—and overlooked by Faure—in Benguigui’s mode of filmic expression. Without this sort of attention, we get thrown back onto a potentially dismissive characterization of “littérature de symptôme, aux effets purement sociologiques.”[4]

This observation brings this reviewer back to the question of the corpus and the fact that Puig spends quite a lot of time telling us what this corpus is not, and little time building the basis for a positive differentiation of his lead notion of urban literature. A reasonable number of his authors are closely linked to the *Qui-fait-la-France* moment, but the latter is not examined systematically as a specific phenomenon, which is a missed opportunity. Some are bestsellers, such as Fazia Guène’s novels from 2004 and 2006, neither of which have anything very direct to do with the 2005 riots, others remain quite marginal. This fact could add to the value of Puig’s study, but if its purpose was to give a broader reading beyond the “stars” of the field in order to grasp its still powerful asymmetries, and to plot the mechanisms that have perhaps enabled negotiation with

them since 2000, we needed a much more systematic approach, such as Claire Ducournau offers with her meticulous study *La fabrique des classiques africains: Écrivains d'Afrique subsaharienne francophone 1960-2012*.<sup>[5]</sup> In contrast, Puig's concept of urban literature fails to recast a fairly obvious circuit of influence and exemplification that circles between postcolonial demands for a recalibrating of cultural memory and certain new forms of expression emerging within metropolitan France of the long, complex legacy of colonialism. As a result, it offers little to generate more nuanced understanding of the forces that have shaped the space of literature in France since the 2000s, a process that might have enabled the category of *banlieue* literature, or urban literature for that matter, to gain consistency as a performative possibility that exceeds its origins and its commercial destinies.

But this is perhaps not the more significant disappointment on reading this otherwise accessible and well-intentioned study. The persistent question that accompanied this reviewer's reading comes back again to the question of corpus and the concentration of attention on works published in the latter half of the 2000s and more specifically 2006-2007. There is a rich critical literature that proposes to read a year—*Reading 1922* by Michael North and *1989* by Joshua Clover, come particularly to mind <sup>[6]</sup>--in order to explore how seemingly disconnected phenomena crystallize in new sensibilities, new social possibilities. Arguably a work of such intention would reveal a lot more about the radical reconfiguration of cultural life in France that happened in and as a result of the protests of 2005 than an effort to substantiate a notion such as *banlieue* literature. It might enable us to refocus our attention around what is at stake in identifying a sequence running from the 2005 riots to the 2015 terrorist attacks in central Paris (which go unmentioned in Puig's book), as is the case in the persistent rearguard tendency to link this escalating violence to a broad crisis in civilisation loosely attributed at once to *la crise des banlieues* and *la crise migratoire*. That 2005 was a landmark in the long trajectory of protest against forms of domination that has sought in various registers, including the literary, to resist the grammar of ethno-nationalism is certain and has been too often simplified by subsequent outpourings about the apparent loss of national unity to Islam or anarchy.<sup>[7]</sup> Puig's book takes us back to a moment when it might have been different, with only minimal reference to religion and none of the complex questions of how explicitly racialized protests have intersected, or not, with other motives of revolt in the face of rising precarity (from the C.P.E. protests through the Nuit debout movement, solidarity with undocumented people, the Gilets Jaunes, and so on). But it leaves us, to all intents and purposes, stuck there, as if in a time warp, with only the pressure of postcolonial memory as an explanatory force. There are very minimal references to any texts from the past decade. The only historical contextualization that seems to have been recently updated comes on page 206 when reference is made to "l'affaire Adam Traoré," following the death in custody of a young black man in 2016, followed immediately by reference to "l'affaire Théo" from 2017, another example of police brutality and a quick allusion to Black Lives Matter. There is no reference, for example, to the trial of the two police officers who gave chase to Zyed Benna and Bouna Traoré, which found them not guilty in May 2015, or to the way this verdict was received.<sup>[8]</sup> It is more than interesting to return to *Banlieue Noire*, published by Thomté Ryam in 2006 <sup>[9]</sup>, in the context of ever-rising police violence in all sorts of contexts in France and elsewhere, but 2019 is not 2006 and what this reader wanted, in part, from this book was some sort of purchase on the multiple factors that have accentuated and transformed the experiences of marginalization and the strategies deployed to resist it.

She also wanted some more basic care in preparing work about writers and people for whom the obstacles to establishing their right to representation, to fair treatment in the hands of the law,

or in the eyes of employers and teachers, are still so desperately punitive. The lack of quotation marks and line breaks to give the words of others their proper place within the text is frustrating, too often provoking a sense of surprise on discovering whom one has just read when reaching the bracketed name, with or without date and page number, that would enable identification. Page 133 is, perhaps, the most striking example of this mode of presentation, but pages 93-94 and page 100 are quickly chosen examples among many where referencing protocols could have been much more rigorous. This lack of care is problematic in other respects, too, particularly where it interferes with the actual reading offered (for example when a reference to the OAS is pinpointed in a text that refers to the humiliation of heaving stones up floor by floor “sous l’œil de l’OS français”; p. 122). This is a striking example of “reading” postcolonial memory where there is a more “humdrum” reference to structures of exploitation. But something seems further amiss in the process of publication if a name such as Zyed Benna, recognizable to most readers of French even thirteen years after his tragic death, can be spelt in three different ways (on page 71 correctly and for the first time, on page 82 as Zined, on page 92 as Zyad). Given that Puig quotes Derrida’s lecture from 2000 on the memory of 17-18 October 1961—“À chacune des victimes, toujours au singulier, à tous ces ‘disparus,’ nous devons épargner ce surcroît de violence: l’indignité, l’ensevelissement du nom ou la défiguration du souvenir” (p. 118)—it seems churlish to lay these inadequacies of the printed book at his doorstep. Yet wrong, too, to overlook them. Something similar can be said of the work as a whole; it should be read and it should be held to maximal standards.

#### NOTES

[1] Puig cites "Can The Subaltern Speak?" and notes that it was published in 1988 and only in 2006 in French, but without citing the volume in which the essay was included: C. Nelson and L. Grossberg, eds., *Marxism and the interpretation of Culture*, pp. 271-313; for Bhabha, he cites *The Location of Culture* (1994, in French in 2007). Neither of these works are included in his bibliography.

[2] Pascal Blanchard, Nicolas Bancel and Pascale Lemaire, *La Fracture coloniale: la société au prisme de l’héritage colonial*, Paris: La Découverte, 2005; Pascal Blanchard and Nicolas Bancel, *Culture post-coloniale, 1961-2006: traces et mémoires coloniales en France* (Paris: Autrement, 2006); Pascal Blanchard, Florence Bernault and Valérie Amiraux, *Ruptures coloniales: les nouveaux visages de la société française* (Paris: la Découverte, 2010). Puig attributes all of these works to a single "collectif d’historiens" (p. 105).

[3] Jean-Marc Moura, *Littératures francophones et théorie postcoloniale* (Paris: PUF, 1999); and Marie-Claude Smouts, *La situation postcoloniale. Les postcolonial studies dans le débat français* (Paris: Les Presses de Sciences Po, 2007). Puig misspells her name as "Marie-Claude Stouts" in the text (p. 107).

[4] Thiphaine Samoyault, “Un réalisme lyrique est-il possible?” in Bruno Blanckeman and Jean-Christophe Milois, eds., *Le roman français aujourd’hui: Transformations, perceptions, mythologies* (Paris: Prétexte, 2004), p. 83.

[5] Claire Ducournau, *La fabrique des classiques africains: Écrivains d’Afrique subsaharienne francophone 1960-2012* (Paris: CNRS, 2017); see Michelle Bumtay’s review in *H-France Review* (18 [April 2018], no. 94).

[6] Michael North, *Reading 1922* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999); Joshua Clover, *1989: Bob Dylan Didn't Have This to Sing About* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009).

[7] These outpourings also, of course, predate the 2005 revolt, as shown by Georges Bensoussan's subsequently re-edited *Territoires perdus de la République* (Paris: Mille et une nuits, 2002 and 2015). Puig summarizes some of the archetypical characterizations of the *banlieue* as a space outside of civilization, from Zola to Jacques Donzelot via Père Lhande (pp. 29-37), in what he terms a genealogy of a stigmatization. His account does not update the genre, however.

[8] See, in particular, the 2018 film *#zyedetbouna, le procès 2.0* by Sihame Assbague, Noëlle Cazenave, and Elsa Gresh.

[9] Thomté Ryam, *Banlieue Noire* (Paris: Editions Présence Africaine, 2006).

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