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Mame-Fatou Niang. *Identités françaises: Banlieues, féminités et universalisme*. Leiden and Boston: Brill-Rodopi, 2019. xii+328 pp. Illustrations and index. \$146.00 U.S. (hb). ISBN 978-90-04-40722-0; \$146.00 U.S. (eb). ISBN 978-90-04-41673-4.

Review by Kathryn Kleppinger, The George Washington University.

Mame-Fatou Niang's *Identités françaises: Banlieues, féminités et universalisme* takes a fresh look at some very well-trod ground: discourses in and about the French banlieues and the place of women in these regions. While previous studies have addressed issues including gender stereotyping and family politics,<sup>[1]</sup> Niang's study takes an innovative approach in bringing together novels, films, print media, and online discussions in her interrogation of the many ways women shape—and talk about—their lives in France's banlieues from the 1980s through today.

Niang's work engages in several tightly linked fields of study: the book deftly combines scholarship on banlieue architecture, immigration, and gender politics. In the introduction, Niang makes a convincing case for her focus on the intersectional portrayal of daily life through Michel de Certeau's concept of "les pratiques du quotidien."<sup>[2]</sup> Niang argues for a displacement of "l'attention de l'exceptionnel vers le banal afin de soumettre l'espace à une nouvelle grille d'analyse....Le déplacement de l'attention vers des sujets féminins qui multiplient les minorisations permettra d'illuminer de nombreux non-dits dans l'étude des zones périphériques françaises" (p. 4). Through this focus on minoritized female voices, Niang studies not only how the works in her corpus challenge and rework the many discourses and stereotypes in circulation about the banlieues and their inhabitants but also argues that women's narratives create new French identities that reflect the diversity of French society today. In short, Niang argues, "ces nouvelles identités s'intègrent au bloc national français, non pas de cette manière universaliste qui assimile en (dés)intégrant, mais véritablement en conservant les traces d'éléments hérités d'autres cultures qui viennent enrichir le patrimoine existant" (p. 7).

Chapter one, "Des rodéos des Minguettes à Charlie Hebdo: trente-cinq ans de production médiatique de la banlieue," is a highlight of the book and features a detailed analysis of media representations of the banlieue at three moments of tension: the 1981 unrest in the banlieues of Lyon, the 2005 banlieue protests, and then in 2015 after the Charlie Hebdo attacks. Building on landmark work by social scientists such as Julie Sedel and Laurent Mucchielli,<sup>[3]</sup> Niang conducted a discourse analysis of the frames used to portray the places, people, and themes of each moment of unrest. Her findings are compelling: whereas in 1981 the top 3 words used to describe the people involved in the unrest are "jeune," "habitant," and "délinquant," (p. 38) by 2005 the list included "jeune," "révolté," and "émeutier" (p. 49) and by 2015 the list featured "jeune,"

“musulman,” and “intégriste” (p. 54). Similar trends are visible for descriptors of place and theme, which shift from emphasis on socio-economic factors such as unemployment and poverty toward frames of violence and religious extremism. As Niang astutely notes, as broader social trends are ignored, responsibility for the events falls ever more squarely on the youth and parents living in the banlieues, thus further demonizing protestors as somehow outside French society rather than accepting them as an undeniable product of it. And, with this shift toward violence comes a narrow focus on mostly male youth in the banlieues, thus leaving a void in discussions of women’s lives. It is precisely this void that the remainder of the book seeks to fill.

Chapter two, “Une écriture de l’espace au féminin,” takes a detailed look at two texts: the novel *Kiffer sa race* (2008) by Habiba Mahany and the autobiographical tale *N’ba* (2016) by Aya Cissoko.[4] In each case, strong, intelligent young women address and counter stereotypes about their lives, including expectations that they must be oppressed by their families and subjected to control by their brothers. Instead, they find alternative outlets of expression: Mahany’s protagonist Sabrina excels in school and seeks refuge in reading, while Cissoko becomes a boxing champion who subsequently completes studies at Sciences Po. Nevertheless, they refuse to compromise who they are: they maintain close cultural ties with their families and refuse pressure to erase signs of difference from dominant French society. In so doing, “Sabrina, Aya et leurs amis s’emparent de ces particularités et les incorporer [sic] à d’autres influences, afin de créer de nouvelles identités plus à même de les définir” (p. 116). Chapter three, “De la difficulté d’intégrer ces corps à la République,” builds on the framework presented in chapter two to consider the positioning of novels such as *Kiffer sa race* and *N’ba* in the French literary field. Niang rightly notes that the labeling of such texts (banlieue? beur? immigrant?) has posed significant difficulty for literary critics and scholars alike, and the French literary field often re-enacts the exclusion the characters face in the works themselves.

Chapter four, “Mères migrantes et filles de la République: la question de la transmission identitaire” and chapter five, “*De Bande de filles à Mariannes noires*: universalisme et décolonisation des imaginaires” each take a deeper dive into the negotiation of stereotypes and the possibilities for creative responses to reductive discourses. Chapter four returns to Cissoko’s novel *N’ba* to study the uneasy relationship between Aya and her mother, Ma, a strong woman who followed her husband from Mali to France and who then refused her family’s directives to return to Mali after the death of her husband. She remains committed to raising her family in France despite all pressure otherwise. While Aya’s relationship with Ma was tense throughout Aya’s adolescence, the two connect over the birth of Aya’s daughter and the transmission of family customs to a third generation. As Niang concludes, “Contrairement aux croyances les plus courantes, ces femmes et mères immigrées ne sont pas coupées du fonctionnement de la société, mais elles y participent fortement en guidant les pas d’enfants postés à un carrefour identitaire” (p. 205).

Chapter five takes this analysis further by considering the role of stereotypes in the creation and promotion of two films: Céline Sciamma’s *Bande de filles* (2014) and Mame-Fatou Niang and Kaytie Nielsen’s documentary *Mariannes noires* (2016). Niang clearly feels very strongly about *Bande de filles*, and in particular how Sciamma’s supposedly universalist project breaks down in its portrayal of black female lives in the banlieue. As Niang notes, the individual psychologies of the characters are not explored in depth, thus making it impossible for viewers to understand the unique responses they have to difficult situations. As a result, stereotypes of violent banlieue inhabitants are reinforced, rather than interrogated. The *Mariannes noires* documentary, on the other hand, features the voices of real women fighting for a place in France. They come from a

range of backgrounds and professions (including artists, filmmakers, and bloggers) and, as Niang explains, “Face à l'imposition de nouveaux codes et les rejets répétés de la société, ces femmes ont développé des modèles culturels, philosophiques et artistiques qui symbolisent une capacité à transformer la marginalité en discours” (p. 271).

Finally, chapter six, “Replacer les périphéries au centre des productions nationales” features an interview with the Franco-Senegalese filmmaker Alice Diop. In the conversation, Diop explains her position in France and the influence of black female politicians and artists such as Christiane Taubira and Nina Simone and how her experiences in France inspired her to make a film on the migrant experience in a psychiatric hospital. The chapter then proceeds to a conclusion, with reflections on various social phenomena today, particularly the use of blackface in festivals in France.

As this review attempts to make clear, *Identités françaises* covers significant theoretical and disciplinary ground. Niang studies literature, film, blogs, and several other cultural phenomena in her quest to demonstrate, as she argues in conclusion, “les périphéries sont la France; l'histoire des périphéries ne se déroule pas dans une trajectoire parallèle à celle de la France, elle est une histoire de France; cette histoire, cette mosaïque devra être écrite” (p. 301). At the same time, however, the threads connecting all of her sources are not always entirely clear to the reader. It would be helpful to have more clear statements on which sources were chosen and why in order to clarify the many directions taken in each chapter. At its best, the book introduces readers to new source materials such as blogs and social media debates. These materials—and their messages—are so varied, however, that it can sometimes be difficult to tease out the overarching argument and organizational structure of the chapters. In a similar vein, I would also have appreciated more attention to the complexities of studying fictional and non-fictional narratives side-by-side for commentaries on French society. Both types of narratives are certainly valid and have much to contribute to our understand of how women in the French banlieues construct their lives, but they operate with different expectations and conventions.

Nevertheless, *Identités françaises* is a compelling study that introduces readers to the history, politics, and cultures of the French banlieues. The first chapter (on media portrayals) would be particularly powerful for undergraduate and graduate classes, while subsequent chapters could provide targeted support for close readings of the specific novels and films they address.

## NOTES

[1] Nacira Guénif-Souilamas and Éric Macé, *Les féministes et le garçon arabe* (La Tour d'Aigues: Éditions de l'Aube, 2004); Trica Danielle Keaton, *Muslim Girls and the Other France: Race, Identity Politics, and Social Exclusion* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2006); Fadela Amara, *Ni Putes Ni Soumises* (Paris: La Découverte, 2004); Françoise Gaspard and Farhad Khosrokhavar, “La problématique de l'exclusion: De la relation des garçons et des filles de culture musulmane dans les quartiers défavorisés,” *Revue française des affaires sociales* 2 (April-June 1994): 3-26.

[2] Michel de Certeau, *L'invention du quotidien*, vol. 1, *Arts de faire* (Paris: Gallimard, 1990).

[3] Julie Sedel, *Les médias et la banlieue* (Paris: Le Bord de l'eau, 2009); Laurent Mucchielli, *Le scandale des “tournantes”: Dérives médiatiques, contre-enquête sociologique* (Paris: La Découverte, 2005).

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[4] Habiba Mahany, *Kiffer sa race* (Paris: J.C. Lattès, 2008); Aya Cissoko, *N'ba* (Paris: Calmann-Lévy, 2016).

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