

Hervé Tchumkam’s *Uncanny Citizenship: State Power, Stigmatization, and Youth Resistance Culture in the French Banlieues* and Fabien Truong’s *Jeunesses Françaises. Bac +5 Made in Banlieues* both set themselves the task of offering a confronting examination not only of the complexity of the notions Frenchness, citizenship, and State power, but furthermore placing this analysis within the context of the French banlieues that are today stigmatized as spaces of national threat and youth unrest.

Tchumkam’s work postulates that the inhabitants of the banlieues have become true bodies of exception in the French consciousness and considered a danger to the nation in which they belong. Drawing on Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben’s notion of “bare life” Tchumkam analyzes the expression of State power and the stigmatization that take place in the banlieues and the paradoxical treatment of its inhabitants tracing this stigmatization to the colonial period to establish that just as the colonized at the time were exploited, their descendants continue today to bear the burden imposed on their ancestors. In addition, the polarization in the official rhetoric in France between a “them” and “us” reveals that the notion of Frenchness continues to be highly selective.

Tchumkam reminds us that this problem arises from the fact that the African diaspora in France somehow continues to be mistaken for immigrants. With the banlieues subject to an exclusion from within, leaving young inhabitants with little hope for improvement in
their social conditions, the author makes a compelling argument showing that segregation in France is giving rise to resistance and to the formation of a community with no conditions of belonging and that can neither be classified nor definable.

In order to examine the question of stigmatization and resistance culture in the French banlieues, *Uncanny Citizenship* draws on selected novels written by French citizens of diverse origins in France after the 2005 banlieues riots. Furthermore, this study explores the relationship between aesthetics and politics in literature with regard to the question of stigmatization and resistance. These literary works generate a new cartography that characterize the inhabitants of the cités who are caught between exclusion and inclusion and focus on themes such as social disqualification, the setting of urban space, social, and urban violence. Through the selected novels, Tchumkam demonstrates that the concern of the banlieue inhabitants is no longer one of integration or of being accepted into French territory but of being recognized as French citizens who share social and political frustrations in the name of a common historical experience.

Following an introductory theoretical discussion that draws on postcolonial theory, sociology, and political philosophy to analyze the relationship between sovereign power and youth resistance culture, *Uncanny Citizenship* structures its analysis in a series of five chapters. Each of the chapters focuses on figures that reinforce the stigmatization of the banlieue inhabitants in contemporary France. Chapter two offers an interpretation of violence in the French banlieues and posits that to understand the violence in the banlieues is of a much more complexity than is formulated around the stereotype of its inhabitants. Literary works are examined to show a new model of identity formation characterized by violence as determiner of a transient identity. Chapter three looks at the
figures of the thug and the delinquent to scrutinize marginalization and to suggest that youth violence in the banlieues appears as a response by those who are perceived as threats to French national identity. In this chapter the author argues that delinquency functions as the social manifestation of the resentment of exclusion experienced by young inhabitants of the banlieues and stands out as a manifesto of the right to exist. The fourth chapter examines the fictional representation of the Muslim to criticize the stigmatization of the Muslim in France. It also highlights the confusion in French popular imaginary between Muslims and radical Islamists and questions whether the cohabitation of France and Islam is possible. The final chapter looks at the role of women in order to deconstruct the stereotype of banlieues as sites for violence against women and to suggest that alternative ways of representing women in the banlieues exist.

In his conclusion, Tchumkam shows that literature, in maintaining deep ties with politics, positions itself within the debate on national identity in France and deconstructs received ideas and stigmas about the descendants of African immigrants in France. The analysis of representative novels of banlieue literature gives evidence of the transgression of political order as well as the transgression of freedoms and rights of the inhabitants of the banlieues. Characters in these novels often form part of a community for which it is difficult to define the conditions of belonging. Tchumkam argues in conclusion that the “coming community” theorized by Giorgio Agamben is the essential paradigm to which we must turn in order to understand the constitution of the postcolonial community of the banlieue in France. This coming community refers to a community made of singularities that reject all notions of identity and do away with any possibility of group classifications and conditions of belonging.
Similarly, Fabien Truong’s study titled Jeunesses Françaises. Bac +5 Made in Banlieues challenges the stereotypical representation of youth in the French banlieues. While Tchumkam’s analysis focuses on the French banlieue through the prism of literature, Truong draws on his background as a sociologist and former high school teacher in various banlieues to observe the real life trajectories of some twenty participants, following them from high school to higher education and then through their early professional life. This book makes a significant contribution to our understanding of the relation between education and contemporary French geopolitics. In a similar vein to Tchumkam’s work, the majority of subjects referred to in this study are born in France to migrant families. These individuals also face the stigmas attached to youth in the banlieues. The question at the heart of Jeunesses Françaises is whether the Republican narrative prizing national education as the key to emancipation is able to offer youth the means by which they are able to break away from the stigmas associated with the banlieue. Throughout the book, Truong uses the analogy of the rocking horse to underscore the fluid nature of each student’s identity as they negotiate their lives anchored in the banlieue on the one hand and influenced by higher education, study abroad, and new relationships on the other.

Following the introduction, Jeunesses Françaises is structured into a series of six chapters. The first chapter defines the role teachers play in the lives of students to meet national education standards in the ZEPs (zones d’éducation prioritaire). Chapters two, three, and four outline the diverse case studies of students who transition from secondary school into higher education in either the banlieues or in Paris. In chapter two there are the students who follow the “voie normale” and go to university. Chapter three discusses the students who choose the “voie médiane” or “bac + 2” to study at “sections tertiaires
supérieures” or “instituts universitaires technologiques.” Chapter four is dedicated to students on the “voie royale” and entry into the elite grandes écoles. The fifth chapter presents the narratives of the students who complement their studies with a Master’s degree. The sixth chapter brings all these voices together towards the final stages of their studies. Finally, chapter seven presents the students in the early stages of their professional careers.

This is certainly an ambitious book that attempts to capture the multiple facets influencing the educational pathways of students in the banlieues such as family, secondary school teachers, tertiary institutions, travel, religion, and relationships. The work also includes a rating system illustrating the author’s preconceived ideas about each student’s success alongside actual outcomes as well as an epilogue referring to this study in the wake of the Charlie Hebdo attacks. These various perspectives make the book’s focus at times a little patchy. A tighter theoretical approach would have strengthened the coherence of this study. Despite this critique, the book’s greatest contribution is undoubtedly its analysis of student narratives collected over a ten-year period. The individual narratives clearly demonstrate the importance of a collective history situated in the banlieues while underscoring the personal trajectories of each student. Furthermore, these case studies highlight how cultural capital, financial resources, mobility, and collective support are influential in determining the success of each student. Indeed, the cases presented illustrate how each participant has their own identity and family history and how these factors shape their educational experience and professional outlook. The book concludes with Truong’s ambivalence towards the education system’s capacity to improve the social condition of banlieue youth asserting rather that a “politique de la considération” is required. The author maintains the importance of taking into
consideration the experiences of each student as factors determining their pathways. This study also highlights the dangers of State policies that essentialize diversity to the point of feeding the divisions that exist within contemporary French society.

Both *Uncanny Citizenship* and *Jeunesses Françaises* stand out as rich contributions to studies on the complexity of Frenchness, citizenship, and State power in the banlieues. The originality of Tchumkam’s work lies in its focus on banlieue literature produced after the 2005 riots as a means of responding to the spatial relegation of which the banlieue is victim. This study powerfully reframes scholarly understanding of the violence and tension that exists in the French banlieues and questions the role of the State in reinforcing notions of race, gender, and social class in the banlieue. Through this study Tchumkam shows that youth violence and urban riots in France are an indication that change is taking place in France with regard to understandings of identity and belonging, while arguing that as long as the State fails to ensure equality among French of diverse origins, social divisions will continue to exist and erupt in violence. Truong’s study is set in a similar timeframe beginning in 2005 and ending in 2015. This work is imbued with the richness of the narrative while critiquing the State’s role in perpetuating divisions within society and failing to confront head on social stigmas in order for the banlieue youth to better prepare themselves socially and professionally. Both works acknowledge the collective’s potential to initiate change in the wake of the State’s failure to address increasing social inequalities and tensions.

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