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Literary Ethnography and Translation in Rachid Djaïdani's *Boumkoeur*

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Article abstract

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Literary Ethnography and Translation in Rachid Djaïdani's *Boumkœur*

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Abstract
Rachid Djaïdani's *Boumkœur* (1999) exposes the inheritance of colonial anthropological thinking that dominates the reception and production of French minority literature of the *banlieue*. By using the ethnographic document as a textual template, Djaïdani situates his narrator, Yaz, in the space of negotiation in which colonial ethnographers and their native informants interacted in the field. Describing the French *banlieue* as a postcolonial ethnographic field, Djaïdani shows how Yaz as a narrator-ethnographer participates in tasks of cultural and linguistic translation. The novel directs the reader's attention away from the production of an authentic representation of cultural difference. Instead, the novel suggests a new form of literary translation capable of abiding by translation ethics that aim to render in the target language meaningful signs of the complex cultural history of "minor" texts (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987 [1980]; Venuti, 1996) in the source language. The novel serves as an experimental literary ethnography, conceived as a new form of translation, in which the translator is an ethnographer, and the act of translation is one of linguistic and cultural translation. In this new form of translation, the translator is present in the text as an active agent. This presence makes palpable the fraught negotiations out of which any translation is born; moreover, the translator is invested with the functions of the author, adding a new literary element to the act of translation.

Keywords: banlieue, translation, literary ethnography, Djaïdani

Résumé
Boumkœur (1999), le premier roman de Rachid Djaïdani, dévoile l'héritage de la pensée de l'anthropologie coloniale qui conditionne encore la réception et la production de la littérature minoritaire française de la banlieue. En utilisant le document ethnographique comme modèle textuel, *Boumkœur* place son narrateur, Yaz, dans un espace de négociation où les ethnographes coloniaux et leurs *native informants* interagissent sur le terrain. Décrivant la banlieue française comme un terrain ethnographique, Djaïdani montre

comment Yaz, en tant que narrateur-ethnographe, prend part à des tâches de traduction culturelle et linguistique. Le roman détourne l'attention du lecteur de la production d'une représentation authentique de la différence culturelle. Échappant à l'attente stéréotypée, il suggère une nouvelle forme de traduction littéraire se conformant à une éthique de traduction qui vise à rendre clairs, dans la langue cible, des signes essentiels de la complexité de l'histoire culturelle de textes « mineurs » (*minor mode*) (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987 [1980]; Venuti, 1996) dans la langue source. Le roman propose une ethnographie littéraire expérimentale, conçue comme une forme nouvelle de traduction, où le traducteur est ethnographe, et où l'acte de traduction est acte de traduction linguistique et culturelle. Dans cette nouvelle forme de traduction, le traducteur a une présence active dans le texte. Cette présence aide à établir la réalité de la traduction comme acte de négociation; de plus, dans l'ethnographie littéraire, le traducteur est investi des fonctions de l'auteur, ajoutant ainsi un nouvel élément littéraire à l'acte de traduction.

Mots-clés : banlieue, traduction, ethnographie littéraire, Djaïdani

Minority literature and the arts in France are often first received in popular media through sociological or ethnographic frames (see Hitchcott, 2006). This labeling is largely discriminatory in the sense that it denies minority artists and writers the full authorship allotted to other artists (see Hargreaves, 1997, p. 177, and Reeck, 2011, p. 82). Yet if we were to inspect the ways in which ethnography signifies in French minority literature, the results of this investigation would be, I think, far from settled. On the one hand, ethnography limits minority literature by an implicit rule: minority literature, it might be said, should detail the lives of minority communities and allow readers not affiliated with those communities some means of entering them vicariously in order to better understand them, and, thus, to understand the full extent of humanity. That is, minority literature should be ethnographic; and this imposes a burden of plot, form, and content that is absent from other literature, "white" literature (see Behar, 2013, p. 159). On the other hand, the ethnographic text as a type of cultural study might also be said to provide a conduit for publication for minority literature. Rachid Djaïdani's *Boumkœur* (1999) brings this paradox to the forefront. The novel simultaneously undermines the fulfillment of the expectation for the "full" or "authentic" story of the *banlieue*, such as would be theoretically available through an ethnographic day-in-the-life account, while indulging in social

and cultural descriptions of the same order. Moreover, instead of simply criticizing the prejudices of colonial anthropology that inhere in an ethnographic account, *Boumkœur* shows the potential for an imaginative, creative intermingling between the ethnographic document and the literary text. At once, the novel critiques the demand for an ethnographic account and presents an experimental, highly subjective ethnography of Yaz's own culture (thus, an auto-ethnography).

Yet more than this, I argue that the novel provides the blueprint for an experimental textual form for translation, which I call the new literary ethnography. In thinking about how *Boumkœur* may serve as a template for translation, I take up Lawrence Venuti's interest in minoritizing translation and Kwame Anthony Appiah's call for "thick" translations, both of which speak to aspects of *Boumkœur* as an example of a new literary ethnography. This new literary ethnography is a form in which the translator is present as narrator and interposes in the plot in both subtle and obvious ways, including moments of self-conscious reflection, explanation, and literary aside. I suggest that by following the cues of Djaïdani's novel, we might find one form for translation that provides the translator with a unique vantage point from which to make clear the negotiations inherent in any translation and to implement strategies for making a translation a dynamic, multi-tiered literary creation.[1]

Literary Ethnography as a Textual Form

In this paper, my contention will be that Djaïdani uses ambivalently the inheritance of colonial anthropology, which continues to circumscribe the reception of French minority arts and literature. In *Boumkœur*, Djaïdani creates a plot that follows the general template of an ethnographic mission that wishes to provide a detailed portrait of the people of a particular culture. Yaz, the novel's narrator, professes his desire to write a true-to-life account of his neighborhood; he enlists Grézi, an acquaintance knowledgeable about the neighborhood to assist him, but Grézi kidnaps Yaz and keeps him hostage for four days in the sub-basement of an HLM. During this time, Yaz recounts many incidents from his life, and when Grézi and Yaz emerge from the sub-basement, Grézi is

1. For the idea of negotiation as integral to translation, see Diagne (2018) and Agar (2011).

arrested for trying to extort Yaz's parents for a ransom payment. From prison, Grézi writes Yaz a long letter and attaches as well the ethnography of the neighborhood that Yaz originally wanted. Yet in the end, Djaïdani dismisses this model, challenging the reader to vacate these strictly ethnographic expectations and, by consequence, to read the novel as a novel—as a literary text. In the ethnographic "field" of the *banlieue,* the novel reveals the problematic status of linguistic and cultural translation within ethnographic contexts. That is, if translation is "always complicit with the building, transforming or disrupting of power relations" (Sakai, 2006, p. 72), then in the ethnographic context of colonialism, translation is practiced implicitly as a "one-directional process of Europeanization" (Diagne, 2017, p. 313).

Djaïdani's novel characterizes how the postcolonial space of the *banlieue* remains steeped in these colonial epistemological constraints, and Djaïdani caricaturizes this fraught and ambiguous legacy. As an experimental model of a new form of translation, *Boumkœur* narrates the tension between an idea of translation as Europeanization in which the translator is a passive tool or "intermediary" and another idea of translation in which the translator acts a "mediator" who "create[s] their autonomous voice[s] by interpreting themselves" (Diagne, 2017, pp. 312-313). In one way, the novel's subject is simply that: narrating the tensions of this anthropological legacy that places these two ideas of translation at odds. Through Yaz, the novel's narrator-ethnographer-translator, the novel traces crucial points of this tension and in so doing responds to Venuti's and Appiah's calls for translation ethics, both of which ask the translator to put into evidence in the target language traces of the cultural remainder. Here, the cultural remainder that any translation aiming at transparency and ease of reading would otherwise risk effacing is thereby embodied in Yaz and dramatized in his ambivalent, shifting roles.

By proposing literary ethnography as a new textual form of translation, I mean that translation can be thought of as a form as much as a process; a translation is as much the container into which the contents are placed as the contents themselves. The new literary ethnography as a textual form exceeds what a particular ethics by itself attests to, or what a particular style of translation could make evident, as both of these operate upon the level of contents and not containers. A literary ethnography, then, is not

merely an ethnography with literary merits (see Warner, 2016). In fact, this type of para-literary document is as old as the origins of ethnography, taken either in its strictest modern sense or in its loosest sense of a collection of written documents about non-Western cultures (see Thornton, 1983; Clifford, 1988; Pratt, 1992; Debaene, 2014). Also, I do not mean that ethnography could be devised from literary texts, though such proposals have also been forwarded by anthropologists themselves (see van de Poel-Knotternus and Knotternus, 1994). I propose instead the new literary ethnography as a form of translation that builds upon colonial anthropological textual practices, that brings to the forefront colonial prejudices, and that ameliorates these practices and undercuts these prejudices. Contemporary literary devices such as irony, "sampling" (Knox, 2017, p. 4), and self-referentiality position the translator as a narrator, ethnographer—and literary character—within the text itself. This last element makes the translation a story as much about the act of translation as about the narrative that is ostensibly the subject of the work and the primary interest in the communicative act. This new form of translation makes explicit the fact that each translator is inherently also a type of ethnographer, and that each translation is an act of inter-cultural as well as inter-lingual translation. This new form of the literary ethnography as translation would be especially well suited for deconstructing the legacy of colonial history in the postcolonial world. Furthermore, such a form of translation might help elucidate the ways that translation in general retains certain earmarks of colonial epistemology as a whole. The term "literary ethnography", then, signals how certain postcolonial texts have an extensive and yet malleable—and, indeed, potentially literary—relationship to this colonial history.

Translation in *Boumkœur*

Boumkœur provides the experimental model of such a new form. The novel makes evident how the ethnographer is a translator, and the translator is an ethnographer. To a certain extent, this has always been a precondition of translation; at the same time, the double role of translator and ethnographer is particularly true for literary works that detail the lives of cultural and linguistic minorities. Through Yaz's authorial interventions in the form of comments, asides, and reflections upon the ethnographic process of textualization, the novel makes clear the difficulties of its dual tasks, namely, finding

a language that can link two cultural locations (mainstream France and the *banlieue*) and describing a culture in the terms that it would accept and that others would be able to understand as well. That is, by problematizing the act of translation—and thus by implicitly rejecting the standard of "fluent translations that produce the illusory effect of transparency" (Venuti, 1996, p. 93)—the novel effectively "demystif[ies]" (*ibid.*) the ethnographic-translational act of representing another culture through linguistic terms foreign to it. With the translator inserted into the text as a character capable of agency and intervention, typical ethnography-translation is retroactively exposed as, in Venuti's terms, an act of "inevitable domestication" (*ibid.*). This ambivalent process of domestication is, then, one of the sources of the novel's humor as Yaz struggles with performing this domesticating function. Ultimately, the act of domestication proves to be exactly that which Yaz refuses to perform—a refusal that ruins any conceit of translation as an "untroubled communicative act" (*ibid.*).

The novel presents what Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari call a "minor language" (1987 [1980], p. 105). This has been spoken of variously in the critical literature dedicated to the novel, as scholars speak of its intense heteroglossia, and as figures from popular media such as Bernard Pivot have spoken of its "mélange étonnant" (Kleppinger, 2015, p. 178). Indeed, its own advertising page, inserted in the end papers before its title page, promotes the book as "mixage oral [...] fait de gitan, d'arabe, de verlan, d'anglais et 'un peu de français'" (Djaïdani, 1999, n.p.). The novel's linguistic difference from a pedagogic norm has led to its reception being framed first within socio-linguistic or strictly sociological rubrics: the novel becomes "poésie sociale" (Mansueto, 2012, p. 130); or it is couched as an "[e]xemple métaphorique d'un monde désorienté [...] le masque visible qui occulte les incertitudes d'une génération de jeunes beurs qui cherchent leur identité" (*ibid.*) where the novel contains "language practices [that] highlight the desire of those relegated to the margins of society" (Abu-Haidar, 2001, p. 84). There exists a problematic conduit through which linguistic singularity, or the novel's status as a "minor" language, becomes the spur for readings of the novel through socio-political templates: the *banlieue* becomes a site of essentialized resistance, difference, and alterity. Yaz, then, is not an author, or a young man striving to become an

author, but his life is reduced to a "position in a marginalized social group (that of the poor, first generation French Arab)" (Brynes, 2016, n.p.). Consequently, the novel's connection to *verlan* or *banlieue* speech per se becomes over-determined; the novel becomes an "authentic" linguistic specimen said to be representative of a specific community, though which specific community nevertheless remains hard to define. The novel's title itself gives lie to over-determination of the novel's language as a specific representative instance of *verlan* or *banlieue* speech. As Lia Brozgal suggests, the title is a neologism "that riffs on the French pronunciation of 'bunker' while at the same [time] producing organic symbolism through its *kœur/cœur* resonance and the onomatopoeia of heartbeats (*boum*)" (2011, p. 94). The title is an example of creative literary play and not a known instance of *verlan* or *banlieue* speech.

Yet the categorization of *Boumkœur* as a "minor" text would present the potential problem of justifying through a linguistic standard the sort of marginalization that socio-literary politics have consigned upon *banlieue* authors. That is, if the reception of Francophone authors in metropolitan France by and large supposes that these authors personalize the French language in uncommon ways, good or bad,[2] this cliché of reception, while bestowing some vague affirmation, nevertheless segments these authors from the full consideration of style per se. Thus, Gustave Flaubert's famous statement "le style étant à lui tout seul une manière absolue de voir les choses" (1973 [1852], p. 346) remains true, but the word "style" itself as a sign of authorship—*auteurship*—is reserved for the language's "major" mode. This emphasis on the socio-linguistic difference of *Boumkœur* may well end up marginalizing it further, by treating its minor language as "merely a dialect," and thus "ghettoizing the foreign text, identifying it too narrowly with a specific cultural constituency" (Venuti, 1996, pp. 93-94).

Both Venuti and Appiah promote types of translations that would produce essential signs, traces, or clues in the target language that express the cultural and linguistic specificity (and hence the

2. The back cover for Patrick Chamoiseau's *Antan d'enfance* (1990) reads, "Intégrant la langue créole au français, Patrick Chamoiseau (coauteur d'un manifeste sur la 'créolité') invente un language d'une extraordinaire richesse, qu'il agrémente d'un humour plein de charme et de poésie." To state that Chamoiseau "invents a language" therefore transforms a literary phenomenon—an "auteur's" style—into a linguistic phenomenon—the invention of a language.

minority status) of the source language. Venuti's "minoritizing" translation stipulates the presence of a certain number of "variations" and "minority elements" (1996, pp. 93-94) in the target language that create a defamiliarizing sensation so that the reader knows that the source language is different from a "normal" example. Brynes gives some good examples of how this might look. For instance, Yaz's dialogue with Grézi, "Grézi! ouvre, c'est Yaz… Zi va, vrirou la teport c'est Yaz que j'te dis, fais pas le baltringue" (Djaïdani, 1999, p. 58) becomes, "Grézi! op'n up, 's me! G'on, op'n the door, 's me Yaz 'm tellin' ya, stop fuckin' 'round" (2016, n.p.).[3]

Appiah, as well, theorizes a translation ethics that would give the reader of a translation some view of the cultural and linguistic complexity of the source language. He wishes for "thick translation" that "seeks with its annotations and its accompanying glosses to locate the text in a rich cultural and linguistic context" (Appiah, 2012, p. 341). This form of literary translation would mean a wide disruption to pedagogic practices and the reading habits instilled through institutions, an intervention needed "to extend the American imagination [...] beyond the narrow scope of the United States" (*ibid.*, p. 342). This clearly would pertain to *banlieue* minority texts, as well, since by definition these texts operate as subalterns within the literary system of the major mode: for an American student to read *Boumkœur* is as much an education about the world as reading the Akan proverbs that interest Appiah and his mother.

Were we to assume that Brynes's example is consistent with the aims of Venuti's "minoritizing" translation, nevertheless such a writing strategy would highlight a stylistic difference effectuated vis-à-vis an expected norm. The translation as a form would still attempt only a one-to-one correspondence. The translation's difference would be, as I mentioned before, on the level of contents. But Appiah seems to suggest more than an ethics; with his insistence upon an "academic style" merged with a "literary style," he perhaps unwittingly points to the formal features of colonial paremiology in which "on vous donne la traduction avec le sens original, suivie d'un petit commentaire qui vous dit que le proverbe est utilisé à telle occasion, occasion lui accordant son sens plein, et supportant toute son existence" (Khatibi, 1974, p. 45).

3. *Boumkœur* became a best seller, selling over 100,000 copies (Kleppinger, 2015, p. 172). WorldCat lists 16 editions between 1999 and 2011. Translations exist, however, only in Dutch and Spanish.

Reading *Boumkœur* for what it says about translation and ethnography as sister arts brings to the surface the novel's implicit ethics and its explicit formal inventions that I consider under the rubric of the new literary ethnography. Though Yaz's language is rife with *verlan* elements, it is Grézi's descent into slang that forces Yaz into the role of interpreter and translator, both for his own sake and for the sake of the fictional reader:

> Il me questionne, alors je mets en fonction mon décodeur de verlan, la phrase en clair correspond à ça. (Djaïdani, 1999, p. 20)
>
> Il ne semble pas avoir envie de délier sa langue davantage, à croire qu'il m'a tout expliqué en morse. (*ibid.*, p. 43)
>
> La génération de Grézi a inventé un dialecte si complexe qu'il m'est pratiquement impossible de le comprendre. (*ibid.*, p. 45)
>
> *Phrase décodée.* (*ibid.*, p. 58, italics author's own)
>
> *Phrase non décodée.* (*ibid.*, p. 69, italics author's own)
>
> La même réplique sans décodeur. (*ibid.*, p. 113)

Yaz makes explicit his acts of translation, situating himself as the reader's translator of the raw language of the native, Grézi. This placement of the translator in a visible role is important for the literary ethnography: it avows the role of the translator as mediator as a formal feature of translation and, within the novel's ethnographic context, it highlights cultural and linguistic translation as simultaneous acts.

The novel's plot nominally consists of a series of character portraits passing in ethnographic montage through the *banlieue*. In this plot structure, Yaz intervenes in self-conscious asides to heighten the reader's awareness of the stakes of translation as integral to the power dynamics that underlie communication between social, racial, religious, and ethnic classes. For instance, Yaz is concerned that his language will attain a sufficiently scientific or intellectual plane for the reader of his eventual ethnography:

> je vais prendre le dictionnaire de Sonia : le niveau des mots que j'utilise n'est pas assez chic, avec les mots complexes du dico, j'aurai l'air d'être un intello pour les gens qui me liront. (*ibid.*, p. 54).

Such self-translation is typical of ethnographers. Yaz couches his self-translation as being concerned only with levels of language, but ethnographers, such as Yaz, also have to translate the cultural

particularities and the language in which these cultural particularities are expressed into a scientific language whose universals translate the particulars into language and information potentially useful to other scientists.[4]

Yaz, as narrator-ethnographer, makes us aware that the translation of *banlieue* literature as a type of postcolonial literature rests at the center of the power dynamics inscribed in the negotiation of language and culture. This act of making aware, or forwarding as a problem, means that he relinquishes the putative objectivity of the colonial ethnographer, a specious objectivity that could only but distort the tense cultural and linguistic exchanges of the field. When Yaz returns from his spell being held hostage by Grézi, an ex-school teacher, Napoléon, consoles him. Yaz's father respects the man more than Yaz thinks he deserves, and in return for his fawning, "[f]ace au Daron, Napoléon retrouve une émotion de colonisateur sortant des mots que même le dictionnaire a du mal à saisir" (*ibid.*, p. 122). The ex-school teacher uses language to instill social hierarchy; or, more precisely, upon Yaz's father's obsequious positioning of himself as the colonial subject, the ex-school teacher takes upon himself the role of the colonizing agent, complete with the appropriate comportment and vocabulary. As the narrator-translator, Yaz never misses the chance to make sure the reader understands that translation in the *banlieue* is linguistic and cultural. In recounting a boyhood incident in which he was sent to the apartment of the local witch doctor—"cave du sorcier marabout, du 21e étage porte gauche entrez sans frapper SVP" (Djaïdani, 1999, p. 106)—Yaz recalls how he looked up in the middle of his session to see a slate filled with illegible incantations that were even "encore moins lisible que les tags qui squattent les murs du quartier" (*ibid.*, p. 110). Yaz compares these graphic signs to what he knows, the spray-painted tags of the neighborhood. It is an act of cultural translation and an ironic—and humorous—literary strategy, playing on the colonial travel narrative in which French metropolitan subjects would rely upon such similes, referring foreign scenes that escaped their experience and vocabulary to ones

4. This is the translation from "emics" to "etics," or in other words, from that which is specific to a particular culture to that which is universal (Agar, 2011, pp. 38-39). In *Anthropologie du point de vue pragmatique*, Kant writes that "la connaissance générale doit précéder toujours la connaissance locale" without which "toute connaissance acquise ne peut former qu'un tâtonnement fragmentaire, et non pas une science" (2008 [1800], p. 82).

familiar from Europe. Here, in the postcolonial ethnographic zone of the *banlieue*, there is then a displacement: if the writing of the *marabout* is incomprehensible for Yaz, it is in his role as a "traveler" in the *banlieue*—as an ethnographic outsider—that he must create a paradigm through which he compares what this writing looks like to him: the tags on the walls of the ghetto.

A simultaneous cultural and linguistic translation of the *banlieue* that expresses the particularity of local culture must find, such as Appiah suggests, a formal apparatus to articulate the complex cultural and linguistic history through which the text was given birth: a "thick" translation capable of communicating information. *Boumkœur* does so through its self-conscious interruptions in the plot to speak of the difficulties of translation in its many aspects. Within the context of the postcolonial situation in France, the novel's strategy of positioning Yaz as the narrator-translator capable of intervention, explanation, and self-referentiality not only serves as a formal feature through which to signal the "variations" and "minority elements" of the translation that he performs, but in the postcolonial setting, it affords Yaz as a translator a vantage from which to situate himself against the complex and tawdry cultural politics of the colonial epistemology that continues to determine the lives of people in the *banlieue*. Reading Yaz as a translator situated with a postcolonial context that is nevertheless indissolubly linked to colonial history, then, allows us as readers to see the advantage that such an authorial position would afford the translator of postcolonial texts as well. In other words, Yaz separates himself from the colonial epistemology in which translation was conceived as a non-problematic process that domesticates and Europeanizes. His ability to do so suggests that translators of postcolonial works—whose epistemological, cultural, and socio-political ties to the colonial era cannot be broken—should also find ways to articulate a position of ethical purchase. This would start merely by announcing the presence of the translator within texts in translation as an active mediator.

Reading Ethnographic Paradigms in *Boumkœur*

Two ethnographic paradigms compete for pride of place in *Boumkœur*. This competition shows the unsettled state of linguistic and cultural translation in the *banlieue*, and serves as one formal feature, an antinomy, by which the literary ethnography breaks

through the translated text's expectation for univocality and harmony and asserts the ethnographer-translator as mediator. The literary ethnography that emerges thus destabilizes the textual forms and styles of ethnography and reveals that translation, as well, is contained within forms as much as it is produced through styles or ethics. The ethnographic context of the novel begins from before its first page: an advertising page inserted at the head of the book's endpapers reads as a "prière d'insérer" and consists of a quote from the gangster rap group Suprême NTM, a publisher's summary of the novel, and an author's biography. The publisher's summary couches the novel as a "chronique de la vie d'une cité de banlieue parisienne" (Djaïdani, 1999, n.p.), or a documentary-like record of the everyday life of a circumscribed geographic region—not a country or region, as would be the case in colonial ethnography, and interestingly not even one particular "banlieue," but specifically a "cité" of a "banlieue." This purported geographical specificity figures prominently in the novel's reception.[5] The "prière d'insérer" then redescribes the work as a "témoignage réaliste sur la France des banlieues" (*ibid.*). While this characterization again proposes that the novel serves as a documentary record, now the focus of its observation has shifted from a "cité" to "suburban France." A character list appears here, as well. Beyond Yaz, the narrator, and Grézi, his friend, the narrative will record the lives of "Gypsy le 'musico-poète', Hamel, un frère toxico disparu trop tôt, les parents de Yaz, Ben, un entraîneur de boxe, un marabout africain, etc." (*ibid.*). This situates the novel as a social portrait, created through the observations of the ethnographer, Yaz, and his native guide, Grézi.

A lengthy testimonial by Suprême NTM follows. The group serves as the collective authenticator of the narrative to follow. They write, "Le côté anecdotique, choisi par Rachid, pour raconter cette vie de quartier, rend son roman proche d'une authenticité qui n'appartient qu'à ceux qui naissent dans un bunker" (Djaïdani, 1999, n.p.). This serves as an authenticating document akin to the prefaces to slave narratives that abolitionist British publishers used to vouch for the veracity of their black narrator's claims. But here, instead of the "white man," it is the most visible representatives of

5. A variety of viewpoints exist on how spatial logics define or circumscribe the book. See Brozgal (2011), Kleppinger (2015), Mansueto (2012), Puig (2010), Reeck (2011).

the ghetto who vouch for the credibility of the author. The lyrics of Suprême NTM's "That's My People," released the year before *Boumkœur* appeared in print, would make obvious the group's role as doyens and judges of *banlieue* authenticity. "I make music for my people / 'Cause that's my people," begins the song (1998). Should we replace "music" for "a book," then we would have Yaz's stated reason for writing his ethnographic document of the *cité*.

In Suprême NTM's attestation, "le côté anecdotique" suggests the narrative's closeness to lived experience and thus to documentary realism, its day-in-the-life portraiture of "cette vie de quartier." Now one more geographical word encases the narrative: "la cité" and "la France des banlieues" now competes with "le quartier." This slippage in terminology points to the problem of delimiting exactly the space in which this culture exists, and recalls the difficulty of situating the language of the book as that of a specific social group. Suprême NTM's last remarks argue that the novel's authenticity is tied to birthplace: "ceux qui naissent dans un bunker"—that is, natives—have this authenticity in a way that others do not. This characterization engages in essentialism of a dubious sort, and it further brings to light how the transition from colonial geographical place to postcolonial cultural space remains fraught with the imprecision inherited from colonial anthropological rubrics.

That is, when the cultural mixing that characterized modern European societies created the fear that traditional societies would disappear from the earth without proper study, modern European societies sought to find "primitive" societies that had not yet suffered from this mixing; this nostalgia for the "vanishing primitive, [and] the end of traditional society" (Clifford, 1986, p. 112) dominated anthropology during the nineteenth century and the first half of the twentieth century. To efface the problem that not even traditional societies are clearly separable cultural units—and that no cultural phenomenon can be said to be "pure"—[6]colonial anthropology tended to over-determine the relation between a culture and a place, fixing a people in a place. The unambiguous titles of ethnographic monographs attest to this possessive relationship. For example, Michel Leiris's *La Langue secrète des Dogons de Sanga* (1948) locates

6. Lévi-Strauss writes, "[l]es sociétés humaines ne sont jamais seules; quand elles semblent le plus séparées, c'est encore sous forme de groupes ou de paquets" (2007 [1952], p. 14).

a people—the Dogon—in a fixed geographical field—Sanga: the place "owns" the people. This facet of ethnographic epistemology influences the construction of the *banlieue* as a zone of cultural difference.[7] The lack of precision in the geographic specificity of the *banlieue*, then, is one characteristic of the reception of its literature and arts that Djaïdani criticizes through the two competing ethnographic paradigms that dominate the narrative.[8]

The first ethnographic paradigm begins with the start of the narrative. Yaz states his ambitions to write something on the order of an ethnographic report: "J'ai toujours voulu écrire sur les ambiances et les galères du quartier" (Djaïdani, 1999, p. 11); "Le sujet, c'est mon quartier" (*ibid.*, p. 13). Here, Grézi, his friend, is the native informant: "Pour ça, j'ai fait appel à mon pote Grézi qui est un peu les murs et les oreilles des tours. C'est un véritable caméléon, jour après jour il me racontera tous les délires, il est sur tous les plans. Il sera mon envoyé spécial" (*ibid.*). Yaz is the ethnographer: "Par contre j'ai décidé moi de m'investir dans la construction de l'histoire, fonction qui ne sera pas des moindres" (*ibid.*). As Yaz is native to the neighborhood, his ethnography would have to be termed an auto- or self-ethnography: Édouard Glissant calls this role the "l'ethnologue de moi-même" (1997 [1956], p. 21). Yet the exact location of this auto-ethnography is still somewhat uncertain: "mon quartier," "la banlieue," and "des tours" follow one after the other in synedochal relation. This has to be seen as a problem for the aspiring ethnographer; without a fixed location for the ethnography, the problem of the language of inquiry—and, thus, the choice of interpreter—remains partially unresolved. Nevertheless, in this paradigm, the failure of Yaz as an ethnographer seems due to his inability to maintain a scientific, objective distance: he gets kidnapped by his native informant.

The second ethnographic paradigm is revealed when the narrative modulates at its end to include the prison narrative of Grézi. After two months of living in prison, Grézi decides

7. While "space" replaces "identity" (Reeck, 2011, p. 125) as *beur* literature morphed into *banlieue* literature, these two designations—geographic place and cultural space—are seen as synonymous in colonial anthropological models.

8. The recognition of the multiplicity of *banlieue* communities and their heterogeneous nature does, however, exist. For example, Jean-Pierre Goudaillier writes, "[d]ans de nombreuses cités de France cohabitent des communautés d'origines diverse et de cultures et de langues non moins différentes" (2001, p. 6).

to write Yaz to supply him with what he originally wanted: the original, essential stories of the HLMs and their culture. This second paradigm subtends and supplants the first. In the second ethnographic paradigm, the prison is revealed as the "real," "authentic," or "pure" *cité*. It is the *cité* of the *cité*, the nonpareil site of the *cité*—the colonial anthropological obsession with locating the primitive in a discrete, contained site is, thus, obtained. So, although Grézi thought he understood how the *cité* worked, after he is incarcerated, he realizes that he did not understand its essence: "Moi qui croyais faire partie d'une famille dans le quartier, je me suis vite rendu compte je me trompais" (*ibid.*, p. 128). Prison is the true "quartier" that cannot be described but must be lived: "Franchement la prison, il faut y mettre les pieds pour pouvoir comprendre ce cauchemar éveillé" (*ibid.*, p. 130). This is nothing less than the method of ethnographic fieldwork; the endeavor's credibility rests entirely upon the principle that experience within a culture gives the scientist the ability to create universal knowledge. Its cliché is that you have to be there to know it; this is what differentiates anthropology as a modern social science from history, and this imbrication of producing texts in collaboration with living subjects and societies is what anthropology used as its claim toward a position within the social sciences.[9] In prison, then, the divisions that were implicit in the *banlieue* become explicit: "[En prison], plus que dans le quartier les clans sont visibles à fleur de peau, les Noirs avec les Noirs, les Blancs avec les Blancs, les Arabes avec les Arabes et les numéros de département avec les numéros de département" (*ibid.*, p. 138). These are the "real" social conditions. In this paradigm, then, the native informant is Grézi, and the interpreter-translator is Kurtis, his cellmate, to whom Grézi "dicte avec le moins de verlan possible pour que tu puisses comprendre le sens profond de toutes mes phrases [...] les aventures des mecs du quartier" (*ibid.*, pp. 126, 157). Yaz now has the distance needed for evaluation: he is the ethnographer at a proper remove, separated from the taut cultural relations of the society under analysis.

Then, in a curious turn, Yaz burns Grézi's ethnography, and he writes to the reader, "Faites l'effort de nous rendre visite" (*ibid.*, p. 158). Yaz renounces his project and the possibility of acquiring

9. The history of anthropology's competition with history can be found in Lévi-Strauss's *Structural Anthropology*, Detienne's *Comparing the Incomparable,* and in Bernard Cohn, *An Anthropologist among the Historians and Other Essays* (1990).

scientific knowledge of a culture through texts.[10] Experience is the only means of understanding, he states. The ethnographic document argues that its form of knowledge is attained through firsthand experience, but Yaz further suggests that if one can obtain knowledge about a culture, it remains useless to try to communicate it through scientific texts. He renounces the subject position implicit in colonial ethnographic models: the master of scientific knowledge and culture. In this case, ethnography fails for a new reason, namely, the ethnographer's self-disgust and distrust of the "science" originally invoked. Through his position as meta-commentator, Djaïdani implies that a novel is literary. In bringing to the surface the continued manner in which ethnographic epistemology frames discourse surrounding the *banlieue*, Djaïdani opens a new possibility for the translation of *banlieue* literature, namely, a type of literary ethnography itself: instead of the strictly scientific cultural translation of ethnography, the novel suggests by its very existence that a literary version of the same might be more successful in apprising interested parties (the readers) of the reality of life in the suburbs. The novel suggests that part of its ability to speak to readers comes from its literary, and hence subjective, qualities that contradict the demands for scientific objectivity of observation. Thus, the colonial paradigm of ethnographic objectivity is reversed.

The novel also evokes colonial anthropology in the manipulation of common French proverbs. The novel's *banlieue* proverbs demonstrate that Yaz, as narrator-ethnographer-translator, rests inside and outside mainstream culture. His ability to manipulate found material, that is, the "French cultural patrimony" through "samples" (Knox, 2017, p. 4) shows how formal features of colonial anthropology can be altered, or translated, to fit the postcolonial situation in which Yaz lives. Here is a representative list of six translated proverbs:

> dealer c'est du bénéf sur terre, mais ça se paye toujours en enfer (Djaïdani, 1999, p. 12)
>
> Je ne tricherai pas, on est pas des pros de ce genre de taf, et alors! C'est bien connu, c'est en forgeant que l'on chausse le cheval, fini

10. This is one further instance of Djaïdani's distance from colonial models. Consider Jean Paulhan's comment that "[y]ou don't need to go to Madagascar to have the experience of the proverb" (Syrotinski, 1998, p. 29).

> d'être dans la politique du jeune assisté conditionné à tendre dans la main et attendre demain et après-demain. (*ibid.*, p. 17)
>
> C'est bien connu, c'est pas l'habit qui fait le moine. C'est le proverbe qui colle le mieux à la situation. Mais Zoubir, le barbu, le résume de la façon suivante: 'C'est pas l'habit qui fait l'imam.' (*ibid.*, p. 29)
>
> Voir un pote dans cet état, c'est pas le pied. (*ibid.*, p. 43)
>
> A chacun les moyens de sa gastronomie. (*ibid.*, p. 74)
>
> J'avais été son otage et par la même occasion sa poule aux œufs d'or car après avoir réussi à avoir le beur il ne se priva pas à taxer l'argent du beurre. (*ibid.*, p. 116)

Djaïdani relies upon the cliché that proverbs document the "wisdom of nations"[11]—with the "nation" in this case being the *banlieue*. These examples range from wholly invented proverbs, such as the first and the fourth, to ones that use well-known proverbs as the basis of their invention, such as the third—where the narrator explicitly invokes the proverb "ce n'est pas l'habit qui fait le moine"—and the fifth—where the proverb "chacun à son goût" rests implicit in the humor. The last example works similarly, riffing off the proverbial image of "la poule aux œufs d'or," most famous in the French context from La Fontaine's fables. Here, however, the narrator constructs a complicated comment upon tokenism. Yaz becomes Grézi's hostage for whose release he demands a ransom, but that first situation extends to a more general social commentary: the French state creates the "beur" as a minority deprived in practice of certain rights and privileges that thereby limit earning power, and yet the state continues to tax "le beur/beurre" as though these limitations were not in place. These examples accomplish a difficult literary and communicative goal: they portray characteristic elements of the life of the HLMs that Yaz means to document; they insert a wedge of difference against the social milieus upon which these proverbs riff; and they also place Yaz's subjectivity between the two poles—metropole and colony, Parisian center and *banlieue*—that serve as the cultural sites of translational interchange. This ability to manipulate cultural patrimony exposes cultural patrimony as a monolithic inheritance that requires frequent interventions to update the forms and the content to contemporary specifications.

11. Lorédan Larchey, quoted in Paulhan (2006, p. 645).

Conclusion

Hargreaves and Reeck notice an ethnographic pulse in *banlieue* literature. *Boumkœur*, then, provides an extended illustration of a self-consciously ethnographic fiction; moreover, it ironizes this ethnographic dimension of minority literary production. In this regard, it is different from other *banlieue* texts with ethnographic dimensions, such as Leïla Sebbar's *Shérazade*. Through the situational irony of a fiction in which a *banlieue* subject writes an ethnography of the "native" society of which he is one member, the novel reveals the lingering epistemology of colonial anthropology, suggests how such models might be subverted through contemporary literary devices, and, furthermore, outlines a new form of translation, the literary ethnography.

One historical paradigm of this new form remains to be explored. It is striking that Appiah's ethics leads to a revitalization of the standard form of colonial paremiology; and *Boumkœur*, in its postcolonial way, adds the explanations and asides necessary for cultural contextualization in the act of translation that Yaz undertakes. Looking to colonial ethnography, another model exists for this new literary ethnography, Marcel Griaule's *Le livre de recettes d'un dabtara abyssin* (1930). Griaule's book translates and comments upon a series of magical, medical incantations of an Ethiopian holy man. Though it lacks the literary flair and the postcolonial sophistication of *Boumkœur*, *Le livre de recettes d'un dabtara abyssin* presents Griaule, the author-ethnographer-translator, as a principal builder of the text. Its preface and introduction helps position Griaule—and to a lesser extent Ato Agagnehou Engeda, an Ethiopian student in Paris—as author-translator by explaining the circumstances in which the book was conceived and accomplished. Griaule shows his ethnographic-translational presence through his ongoing attempts to translate the dense and "minor" linguistic and cultural material with revisions and annotations. This helps quiet Khatibi's major complain about anthropologists, namely, that "[l]'ethnologue tend à effacer la différence (culturelle ou autre) sans dire quel est le *lieu* de sa propre parole, de sa parole à l'autre" (1974, p. 26). But Djaïdani goes one step further. Whatever presence Griaule might maintain, he is nevertheless not the book's narrator. By situating Yaz as narrator-ethnographer-translator, Djaïdani curtails the nefarious aspect of colonial anthropology to insist on an inflated and spurious sense of objectivity; Djaïdani redefines

the ethnographic-literary project through the biases, insights, and subjectivity of the narrator-ethnographer as translator and central character.

Djaïdani ironizes the scientific activity that Griaule undertook, showing that ethnographic-translational acts as *salva veritate* are encumbered with weighty preconditions and potentially insurmountable ethical and epistemological problems. Instead of separating the ethnographic-translational act into two separate textual forms—the personal and the professional, the subjective and the objective[12]—Djaïdani combines them in Yaz's narration. This shows that the ethnographic-translation act is always historically situated and personal. It goes without saying that Djaïdani's novel aims at producing aesthetic sensations; its relationship to reality is not that of documenting empirical facts. That the novel does not propose to record social scientific fact distinguishes it from textual predecessors within the social sciences. As a form of translation, then, *Boumkœur* brings to light how a translation's aesthetic heft is usually thought to be related only to the aesthetic heft of the source language: a pleasurable, "good" text in the source language should make the same in the target language. Instead, *Boumkœur* provides the model of the new literary ethnography that has its own aesthetic devices: to situate the translator within the text, to give that character a subjectivity, to give that character a history, to identity the epistemological limitations of the frames that surround the translational act, and thus to make clear that the translator's story is as much the story of the story as the "original's" story allows a new form of translation that melds the literary and the communicative. That is, if *Boumkœur* is our guide and informant, the literary ethnography as a form of translation would present the translator as inhabiting actively and visibly the site of ethical and creative activity in translation, as well as negotiating the site where different vectors of cultural and linguistic power intersect.

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12. Debaene's *Far Afield* (2014) explains the historical circumstances of the "double books"—the one, scientific, the other, literary—that characterized modern French anthropology.

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