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## Banlieusard.e.s claiming a right to the City of Light: Gendered violence and spatial politics in Paris<sup>☆</sup>

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### ABSTRACT

Returning to the origin of Lefebvre's thought on the right to the city, this paper reflects on how it intersects with French constructions of the *banlieue* and offers an overview of the gender-specific forms of engagement with the city of young inhabitants of the *banlieue*, *banlieusard.e.s*. It argues that an essential background to the current situation of *banlieues* at present is the implementation of territorialized policies which target areas within the framework of the *Politique de la Ville*, with specific gendered dimensions. In a context of neo-colonial state feminism, the ways in which women are being promoted and included in the assessment and improvement of their neighbourhood environments operates as an exclusion of men from these processes. The paper goes on to consider forms of gendered violence that inhabitants of the *banlieues*, in particular those who are perceived as Muslim and/or are racialized, are likely to encounter in their daily lives in the Paris region. The last section of this paper examines how some women's collectives are challenging this and the types of discourse and the spatial claims they stake, for both a city that "belongs to them" and everyday citizenship for all *banlieusard.e.s*.

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### 1. Introduction

France is the place of origin of one of the main thinkers of the "right to the city", Henri Lefebvre, whose thought influenced the original formulations of French urban policy (Dikeç, 2007) before gaining worldwide currency. In Lefebvre's depiction of the shift from the city to generalized urbanization, the rapid growth of the *banlieues* surrounding French cities played a critical part: as Lefebvre later commented "the *banlieues* were the spectre of the city" (Lefebvre, 1985) and arguably these remain a crucial part of French ways of envisioning society. While there are wealthy *banlieues*, in particular to the south-west of central Paris, the term has become almost entirely associated with negative ideas in everyday, media and political discourse. Since the 1960s, the term *banlieues* connotes peripheral deprived areas with high proportions of social housing and inhabitants of immigrant origin, which have become increasingly stigmatized, to the point of being construed as a major threat to French society and values.

In the Paris region, essentialization as "*banlieusard.e*" in and by itself constitutes a denial of a right to the city (which Lefebvre further defined

as a "right to centrality"); being defined as *banlieusard.e*, inhabitant of the *banlieue*, is being defined as marginal and "out of place" in central Paris. The implication is that *banlieusard.e.s* are identifiable as racialized and/or visibly working-class, and would be instantly recognized by their clothing, language and behaviour, as illustrated in Matthieu Kassovitz's famous movie *La Haine*, when three young *banlieusards* hang around in the center of Paris. Very potent mechanisms operate to "police" and constrain the mobilities of "*banlieue* youth", from being targeted by the police for systematic stop and search to being stared at or even verbally abused by the general public. What is denied is not just a right to use city space with the same liberties as other Parisians, but also a sense of belonging and citizenship more generally. In many ways being from the *banlieue* has become shorthand for being illegitimate, a second-class citizen, and carries a stigma that mere foreign nationality or migrant background do not match by any means.

On the backdrop of major political claims (among which the right to vote in local elections for foreign nationals, a recurring but never held promise of French Socialist governments since the 1980s), there are therefore also claims for what Secor (2004) termed "everyday citizenship", a citizenship centering on the ability to articulate a sense of belonging to a city (if not to a nation-state)—which of course resonates also with Lefebvre's "sociology of the everyday" (Lefebvre, 1987) as much as it does with the "right to the city" (Lefebvre, 1968). This view is particularly helpful in a context in which a crisis of French citizenship is being played out, which has singled out the bodies of its racialized citizens, especially of Muslim women, as its battlefield (Benelli et al., 2006; Hancock, 2008, 2011, 2015), and has very material consequences for the

<sup>☆</sup> Note on spelling: the issue of the gender-sensitive language, in French, is particularly difficult to tackle. Several options are being debated and some appear in this paper: an e between dots is sometimes used to make manifest the fact that women as well as men are included (as in *banlieusard.e.s*, inhabitants of the *banlieue*). Other visually more striking options exist such as capitalizing the feminine form as in "*8 mars pour toutes*", an event mentioned below.

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everyday lives of millions of inhabitants, constraining their possibilities in terms of housing, employment, leisure and everyday mobility patterns.

It is important to make clear that most of the women involved in the collectives considered in this paper are not “migrants” to France but belong to what has been defined as the socially constructed category of “post-migrants”, or, in French, “issus de l’immigration”, “of migrant origin/background”—a stigma which remains attached to most or all racialized groups within French society, caste-like (as pointed out by Delphy, 2005) and has little to do with migration status or nationality.<sup>1</sup> In fact it is this very transgenerational confinement to this status of “second-class citizens” that causes many to take to the streets.

This paper draws on a long-time research involvement with these topics through several projects. A first one was conducted, through in-depth interviews with young women from the *banlieues* wearing a veil, on the issue of their specific experiences of public spaces and sense of discrimination.<sup>2</sup> Another ongoing work consists in a systematic critical analysis, through the lens of gender issues, of urban policies in the central Paris and the surrounding *banlieues*. A last one focuses on the social movements arising from these feelings of relegation. In this paper we build our analyses on a first range of observations and discourse analysis of some grassroots organizations particularly illustrative of these resistance initiatives.

The central tension in the situations we analyze is between women of the *banlieues* who are intent on expressing their solidarity with male *banlieusards* faced with extreme forms of police violence and stigmatization, while both common beliefs and public policies depict and address them primarily as victims of male violence. Crucial questions here are to do with whose safety is being promoted, and from what sort of violence, in policies purporting to improve women’s “right to the city”. *Banlieusardes* find themselves in a particular double bind to do with the gender/race dilemma (explored in depth in Hancock, 2016), which the first section of this paper illustrates. The second section considers the forms of gendered violence that inhabitants of the *banlieues*, in particular those who are perceived as Muslim and/or are racialized, are likely to encounter in their daily lives in the Paris region, and suggests that the geography of this violence, as well as the very notion of violence, are to be challenged. The last section of this paper examines how some women’s collectives are working on this challenge and the types of discourse and the spatial claims they stake, for both a city that “belongs to them” and everyday citizenship.

## 2. “If I were a boy”

In Aubervilliers, a *banlieue* immediately north of Paris, a group of young teenage girls produced, as part of a workshop within the municipal youth center, a short film which won an award at the local film festival in 2013.<sup>3</sup> Entitled “If I were a boy” (and with a Beyoncé soundtrack), it shows the story of a young woman whose two brothers are allowed to play on their playstations while she is ordered by her mother and family to wash and clean up. In the privacy of her bedroom, she daydreams about what life would be like if she were a boy, allowed to hang out with buddies on the streets—and the thoughts that vividly come into her mind are those of all the unpleasant experiences she might then encounter: being brushed off as a threat by a disabled woman s/he is trying to help on the street, being requested to carry a neighbour’s heavy bags, being refused access at a local supermarket or being thrown out of a night-club after some girls complain of being harassed (s/he has, in her daydreams, retained the skin color that make all these experiences all the more likely to occur). At the end of

<sup>1</sup> Issues of nationality play out very differently in a context in which many people considered “of immigrant background” were in fact born in France to parents who themselves hold French nationality by virtue of their birth in what was until 1962 “French Algeria”.

<sup>2</sup> This research was conducted in collaboration with our colleague Anissa Ouamrane.

<sup>3</sup> It can be viewed online <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pjbs3mtcngM>.

the short fiction, she accepts to go and wash the dishes when her mother asks again.

While this fiction might seem to perpetuate a dangerous equation of men and women’s oppressions, it underlines the solidarity that many young women in the *banlieues* are intent on expressing with the men around them and the acute, and often violent, racism they are likely to encounter either within or outside their neighbourhood. The fictional male hero is faced with a number of slights, taunts or rejections in public space that seem to even out the unfairness of the fictional female’s being burdened with domestic tasks within the home. The film authors chose to name themselves the “collective of the 8th of March”, after the international day dedicated to women’s rights: they however seem to insist that such rights should not be gained unilaterally if other forms of oppression remain officially unrecognized. This film is also a statement of independence with respect to the institution’s expectations of them, hence the award from both jury and public of the film festival.

Taking our cue from the concerns implicit in this short film, we want to point at ways in which *banlieusard* men are likely to encounter forms of policing in their everyday use of the city that may differ from those encountered by women, but are nonetheless disabling. Ten years after the 2005 revolts, the sense that *banlieues* are “war zones” remains pervasive (Khelifi, 2015) and is bolstered by gender-specific police harassment and widespread incarceration of young men with immigrant backgrounds, who are also far more likely to drop out from school. In this context, the construction of young people’s “everyday citizenship” in the face of widespread discrimination and violence takes on very specific geographies, at odds with more official geographies of safety and danger in French urban areas. It is also important not to simplify and caricature, and to underline the ambivalent nature of these young people’s engagements with central Paris.

In some ways constraints on the mobility of young men seem to be as strong as, if not stronger than, those experienced by women: local neighbourhoods become the focus of the lives of young people who are denied full access to the “City of Light”. Earlier studies (Clair, 2008; Coutras, 2002; Faure, 2005) as well as our interviews emphasize a tendency on the part of many young men to “hang out” and become territorial about their neighbourhood, while many young women prefer to socialize outside the area to escape the social control exerted on them and in fact enjoy greater mobility throughout the urban region.

Relegation mechanisms by no means render young *banlieusard.e.s* immobile, as they learn to navigate networks of neighbourhoods sharing similar characteristics to theirs, and to domesticate symbolic central areas of Paris such as Les Halles (Oppenchain, 2011; Truong, 2012). Truong worked for several years with young men and women of the Seine-St-Denis to outline their specific map of Paris, based on degrees of social distance, the very *bourgeois* “white” areas being in some ways more violent and threatening than the working-class neighbourhoods most similar to the *banlieue*, but also more desirable and attractive in other ways (these are the parts of Paris his respondents would choose to live in if they had the opportunity to do so, see Truong, 2012). Work by Ouamrane (2011) and Pagès El-Karoui (2011) shows how some specific hang-outs catering to the tastes of *banlieusard.e.s* (offering *halal* food, or *chicha* bars for *narguile* smoking) become focal points of an appropriation of central Paris for leisure and consumption purposes. Oppenchain analyzes their mobilities as “trial”, that is, as both trying and personally uncomfortable, and simultaneously as empowering as they push back the limits of what they believed possible, and thus, ambivalent experiences (Oppenchain, 2011). While he finds greater restrictions on girls’ mobility on the part of parents, he also finds many boys particularly dread “gatekeepers (...) repeated identity checks” (Oppenchain, 2011) when they leave their neighbourhoods. Mobility, and access to “centrality” thus proves “trying” for different reasons for different types of young people from deprived neighbourhoods in the Paris area.

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