

## ‘TA MÈRE, TA RACE’ : FILIATION AND THE SACRALISATION AND VILIFICATION OF THE MOTHER IN *BANLIEUE* CINEMA<sup>1</sup>

**Cristina Johnston**

**University of Stirling (Ecosse)**

The absence of figures of *paternal* authority from the diegetic space of most *banlieue* films has been commented on by critics and scholars alike since the advent of the genre in the 1990s. The relationship between this cast of predominantly male urban characters and their *mothers* has, however, less frequently been the focus of analysis. It is the verbal construction of this mother-child (and primarily mother-son) relationship which will be examined in this article, discussing the simultaneous sacralisation and vilification of the maternal figure that ultimately emerges through verbal encounters and interactions onscreen.

This analysis is particularly salient given the renewed focus on the concept of « *filiation* » in contemporary French sociopolitical debate, as highlighted by the work of sociologist Eric Fassin who sees this trend as having initially evolved from debates regarding the development of family structures in contemporary France. These debates have their origin in mid to late 1990s discussions surrounding the PACS legislation and its impact (perceived or otherwise) on 'traditional' family structures. Crucially, however, Fassin (2001 : 225) links current and ongoing debates on filiation in the context of same-sex unions to broader concerns related to « *the French nation and nationalité through citizenship* » and the search for a relevant response to the question « *who is French, and who is not?* » (Fassin, 2001 : 232) Clearly, such concerns and the role played within them by questions of family and filiation can be understood within longer-term developments of French society in which, as Michel Fize (1998 : 20) sees it « *toute l'histoire de la famille, depuis 1945, se résume [...] à un inexorable déclin de la “puissance paternelle”* ».

The significance of links drawn between filiation and national identity, between family and nation, becomes increasingly pertinent when considered alongside, firstly, the rise in support for the Front National – up to and including Le Pen's victory over Lionel Jospin in the first round of the 2002 Presidential election – and, secondly, the role played in mainstream French political debates by questions related – whether in reality or in the popular imagination – to immigration. In short, « *the subject of immigration and the citizenship principle of jus soli*

---

<sup>1</sup> A version of this paper was delivered at the Mother and Creativity in French and Francophone Culture and Writing Conference at the University of Edinburgh in December 2006. I am grateful to the organisers and participants at the conference for their insightful feedback and questions. Thanks also to Kerri Woods, Sophie Feltrin, and *Glottopol's* anonymous reviewer for feedback, and to Jonathan Ervine for help tracking down materials on *Wesh Wesh*.

have become highly politicised » (Lefebvre, 2003 : 33). It is precisely the « *long struggle of the French government to balance jus soli and jus sanguinis principles* » (Lefebvre, 2003 : 34) which lie at the heart of questions of French citizenship and national belonging that means that the notion of filiation never seems to be far from the fore :

« [C]'est parce que les fils d'immigrés se rendent compte qu'ils sont français, que leur avenir est dans la France et qu'ils n'ont pas d'autre patrie, que soudain ces problèmes d'identité prennent une telle tournure » (Dahomay, 2005 : s.p.).

Fassin underlines the ways in which the centrality of filiation and filial relationships resonates across debates on ethnic, gendered, and sexual identities in the contemporary metropolitan French context. Indeed, according to Fassin (2001 : 225), the concept of « *filiation* » has become the « *cornerstone* » of rhetoric in public discourses in debates regarding the evolution of family structures in France<sup>2</sup> largely due to the perception that :

« [*f]iliation structures the human psyche (as a symbolic link between parent and child) and at the same time culture itself (as consanguinity complements affinity)* » (2001 : 225).

This article will take *banlieue* cinema as a cultural site in which these three distinct, yet related, strands of gendered, sexual, and ethnic identity come into contact – and often conflict – and will examine the verbal construction of the maternal figure and the filial relationship in a small selection of key *banlieue* films, including Jean-François Richet's *Ma 6-T va crack-er* (1997) and Malik Chibane's *Douce France* (1995). The analysis presented will demonstrate the ways in which these *banlieue* mothers often represent diverse cultural and national « *foyers de référence* », to use Azouz Begag and Abdellatif Chaouite's term (1990 : 47). Clearly, « *film uses language variation and accent to draw character quickly, building on established preconceived notions associated with specific regional loyalties, racial, ethnic or economic alliances* » (Lippi-Green in Queen, 2004 : 516) and, as such, there is an extent to which the depictions of *banlieue* mothers and filial relationships analysed here depend on a telescoping of such « *preconceived notions* ». However, I will argue against the oft-presented reductive reading which sees onscreen *banlieue* mothers – when it considers them at all – almost exclusively as traditional figures confined to a domestic setting. Particular attention will be paid to the ways in which the « *nique ta mère* » insult – and others based on the same model – illustrates the complexity of the maternal role in *banlieue* film, at once vilifying and sacralising both the mother and the filial relationship.

## Absent Parents?

The onscreen absence of parents in *banlieue* films is well documented in both scholarly and journalistic responses to the individual works and the movement as a whole. Schroeder (2001 : 153), for instance, in her comparative analysis of *La Haine* (Kassovitz, 1995), *Rai* (Gilou, 1995), and *Menace II Society* (Hughes and Hughes, 1991), describes the first of this trio of *banlieue*/'hood films as « *contain[ing] no fathers and barely any families* ». Tarr (2005 : 59) makes similar points in relation, first, to early *beur* cinema where « *the father figure [...] is marginalised or absent* », and then in response to a number of *banlieue* films. *La Haine* and *Etat des lieux* (Richet, 1995) are singled out as including « *no representation of the family background or living spaces of the beur youths* » (Tarr, 2005 : 77) while, in *Ma 6-T va crack-er* « *parents are noticeably absent from the diegesis and the authority figures who take their place [...] are openly mocked* » (Tarr, 2005 : 101). It is also worth noting that such responses are not limited solely to academic or critical discussions of the onscreen content of the films,

<sup>2</sup> Debate, for instance, rapidly broadened to encompass such issues as gay parenting and the right of gay and lesbian couples to adopt.

but rather are expanded to encompass analysis of the motivation of *banlieue* directors. *Libération*, for example, published a profile of Jean-François Richet in which great emphasis was placed by the author on the director's experience of filial relationships, or indeed the lack thereof :

« *Premier de trois enfants. Mère secrétaire. Père inconnu au bataillon, rayé de la carte du Tendre. "Je ne veux rien savoir de lui." Est-ce cette absence [...] qui cramponne Richet à son mutisme intérieur?* » (Devinat, 1997 : s.p.)

The films themselves frequently focus exclusively on the depiction of male characters between their mid-teens and their mid to late 20s, who may well still be living at home, but whose homes and families are, at most, glimpsed only as a backdrop in brief sequences. The central characters' lives seem to be lived in a variety of public locations, from waste grounds to underground car parks and high-rise rooftops.

However, while it is clear that the central focus of these films falls on their younger central characters, this is not to say that parents of both genders are equally « *absent from the diegesis* ». With a very small number of notable exceptions – Jean-Claude Brisseau's precursor to the *banlieue* movement *De Bruit et de fureur* (1988), for instance – *fathers* are almost entirely absent from the onscreen proceedings, just as they are absent from even a minimal narrative presence, be it physical or verbal. *Banlieue* mothers, on the other hand, although certainly not gaining anything even approaching prominence within the narrative of any *banlieue* works, do nevertheless succeed in carving out a position of significance on the narrative margins. In Mathieu Kassovitz's *La Haine*, for instance, alongside the close attention paid throughout to the lives of the exclusively male central trio of Vinz, Hubert, and Saïd, we find clear indications of the importance, at least on a symbolic level, of maternal and matriarchal figures such as Hubert's mother and Vinz's grandmother. Indeed, as Ginette Vincendeau (2005 : 65) points out :

« *Heads of families are female : aunts, mothers, grandmothers. Similarly, society's representatives are female (the television newscaster, the journalist)* ».

Other *banlieue* films such as *Raï*, *La Squale* (Genestal, 2000), and *Wesh Wesh, qu'est-ce qui se passe?* (Ameur-Zaïmeche, 2001)<sup>3</sup> for instance, have included some consideration of the development of intergenerational relationships, choosing as their focus those between central characters (both male and female) and their mothers, doting or otherwise. It is this often-overlooked filial relationship which forms the core of the analysis presented here.

## Identity Magnets in *Douce France*

While many commentators have chosen to focus on the absence of parental figures as a distinguishing feature of *banlieue* cinema, one particularly interesting example of the way in which this onscreen trend towards maternal absence is, in fact, bucked from the earliest stages of the movement comes in Malik Chibane's *Douce France*. Somewhat surprisingly for a *banlieue* work, we are introduced, not only to the two central female characters (Farida and Souad), but also to their mother, within the film's opening five minutes. This is unexpected not only because of the rarity of the focus on younger female protagonists, but also because the knock-on effect of this imbalance tends to be a total absence of mothers of female characters from the narrative. If we consider, for example, another of 1995's *banlieue* releases, Thomas Gilou's *Raï*, the mother of one female character does appear onscreen but only very briefly. The maternal figure who features most prominently in Gilou's work – and

<sup>3</sup> Following on from discussion of the importance of filiation to French sociopolitical debates, particularly in light of the rise in popularity of the Front National since the early 1980s, it is worth noting that *Wesh Wesh* was released between the first and second rounds of the 2002 presidential election. (Ervine, 2005 : s.p.)

even then occupies far less screen time than the parental figures in *Douce France* – is the mother of the two *male* central characters, Nordine and Djamel. Similarly, the concentration on the male trio at the core of *La Haine*, also released in 1995, means that there can be no depictions onscreen of mother-daughter relationships.

To return to *Douce France*, however, not only do Farida and Souad play central roles throughout the film, but the young women's mother is featured from the third minute of the film onwards. Her first words are an active attempt to stop an argument between her daughters and they come in a mixture of French and unsubtitled Arabic which overlaps with the considerations of Begag and Chaouite's (1990 : 47) « *double aimantation identificatoire* ». Farida and Souad's relationship is portrayed as antagonistic from the beginning of the scene as they argue, first, over clothes each accuses the other of having borrowed without asking for permission, and then over matters of tradition and nationality :

*Souad :* *J'ai la permission de la Farida d'entrer dans sa chambre?*

*Farida :* *Pour quoi faire?*

*Souad :* *Pour récupérer un de mes pulls acheté avec mes sous que tu mets tout le temps.*

*Farida :* *A ce propos, je voulais dire, évite de prendre mes sous-vêtements.*

*Souad :* *T'inquiètes pas, p'tite sœur, je me lave. Il y a pas que ceux qui font la prière qui sont nickels.*

[...]

*Farida :* *Tu sais, si tu veux jouer les Françaises, apprends au moins leur langue. Il y a pas que les cuisses qui s'ouvrent, il y a aussi les esprits.*

[...]

*Mother :* *[In French] Vous allez arrêter de vous disputer maintenant. [Switches to Arabic]*

A few moments later, we again see an argument erupting between Farida and Souad – this time over the latter's job working for the fast food restaurant chain Quick – and, once again, it is their mother who tempers the exchange with a mixture of French and unsubtitled Arabic. The following extract is taken from the end of the scene in question and illustrates the frequency of the switching from one language to the other:

*Souad :* *[About Farida] Elle est fatigante, en ce moment.*

*Mother :* *[First speaks Arabic, then switches into French] Dis-moi, à quelle heure tu quittes, ce soir?*

*Souad :* *[...] Je fais deux services aujourd'hui. Au revoir.*

*Mother :* *[Replies in Arabic]*

These exchanges between Farida, Souad, and their mother, with their mixture of French and Arabic, serve to indicate that dialogue is possible between and across the two implicit « *foyers de référence* ». Moreover, they clearly demonstrate that it is frequently the mother who acts as a conduit for this transcultural, linguistic exchange. As in another early *banlieue* film mentioned above – *Rai* – the bilingual interruptions in *Douce France* also indicate that both children, although presumably metropolitan-French born, nevertheless understand the Arabic dialect spoken by their mother. Furthermore, they demonstrate that all three parties are used to exchanges in which there is a degree of code-switching from one language to another without loss of intelligibility, illustrating that, while some may fear that this leads to a « *zone d'interférence [linguistique] qui est aussi un espace de malaise et de brouillage* » (Begag, 1997 : 33), in fact :

« le mélange est le mode de communication normale entre pairs. [...] Le codeswitching établit une complicité, une intimité » (Caubet, 2002 : 124).

An interesting development of this form of code-switching can be found in *Wesh Wesh Qu'est-ce qui se passe ?* where the parents of the central character Kamel, but more specifically his mother, have an important role to play throughout the narrative. We hear Kamel's mother speaking broken French at times but, throughout most of the film, she speaks (subtitled) dialectal Arabic, whether to her husband, or to her children, or, for example, to the waitress serving tea in her local *hammam*. Again, as in *Douce France*, although her interlocutors tend to respond in French, there is no implication of a lack of understanding on their part. What does become clear, however, is that the mother herself has only a limited grasp of the linguistic subtleties of French and, although she can follow the broad gist of conversations, she does not always understand the detail. The film focuses on Kamel, the family's eldest son, who illegally returns to France, having been sent to Algeria under the « *double peine* » sanction. Kamel enters into a relationship with a white French schoolteacher, of whom his mother disapproves as we discover when the woman visits the family home to try and find her partner. She meets with the mother and it is Kamel's sister who acts as an interpreter of sorts, relying at once on her own understanding of Arabic and the schoolteacher's lack of knowledge thereof, and on her mother's difficulties with French. The mother issues forth a series of complaints, threats, and expressions of disapproval, all in subtitled Arabic and thus understood by the film's audience, but all of which are deliberately mistranslated or toned down by the daughter, eager to avoid conflict. A clash between layers of 'tradition' and 'modernity' is played out here across the spoken dialogue and the written subtitles. In this way, as Tarr (2005 : 180) has observed, *Wesh Wesh* « *draws attention to gender difference in the expectations of young people of North African descent* ».

To return to the depiction of *banlieue* mothers, whereas the use of Arabic by Nordine and Djamel's mother in *Raï* could be seen to emphasise the strength of her connections with a mythical 'homeland', the switching between French and Arabic by Farida and Souad's mother in *Douce France* indicates a more complex and multi-layered culture of belonging. Firstly, although unsubtitled, there is no indication from either the behavioural or the verbal responses of the daughters that their mother's words are, in any way, simply expressions of 'homeland' traditions or beliefs as is the case in *Raï*. Secondly, and more significantly, what the mother says in French during the first ten minutes of the film clearly suggests a sense of belonging which is rooted in the customs of France as much as it is 'other' to them.

The initial argument scenes are followed by an encounter between the mother and a salesman trying to sell spy holes for the front doors of the flats in her apartment block. When the mother opens the door, the young, white salesman's immediate response is to ask whether she speaks French and to say, before she has time to respond that, if she does not, he has men who speak all manner of other languages associated with ex-French colonies (*le wolof, le peul*). The mother's response is striking :

« Tu étais pas déjà né quand je vivais dans cet immeuble. »

In grammatically incorrect French, the mother expresses a long-standing connection not only with metropolitan France on a national level, but indeed a far more deep-rooted *local* connection. Hers is not a recent immigration, nor has it proved to be a period of transition. The salesman is in his mid to late twenties, so the mother is clearly suggesting that her presence on French soil started more than two decades earlier. Clearly, the irony here is manifold : the salesman bases his query as to whether another language may be required on the physical appearance of the woman, she takes offence at the suggestion and when she responds in French which is comprehensible but not 'grammatically correct',<sup>4</sup> her response

<sup>4</sup> We also discover, in this same scene, that the mother is illiterate and, later, that the mother of Moussa, one of the male central characters, is innumerate.



seems to suggest that her own long-term presence in the block establishes her as a more 'senior' French citizen than he is. While criticism can be levelled at Chibane in relation to some aspects of the film – for example, in his construction of a relatively simplistic binary opposition between the modern sister (Souad) and her traditional counterpart (Farida) – his depiction of the figure of the mother gives a clear indication of the underlying complexities of both of these identities.

An interesting parallel to this sequence can be found in *Inch'Allah Dimanche* (Benguigui, 2001), which, although set in the provincial town of St Quentin and thus not strictly speaking in a *banlieue* setting, deals with similar subject matter, depicting the experiences of Zouina, a young Maghrebi woman who comes to France to join her husband accompanied by her children and mother-in-law. The film depicts Zouina's sense of cultural and social isolation and the difficulties she faces both within and outwith the home. One of her main sources of comfort comes from listening to French radio while she cooks and cleans. She becomes an avid listener of the « *radio advice programme of Mérie Grégoire, thanks to which she begins to learn not just French but also a way of conceptualising her desires and fears* » (Tarr, 2005 : 176). However, she also grows particularly fond of France Inter's « *Jeu des Mille Francs* ». On the one hand, we see the ways in which this cultural reference point is shared between Zouina and her white French neighbour as the camera cuts between the two women listening to the same programme. On the other hand, however, when a vacuum salesman knocks on Zouina's door, it is a combination of her fascination for the programme and the salesman's slightly underhand exploitation of this fascination that leads Zouina to sign a contract to buy one of the cleaners he is selling, much to the subsequent anger of her husband. The salesman's pitch involves a riddle, the answer to which is « *vacuum cleaner* », and it is the format of his pitch that Zouina mistakes for her much-loved radio programme. When she timidly asks, through the still-closed front door, « *c'est le Jeu des Mille Francs ?* », the salesman immediately spots his way in and responds in the affirmative, albeit by adding one crucial word :

« *Oui, madame, c'est comme le Jeu des Mille Francs.* »

The expression of the mother's feeling of belonging is not limited in *Douce France* to the reference to the length of time she has lived in the flat, but is compounded later in the same conversation by a reference to money. The salesman continues his pitch, trying to convince her to purchase one of the spy holes, and eventually tells her the price. Again the mother's response is striking and unexpected, as she asks « *Ça fait combien en anciens?* »<sup>5</sup>, in reference to the *anciens francs*, official French currency until the conversion to *nouveaux francs* in 1960. Once more, this indicates that the mother's « *foyer de référence* » encompasses elements of the evolution of France as a nation. The terms of reference which are significant to her are, at least in some domains, those of the 'host' nation, alongside those of the mythical 'homeland.' Furthermore, we can observe that, on some levels, « *ethnicity itself is an interactional achievement* » (Lo, 1999 : 475) and crucially one in which, despite an oft-cited diegetic absence, onscreen *banlieue* mothers can, in fact, participate actively in their own right.

---

<sup>5</sup> This reference to *anciens francs* is far less remarkable in, for example, *Belle Maman* (Aghion, 1999) when Léa (Catherine Deneuve) asks the same question because there it is interpreted as an indication of her belonging to a particular generation of French citizens. In *Douce France*, it is not only a generational marker, but also serves as an unexpected marker of national belonging.

## Sacralising Filiation

Shifting our focus from mothers to mother-child relationships in *banlieue* film, there is, however, a specific linguistic feature to be found in a great number of *banlieue* films which may be seen to embody an explicit engagement with Fassin's (2001 : 232) notion of the « *sacralisation of filiation* ». This feature is particularly prominent in the dialogue of such works as Jean-François Richet's *Ma 6-T va crack-er*. Here, the action centres on the members of two gangs of youths and « *parents are notably absent from the diegesis* » (Tarr, 2005 : 101). While parents are, indeed, absent from the *diegesis*, they are still referred to in exchanges between other characters and it is worth highlighting, for example, a scene in which members of the elder gang, discussing the (in their view) unjustified incursion into *banlieue* territory by the police, explicitly connect the inappropriateness of police presence to the sacred status of the family. Their objection seems not to be to police intervention *per se*, at least not in this scene, but specifically to the ensuing loss of face which they suffer : « *C'est pas beau là. Devant la famille et tout là.* » Clearly the family still has an impact and is still viewed as deserving of respect, despite its apparent diegetic absence, and the youths in question see themselves as responsible for guaranteeing that respect be obtained and observed.

The specific verbal feature in question depends precisely on this respect for key family roles and is a form of parallel sacralisation and vilification of female figures through insults which make specific reference to their place within family structures. It rarely, if ever, actually occurs within a parent-child conversation, but it is at all times closely linked to questions of both gender and ethnic identity. The phenomenon in question is the construction of the insult « *nique ta mère* » or « *nique ta sœur* » which are clearly dependent upon a particular symbolic status being accorded to the figure of the mother or, indeed, the sister. I refer to a parallel sacralisation and vilification through such insults because, on the one hand, the figure of the mother/sister is clearly objectified through them while, on the other hand, being raised to almost sacred status and viewed as a figure who is inviolable and should be respected.<sup>6</sup>

One of the most striking usages of a variation of the basic insult is to be found in a scene from *Ma 6-T va crack-er* which involves members of a gang of secondary school age youths and their basketball coach during a training session. It is significant to note that this particular altercation evolves against the backdrop of a game, or, more precisely, a situation which sees the school-age youths at what might be termed 'organised play' only involving their same-sex peers, under the supervision of an older, male coach. The influence of such settings in the development of « *gender-specific "cultures"* » (Maltz and Borker, 1997 : 203) is well-documented and we can clearly observe here that the « *social world of boys is one of posturing and counterposturing* » (Maltz and Borker, 1997 : 207). Furthermore, this exchange, and others constructed on a similar model across *banlieue* cinema, can clearly be read as an indication that the verbal identity constructions operated by onscreen *banlieue* youths simultaneously depend on an engagement with the terms of both standardised linguistic and cultural practices and with what Halliday (1976) has termed « *anti-language* ». In other words, just as onscreen *banlieue* mothers are embedded in multiple « *foyers de*

<sup>6</sup> It should be noted that there is an obvious parallel here with the US-English insult « *motherfucker* » and one can point, once again, towards an overlap between gendered and ethnic identities with the influence of American culture spreading to aspects of contemporary French language usage. However, the key difference lies in the fact that « *motherfucker* », at its root, implies sexual possession of the mother by the addressee of the insult. The French model « *nique ta mère* », on the other hand, allows, firstly, for a degree of variation within the established model and, secondly, represents a potential strategy whereby the insulter can, in fact, assert his own position of dominance over the addressee by symbolically deciding who will be allowed to carry out the act of sexual possession, ie « *on va niquer ta mère* », « *ta mère, je la nique* », etc.

*référence* », so too are their sons' cultures of belonging anchored within, across, and, indeed, against diverse layers of society, creating a « *“second-life” reality* » whose « *status as an alternative, under constant pressure from the reality that is “out there” [...] and especially its power to create and maintain social hierarchy, is strongly foregrounded* » (Halliday 1976 : 574).

As the training session progresses, tempers become steadily more frayed, with scuffles breaking out and the coach attempting to assert a degree of control over the proceedings, gently reminding the youths that basketball should not be a contact sport. One youth in particular becomes involved in a series of short-lived but brutal fights with other players, from whom the coach physically prises him away. The scene ends with a violent stream of abuse between the youths who are being restrained physically by figures who represent masculine authority, the series of insults issued revolving around the « *nique ta mère* » paradigm and questions of filial relationships :

*First youth : Lâche-moi, bâtard.*

*Second youth : On va niquer ta mère.*

*Coach : On se calme, calme-toi. On se calme.*

*First youth : Ta mère, je la baise, ta mère, je la baise, fils de pute. Lâche-moi.*

Particularly striking here are the ways in which the youths' attempts to assert their own dominance within the peer group revolve around sexual possession and sexual objectification of the mother, but also, crucially, denigration specifically of the mother-son relationship. The first youth, for instance, refers to the second as « *bâtard* » and « *fils de pute* », both of which, though ostensibly directed at the second youth, are in fact insults which depend, for their strength, on the implication of impurity of the parent and, by extension, a weakened blood bond between parental figure and son. As Maltz and Borker (1997 : 207) have observed « *relative status in [the] ever-fluctuating hierarchy [of male peer groups] is the main thing that boys learn to manipulate in their interactions with their peers* ». This tendency manifests itself here, insofar as we see the switch from the first youth's direct address to a single individual to the second youth's response which, through his use of the informal plural form « *on* » indicates that he is placing himself in a position of some authority within the group. The implication here is that the second youth sees himself as having sufficient dominance to be able to speak for the group.

However, a second switch is then effected by which the first youth attempts to assert his own dominance through his use of the first and second-person singular forms, embarking on a form of verbal jousting that fits within a schema of male discourse strategies based on « *a competitive use of language tied to the assertion and maintenance of power* » (Cheshire 2000 : 235). On this reading, the implication of the first youth's final repeated insult (« *ta mère, je la baise* ») is that, while his interlocutor's power was asserted through relative status as leader of a group, the first youth sees his own position as being sufficiently dominant to allow him to issue threats that would not depend on the help of other members of the peer group.

While, in this example, the focus of the threats issued is placed exclusively on the maternal figure, other examples could have been chosen in which the figure at the centre of the insult would have been the sister with little perceptible difference in the force, or otherwise, of the insult on the basis of the central figure chosen. The threat issued by the second youth in this exchange is ostensibly directed, not towards his immediate opponent, but rather towards his mother and the symbolic position that both youths see her as holding. Were it not for an implicit recognition of the respect due to this traditionally gendered role, the insult here would lose its force, but both youths appear to acknowledge the implicit inviolability of the maternal figure. The coach, in turn, certainly recognises the insult as a potential trigger for further



violence and, while the youths use switches between « *on* » and « *je* » as a means of reasserting their place within a gendered social hierarchy, the coach opts for a more conciliatory use of « *on* » which might be translated by « *let's calm down now* ».

Rather than arguing, as some observers have done, that this « *langue des banlieues [... constitue] un phénomène circonstancié, territorialement et socialement, et incapable d'évolution* » (Begag, 1997 : 36), what is particularly striking here and in similar exchanges which are to be found across *banlieue* films is, in fact, the complex representation of gendered parenthood which emerges. The misogyny of the insults is undeniable<sup>7</sup> :

« *On sait combien dans les banlieues le maniement de l'insulte est chose banale. [...] Banale donc pour les garçons qui entretiennent par leur langage un rapport de virilité avec/contre les filles, à l'âge de toutes les épreuves machistes. Les insultes attaquent l'autre par la femme* » (Moïse, 2002 : 48).

However the insult can be viewed in both negative and positive terms in relation to the view of gender it offers. In negative terms, the insult as formulated here in *Ma 6-T va crack-er* clearly implies the sexual possession of its addressee's mother and, as such, contains sexual violence of a verbal nature which serves to construct women, through the symbolic figure of the mother, as objects possessed through sex. The fact that these insults are issued here by male youths of school age only contributes to this due to their sexual immaturity.

However, at the same time as the mother/sister is being objectified, there is also an inescapable implicit recognition on the part of the insulter that the mother/sister *should*, in fact, be a figure worthy of respect.

« *Symboliquement, le garçon qui réagit à des insultes telles que "fils de pute", "nique ta mère", ou simplement "ta mère" se conduit bel et bien en responsable et en garant de l'honneur des femmes de son groupe* » (Lepoutre, 2001 : 365).

The force of the insult resides in the fact that it targets symbolic female figures who, within the hierarchy of the traditional family structure, are to be respected, and indeed protected, in particular by their sons. The impact of the insult is thus to be observed on three distinct levels. Firstly, there is a misogynistic sexual violence directed towards an absent<sup>8</sup> female figure. Secondly, there is an implicit accusation of weakness targeted towards the sons, insofar as they are powerless to stop the symbolic violence. And thirdly – and this is where the parallel sacralisation and vilification meets Fassin's argument – the insults, when focussed on the figure of the mother, become, by extension, allegations of impurity of family name or bloodline.<sup>9</sup>

### Intersecting « *Foyers de référence* »

It is this final level of insult which is most significant in the current context, since it exists in a body of films which the evidence adduced here shows to be constructing complex and fractured gendered (and ethnic) subjectivities, and it is this inherent paradox which has been overlooked in critiques of these films and of *banlieue* cinema. The mothers in *banlieue* films

<sup>7</sup> I have found no cinematic examples in which the insult would be transformed to become « *nique ton père* » or « *nique ton frère* », but rather it appears to be uniquely directed towards female family members. There are, however, examples to be found in the lyrics of some French punk and rap. (See, for instance, « *l'feu nique sa mère et son père* » in « Numéro 10 » by Booba, <http://taniadu29.skyblog.com/> accessed on September 20<sup>th</sup> 2005)

<sup>8</sup> There are no examples in the corpus of films examined here in which such insults would be used when either the mother or the sister in question was actually present onscreen during the scene. Indeed, quite often, as here in *Ma 6-T va crack-er*, the mother being insulted is not even a character within the diegesis.

<sup>9</sup> An interesting parallel can be drawn here with an insult directed towards Moussa in *Douce France*, when an acquaintance goads him by saying « *vous êtes bien des harkis, de père en fils, dans la famille* ». The implication in the insult here is that the 'treachery' of one generation can be transmitted to the next, from father to son. Whereas the « *nique ta mère* » insults are based, in part, on the sons' symbolic inability to protect the mother, here it is the honour of a family name which is being damaged.

are not simply torn between what Begag and Chaouite have termed binary «*foyers de référence*» but rather they emerge from the intersection of these spheres. Onscreen mothers (and fathers) in *banlieue* works can, indeed, be analysed in terms of their adherence to the perception of a traditional Maghrebi family structure or as dysfunctional families, in a contemporary sense, but neither of these analyses alone can encompass the complexities of the gendered identities which emerge. The complexity which is expressed here through «*nique ta mère*» type insults brings into dialogue considerations of complex gendered subjectivities, with reference to Fassin's discussion of consanguinity and filiation, and fractured, multi-layered ethnic identities.

The initial «*nique ta mère*» is frequently followed by a parallel «*nique ta race*» which serves to underline the symbolism of the maternal figure representing alleged purity of 'race'.<sup>10</sup> The paradox, therefore, lies in an encounter between the complexities of gendered identities discussed above, in terms of plural intersections of gender and ethnicity around tropes of tradition, modernity, and integration, and an implicit purity of belonging which underlies the frequent usage of «*nique ta mère*» type insults.<sup>11</sup> It is not the sexual violence in itself which is deemed to be most offensive, either by insulter or insulted party. Rather it is the implicit allegation it brings with it regarding the purity of the maternal figure and, by means of the frequent jump from «*mère*» to «*race*», the parallel denigration of ethnic belonging, as well as, by extension, the force of the accusation indirectly levelled at the insulted party. After all, if, in a set of social and linguistic circumstances within which filiation is of paramount concern, such insults are directed towards representatives of the parental generation, these necessarily bring into play parallel considerations of the status of the next generation. If an accusation of 'impurity' is levelled at *banlieue* mothers, it is clear that the insult also revolves around its implications for the offspring of these mothers. The sins of the mother, in this case, are visited upon the children. And all of this is clearly paradoxical when considered alongside the intersecting gendered and ethnic identities discussed above with, on the one hand, onscreen *banlieue* youths carving out a position at the interface of cultures while, on the other hand, attempting to do so by maintaining a perceived "purity" of strands of origin.

On the one hand then, onscreen mothers, as in *Douce France*, for instance, are represented as emerging from an overlap between cultures and the focus of the narrative of such films is often on the impact that this overlap has on the children's generation. On the other hand, through the frequent use of insults constructed on the «*nique ta mère*» model, they are constructed as figures of 'pure', unsullied, origin. It is not the hybridised maternal identity which is being tarnished through these insults, but rather, ironically, a mythically pure maternal identity, viewed at once as the safeguard of tradition and a culture of origin, and as a conduit for exchange between this culture of origin and metropolitan France.

Furthermore, symbolically, the mother figure is to be protected, otherwise the insults would have no force, but, specifically, she is to be protected by the son from sexual possession which clearly feeds into established patterns of patriarchal family hierarchies. Regardless of the presence or absence of the father figure, the son, within this traditionally gendered set up, takes on the role of family protector and *ersatz* patriarch. So, at the same time as we find, in some *banlieue* works, evidence of the complexities of gendered identities as witnessed through the prism of family relations, we also have the frequent usage of insults

<sup>10</sup> Consider, for instance, in *Louise (Take 2)* (Siegfried, 1998), the line «*je lui nique sa mère, tu comprends? Je lui nique sa race*», which encapsulates the jump from mother to race.

<sup>11</sup> Other examples could have been examined here which would have contributed to this analysis. In *Rai*, for instance, there is a scene involving three of the central characters and a relatively light-hearted exchange (certainly compared to the violence of the exchange highlighted here in *Ma 6-T va crack-er*) composed primarily of insults directed towards the mother of one of the characters, including, for instance, «*ta mère couche avec deux Renois [Noirs]*».

which serve to strengthen a more traditional view of the gender relations in operation within a family. However, rather than taking this usage and viewing it, alone, as straightforward evidence of sexism within onscreen *banlieue* families, I argue that it is vital to consider it alongside other facets of the representation of gendered identities and to analyse it as but one part of a complex web of intersecting identities.

## Bibliography

- ADAMS K. L. and A. WINTER, 1997, « Gang Graffiti as a Discourse Genre », in *Journal of Sociolinguistics* 1 : 3, pp. 337-360.
- BEGAG A., 1997, « Trafic de mots en banlieue : du “Nique ta mere” au “Plaît-il?” », in *Migrants-Formation* 108, pp. 30-37.
- BEGAG A. and A. CHAOUITE, 1990, *Ecarts d'identité*, Seuil, Paris.
- CAUBET D., 2002, « Métissages linguistiques ici (en France) et là-bas (au Maghreb) », in *Ville-Ecole-Intégration Enjeux* 130, pp. 117-132.
- CHESHIRE J., 2000, « The telling or the tale ? Narratives and Gender in Adolescent Friendship Networks », in *Journal of Sociolinguistics* 4 : 2, pp. 234-262.
- DAHOMAY J., 2005, « Pour une nouvelle identité républicaine », in *Le Monde*, April 14<sup>th</sup>, ([www.lemonde.fr](http://www.lemonde.fr)).
- DEVINAT F., 1997 « Luther des classes. Jean-François Richet. Profil », in *Libération*, July 2<sup>nd</sup>, ([www.liberation.fr](http://www.liberation.fr)).
- ERVINE J., 2005, « Films in the Campaign Against the *Double Peine*, 2001-3 », Paper delivered at the Association for the Study of Modern and Contemporary France Annual Conference.
- FASSIN E., 2001, « Same Sex, Different Politics : “Gay Marriage” Debates in France and the United States », in *Public Culture*, 13 : 2, pp. 215-232.
- FIZE M., 1998, « L'Autorité maltraitée... et revendiquée », in *Migrants-Formation*, 112, pp.20-25.
- HALLIDAY M. A. K., 1976, « Anti-languages », *American Anthropologist* 78, pp. 570-584.
- LEFEBVRE E. L., 2003, « Republicanism and Universalism : Factors of Inclusion or Exclusion in the French Concept of Citizenship », in *Citizenship Studies*, 7 : 1, pp. 15-36.
- LEPOUTRE D., 2001, *Cœur de banlieue. Codes, rites et langages*, Odile Jacob, Paris.
- LO, A., 1999, « Codeswitching, speech community membership, and the construction of ethnic identity », in *Journal of Sociolinguistics*, 3/4, pp. 461-479.
- MALTZ, D. N. and R. A. BORKER, 1997, « A Cultural Approach to Male-Female Miscommunication », in *Language and Social Identity*, J. Gumperz (ed.), Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, pp. 196-216.
- MOISE C., 2002, « Pratiques langagières des banlieues : où sont les femmes ? », in *Ville-Ecole-Intégration Enjeux* 128, pp. 46-60.
- ORLANDO V., 2003, « From Rap to Raï in the Mixing Bowl : Beur Hip-Hop Culture and Banlieue Cinema in Urban France », in *Journal of Popular Culture*, 36 : 3, pp. 395-415.
- QUEEN R., 2004, « “Du hast jar keene Ahnung” : African American English Dubbed Into German », in *Journal of Sociolinguistics* 8 : 4, pp. 515-537.
- SCHROEDER E., 2001, « A Multicultural Conversation : *La Haine*, *Raï*, and *Menace II Society* », in *Camera Obscura* 46, 16 : 1, pp. 143-179.
- SEGUIN B. and F. TEILLARD, 1996, *Les Céfrans parlent aux Français*, Calmann-Lévy, Paris.

- STYCHIN C., 2001, « Civil Solidarity or Fragmented Identities ? The Politics of Sexuality and Citizenship in France », in *Social & Legal Studies*, 10 : 3, pp. 347-375.
- TARR C., 2005, *Reframing Difference. Beur and Banlieue Filmmaking in France*, Manchester University Press, Manchester and New York.
- VINCENDEAU G., 2005, *La Haine*, University of Illinois Press, Urbana and Chicago.
- <http://taniadu29.skyblog.com/>, 2005, (Accessed on September 20<sup>th</sup>).

## Filmography

- Belle Maman* (Aghion, 1999)
- De Bruit et de fureur* (Brisseau, 1989)
- Douce France* (Chibane, 1995)
- Etat des lieux* (Richet, 1995)
- Inch'Allah Dimanche* (Benguigui, 2001)
- La Haine* (Kassovitz, 1995)
- La Squale* (Genestal, 2000)
- Ma 6-T va crack-er* (Richet, 1997)
- Menace II Society* (Hughes and Hughes, 1991)
- Rai* (Gilou, 1995)
- Wesh Wesh, qu'est-ce qui se passe?* (Ameur-Zaïmeche, 2001)