

THE SHIFTING BOUNDARIES OF GENDER POLITICS AND *LAÏCITÉ*:  
AN ETHNOGRAPHY OF FIRST-GENERATION MUSLIM MAGHREBIAN WOMEN  
IN A PARISIAN *BANLIEUE*

By

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## ABSTRACT

Muslim women in France are at the centre of public debates about religion in the public sphere, gender politics and immigration. The *hijab* or Islamic headscarf has become emblematic of these issues. Based on ethnographic research in Petit Nanterre, a suburb 15 kilometres northwest of Paris, this dissertation examines various actors who seek to compartmentalize or shape Muslim women's identities. I begin with academic anthropological approaches to Islam and women, and with changing legal and popular definitions in France of *laïcité* (French secularism) and its relationship to Islam. I then argue that the continued marriage-partner preference for "traditional" North African women expressed by male North African immigrants constrains the identity politics of local women, while a "cultural freezing" phenomena instils greater social pressure to enact and renegotiate certain cultural and religious mores in the *banlieue*. These cultural preferences are fortified by local gossip focused on women's religious and sexual propriety and by the Panopticon-like architecture of the housing projects. French feminist organizations like *Femmes Solidaires* ("Women in Solidarity") often hold neo-Orientalist positions, seeking to "save" Muslim women in the *banlieue*, and ultimately reinforcing negative stereotypes about the headscarf and gender politics in Muslim communities. I conclude that the women of Petit Nanterre themselves move within and without these categories as postcolonial "hybrids".

While French social scientists and journalists have focused on the adaptational difficulties Muslims face in a nation legally and philosophically committed to secularism, there have been few academic studies undertaken from an ethnographic perspective focused on first-generation Muslim Maghrebian women living in the *banlieue*. My research emphasizes their voices and migratory experiences. I demonstrate that French Muslim women are key actors in promoting the visibility of Muslims in the West and in contemporary linkages between gender politics and religion in the public sphere.

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## **An Ethnography of a Parisian *Banlieue***

*In an empty field in Nanterre  
There were stolen mopeds on the ground  
And all the cops with your bitter looks  
We spit in your faces and on your old caps  
Me and my buddies from the area, we show solidarity  
For better or for worse in our bloody histories (Belade 1994: 144).<sup>1</sup>*

This first chapter sets the scene for the fieldwork I undertook from 2004-2006 with first-generation Maghrebian Muslim women in a suburban Parisian neighbourhood, 15 kilometers northwest of Paris, France. Petit Nanterre is an enclave neighbourhood of 8200 habitants.<sup>2</sup> While describing the specific features of this space, I also aim to consider the *banlieue* (suburb) phenomenon within the industrial outer limits of Paris more broadly, both in its historical and contemporary manifestations and as a central location for immigrant populations. The contrast between Petit Nanterre, the Parisian *banlieue* which is the focus of this dissertation, and the nearby neighbourhood of Neuilly-sur-Seine, one of the most socio-economically elite regions of Paris just past the Arc de Triomphe, is startling. Common images of Paris in the collective Western popular imagination and in artistic renditions from the nineteenth and twentieth centuries do not include these industrial and concrete suburban regions outside the city's periphery, laden with non descript high-rises built in the 1960s. The immigrant populations which now

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<sup>1</sup> All translations from French to English are my own, unless otherwise noted. « Dans un terrain vague de Nanterre / Il y avait des mobylettes volées par terre / Et tous les flics avec vos regards amers / On vous crache à la gueule et sur vos calots de vieilles rombières / Moi et mes potes de la zone sommes tous solidaires / Pour le meilleur et le pire de nos histoires sanguinaires » (Belade 1994 : 144).

<sup>2</sup> According to the most recent municipal records (based on 1999 INSEE data, the *Institut National de la Statistique et des Études Économiques* or the National Institute for Statistics and Economic Studies), Petit Nanterre had 8197 residents, down sizably (by 1155) from 1990 figures. The population of the larger city of Nanterre (including Petit Nanterre) has remained more stable (84528 in 1990 and 84270 in 1999). In comparison with the city of Nanterre and with the larger Hauts-de-Seine district, the neighbourhood is dominated by the 25-59 age group (in 1999 at 49.6% of the population). There are slightly more men than women (4490 and 3707 respectively).

populate these suburban areas often shared the stereotypical glamorous image of Paris when they migrated to France, largely from North Africa.

Originating mostly in the former colonies of the Maghreb – Algeria, Tunisia, and Morocco – North Africans account for 8-20% of the total French population, and are the largest Muslim population in Western Europe. The actual percentage is unknown as the secular French state does not gather statistical information regarding religious participation or affiliation. Similarly, the closest approximation available on the ethnic origins of the French population is through data published on the nationality of residents. Alex Hargreaves notes that these omissions have political explanations: “The statistical lacunae generated by the state reflect a long-standing unwillingness at the highest level officially to recognize immigrants and their descendents as structurally identifiable groups within French society” (Hargreaves 2007: 11). Max Silverman similarly distinguishes between those who are statistically referred to as immigrants and those who are popularly understood as such (Silverman 1992: 37). Statistics concerning ethnic origin, in this instance North African, are interpreted to account for religious affiliation, in this case Muslim. Thus, people of North African origin in France are counted as Muslim for the purposes of gauging shifts within the Republic’s religious demography. In the very publicly *laïque* (secular) space of France, the same cannot be said of the *Français de Souche* (ethnically “French French”); Roman Catholic religious affiliation is not automatically attributed to them for statistical purposes.

Petit Nanterre is located in the far eastern section of the city of Nanterre which is itself, as French sociologist Martine Segalen describes, a city with a medley of urban

spaces and populations (1990). Nanterre is comprised of eight neighbourhoods; here I mention Nanterre Ville, Nanterre Préfecture and Petit Nanterre. Its old centre in Nanterre Ville possesses a certain chic-ness with its turn-of-the-century pavilion-style homes and small commercial shops. This centre with its beautiful gardens is surrounded by housing projects which border Nanterre Préfecture, a large municipal government building built when Nanterre was selected as the capital of the French *Département des Hautes-de-Seine* in 1968. Also next to Nanterre is *La Défense*, Paris' central financial and business district. Segalen notes that not only is the city's identity confused, but so too is its negative reputation (1990: 9).<sup>3</sup> While this reputation reflects a general stigma attached to the *banlieue*, of all the city's regions, Petit Nanterre is particularly disfavored because of its relative isolation and lack of viable public transportation, and because of the high number of homeless people from Paris that frequent the neighbourhood.<sup>4</sup> Thus, although its landscape parallels that of other Parisian suburbs, its former large shantytown of almost 14,000 (dismantled in the early 1960s), the unusually high concentration of Algerians, its acute physical separation from the city of Nanterre, the tremendous number of homeless wandering around as well as important drug-trafficking make Petit Nanterre somewhat more well-known.<sup>5</sup> As Jacques Guével, the director of one of the community

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<sup>3</sup> In her comparison between Petit Nanterre and the rest of Nanterre Martine Segalen makes an interesting point. Based on the social-scientific research she undertook for *Nanterriens: Les Familles dans la Ville* (1990), she deems the forms of sociability among Arabs in the city as comparable to those which existed among the French working class in the 1930s (1990: 143).

<sup>4</sup> This community is cut off from the remainder of the city by the A86 highway; a series of railway tracks (for the SNCF, the *Société Nationale des Chemins de Fer*, and the RER, or the *Réseau Express Régional* trains) connecting Paris to the University Paris X in Nanterre and to the city centre of Nanterre; and by the difficulty of passing over the Rouen Bridge, particularly for pedestrians. The physical boundaries of the neighbourhood are thus clear.

<sup>5</sup> The CASH (*Centre d'Accueil et de Soins Hospitaliers* or the Welcome and Hospital Care Centre) was formerly a set of buildings used by the Paris Police force, later occupied by the Germans in the Second



centres who lives in the neighbourhood noted in an interview, “While our isolation is often exaggerated, it’s true that nothing promotes our ties to Nanterre, either through the lay-out of the neighbourhood or by virtue of its mostly unemployed, largely North African population” (Interview April 5, 2005). Petit Nanterre has been classified as a *Zone Urbaine Sensible* (ZUS or a Sensitive Urban Zone), which means that it receives extra funding, but it is also plagued with high levels of unemployment (INSEE 1999: 4). Its public schools have similarly been classified as a *Zone d’Éducation Prioritaire* (ZEP or a Priority Educational Zone).

As I will detail in this chapter, since the first demolition of the neighbourhood’s former large shanty-town in the late 1950s, Petit Nanterre has also been characterized by a division into two sections at the Rue de l’Agriculture. These two areas are known as the *Cité des Pâquerettes* and the *Cité des Canibouts* (see Map 1 in Appendix 1). Most of the neighbourhood’s buildings are HLMs (*Habitation Loyer Modérée*, or Public Housing Apartments), although there are a dozen independent detached homes on the far side of the Rue de la République. There are a total of 2508 HLM residences, of which 2065 were built before 1975, 42 between 1975 and 1989 and 401 since 1990. The community holds a local government office (the *Mairie du quartier*), two gymnasiums, two youth centres (Zy’va and GAO), two daycares, one hospital (combining traditional hospital care and the CASH Centre), a retirement home, a shopping area, one public library, a social organization (Association Nadha) and two community centres (the *Centre Social Valérie*

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World War and now a hospital (named after Max Fourestier), a homeless shelter and a retirement home. Today the CASH hospital can hold 250 homeless every evening who are released at 6:30am.

*Méot* or the Valérie Méot Community Centre, and the *Centre Social des Canibouts* or the Canibouts Community Centre).

One young Algerian who arrived in the-then *bidonville* (shanty-town) of Petit Nanterre as a child in 1959 recalls in his fictionalized life story that

It is in this filthy place [the then-shanty-town of Petit Nanterre] that we will live in unimaginable conditions for many long years, less than 3 kilometers ‘as the crow flies’, from Paris and the Champs-Élysées (Brahim 1992: 44).

Benaïcha Brahim’s ironically titled *Vivre au Paradis* (1992), an account of growing up in Petit Nanterre, vividly captures the deceptive experience of arriving in a dirty, muddy “Paradise” from sub-Saharan Algeria.<sup>6</sup> The shanty-town in which Brahim lived with his parents and nine siblings radically shifted in the 1960s when a private French building management company, Logirep, and the municipality of Nanterre, co-funded by the *Département* and the French national government, began tearing down the nearly one thousand shacks and replacing them with high and low-rise public housing equipped with electricity and running water. While these social housing projects are now often described unfavourably, they offered an immediate and considerable improvement to the conditions of the shanty-town. Public housing was built beginning in the late 1950s through to the 1970s. Today residents live in these same social housing projects (or HLMs) in a neighbourhood with notable unemployment. According to the most recent municipal records (using 1999 INSEE data), while the national unemployment rate in France in

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<sup>6</sup> *Vivre au Paradis* was made into a film by the same name by a Belgium filmmaker in 1998. While the book chronicles the experiences of the young boy, the film focuses more on the experience of Brahim’s father, a construction worker, whose extreme loneliness in his separation from his family leads him to deceive his wife and children into coming to “Paradise” to join him in the shanty-town. The film also depicts how those living in Petit Nanterre in the early 1960s, Algerians in particular, were harassed by local police.

1999 reached 10%, the rate in Petit Nanterre soared higher than 30%; more recent statistical data suggests that this figure has risen substantially. Of the active population in 1999 of 3545 persons, 1062 were unemployed. These statistics do not reflect illegal immigrant unemployment, nor non-working individuals who are no longer actively seeking employment, nor the large number of women who do not have the necessary French-language or literacy skills to search for legal work.<sup>7</sup> Social workers in the neighbourhood estimate the unemployment rate is as high as 60%. Thus, contrary to frequent claims that immigrant minorities are unable or unwilling to adapt to French cultural norms, a great deal of statistical evidence suggests the principal barriers are not only racial and ethnic discrimination, but socio-economic, as well (see Hargreaves 2007 for detailed statistical analysis of immigrant unemployment in France).<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> A noteworthy shift within the 'typical' immigrant nuclear family in the *banlieue* has been the shift in steady industrial work for male immigrants to rampant unemployment. Petit Nanterre is part of the 'red belt,' a former industrial area north of Paris, characterized by a large number of ethnic groups and strong union and communist party-based community support (Wacquant 2006: 77). It is a region resolutely industrial and masculine whereby populations historically incorporated themselves socially through union and municipal organizations, which linked work and family life with community participation more generally (Wacquant 2006: 175). The closing of industries has created not only a problem of unemployment, but has arguably shifted family dynamics and conceptions of male identity as breadwinner and head of household.

<sup>8</sup> I accompanied five women to the ANPE office of Nanterre who were looking to find a training program and/or work in France on 11 April 2006. Three of the women were married, one wore a headscarf, and another was four months pregnant. Having never worked in France these women are not eligible for ASSEDIC assistance (employment insurance) from the French state, but may benefit from the assistance of an Employment Officer and check job postings, and create CVs in this local office (there are two locations in Nanterre). One program in particular called the *Plan Local pour l'Insertion et l'Emploi* (PLIE or Local Plan for Employment Insertion) is especially useful as, once eligible, some training courses are paid for.

Most of these women expressed considerable disappointment about their possibilities for employment following a meeting with the Agency's Director (Mme Christine Entz). After the women described the employment they had in mind – as seamstress, secretary, cashier, hairdresser, and homecare worker – Mme Entz explained how these professions, even as cashier, generally now require the BAC (or French High School equivalency) and a mastery of the French language. As only three of the women had completed a fifth-grade equivalent in their native countries in Arabic, language and educational barriers in attaining legal employment were evident, if not unsurpassable. Mme Entz explained that work which in the 1950s-1970s had been suitable for those who could not read or comprehend French – largely factory and cleaning work – now requires French language and literacy skills. The director also explained that sought-

Neighbourhoods like Petit Nanterre are made up of mostly high-rise subsidized housing complexes known as *Cités*, or what in North America might be termed “the projects.” A *Cité* technically refers to a group of isolated buildings catering to the same typically disenfranchised public. The term *Cité* in contemporary France carries negative associations and reflects a certain stigmatized social identity. Both the concept and the social location of the *cité* engender several cultural assumptions. The *cité* connotes low-income housing projects represented in the French media in tandem with crime, drugs and immigration. Azouz Begag and Christian Delorme claim that almost three million French people, the majority of them young people of immigrant origins, live in these socially and economically precarious spaces (1992: 38; see also Fausto 1992). These authors posit that over the course of time and marginalization, a sentiment of vengeance has come to typify the *banlieues*, particularly amongst young men, who seek to rectify stigmatization by police and endemic racism. It is, in part, such emotions that fuelled the violence which erupted in the Paris suburbs for 13 days in October and November 2005. In turn, residents also highlight their dissimilarity themselves, deliberately exaggerating stereotypical styles of dress or social comportment, particularly when non-residents or the media visit.<sup>9</sup> As

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after part-time work in the neighbourhood of Petit Nanterre is exceedingly rare; with the exception of janitorial work at the Nanterre Hospital or as a cashier at the local grocery store, ED, there are few employment opportunities. She suggested that the women focus on improving their language skills, a difficult proposition for women who need or want to find paid work in France, particularly when they had qualified positions in their countries of origin. The high rate of women who work ‘under the table’ is evident and, as we left the employment office to walk toward the bus stop, all five women expressed the opinion that working *au noire* seemed like the best option.

<sup>9</sup> Before exiting the rented bus on a trip with the young people of Petit Nanterre to Normandy in June 2005, the leader of the trip organized by a local community organization, himself of Moroccan origins spoke over the loud speaker and reminded the 30 or so young people to return to the bus six hours later and to behave appropriately, not like “Arabs.” The young people immediately knew to what he referred, laughed and agreed. I once came upon young children in the hallway of the HLM where I lived, making exaggerated gestures as though they were eating. One young boy said, “Maintenant je suis Arabe” (Now

Begag and Delorme (1992) explain, these “sensitive” regions have reclaimed their marginalization with their own cultural signs and language known as *verlan*. *Verlan*, which comes from “à l’envers” or reverse, refers to words whose sounds are reversed to create a new “code” with the same meaning as the original word.<sup>10</sup>

Petit Nanterre represents what Begag and Delorme describe as an archetypal French suburban space. Initially, like other industrialized suburban regions in the Republic, Petit Nanterre drew immigrants from southern Europe and North Africa because of growing industrialization and the related need for manual labour after the First World War. While migrants came from diverse regions, this workforce was largely reliant upon unskilled male temporary workers. Historian Benjamin Stora chronicles how beginning in the twentieth century, in 1912, the first regions to receive majority Algerian immigration were Marseille, Paris and the *Nord* because of the concentration of metallurgical industries in these areas (Stora 1992, Silverstein 2004: 4). Free movement between Algeria and France was instituted with the Law of 20 September 1947, repealed in 1964 with the Franco-Algerian agreement to begin to limit numbers. Until the law was

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I’m Arab), pretending to eat with his hands and “Maintenant je suis Français” (Now I’m French), miming as though he were holding a spoon sipping soup with his pinkie finger out. He alternated back and forth to highlight the difference in mannerisms while his young friends laughed.

Sociologically, as Alex Hargreaves notes, anyone of Maghrebi appearance in France is liable to be referred to by a ‘French French’ observer as a Arab, regardless of their origins (2007: 91). Many Algerians in Petit Nanterre, for instance, are of Berber origin and take offence at the label’s pejorative connotations and misuse. Race discourse in France is prevalent and often referred to in everyday conversations; people in the *banlieue* often refer to *blacks* (blacks), *blanc* (white) or *beur* (Arab) (see Keaton 2006: 6-9; Beriss 2004; Tribalat 1995).

<sup>10</sup> *Verlan*, literally ‘l’envers’ (backwards), originated in marginalized suburban French neighbourhoods in the 1970s, but more than thirty years later, has become popularized in France beyond social class or ethnic group. Some *verlan* is straightforward, like ‘ouf’ which signifies ‘fou’ (crazy) The words which are reversed are typically those which are most contentious. For instance the police are popularly known in France as the *flics*, which in *verlan* becomes the *keufs*. Most famously, often pointed to in the important political moment of the *Marche des Beurs* in 1982, “Arabes” became known as the *Beurs*. Now more than 25 years later, they are sometimes now known as the *Rebeu* (Bachman and Besier 1986; Lefkowitz 1991; Merle 2007).

revoked, remarkable numbers of Algerians came to France to work in industry. While there were approximately 20,000 Algerians who settled in 1946, by 1954, the number reached 210,000 (Silverman 1992: 43). Following the independence of Algeria in 1962 and the Franco-Algerian agreement in 1964, immigration to French suburban regions widened to include other African workers, particularly from West Africa, as well as immigrants from the rest of Europe, especially Spain and Portugal. Petit Nanterre itself remains largely Algerian in origin, owing to transnational community ties and to the family reunification immigration policy. Despite the predominance of people of Algerian origin in Petit Nanterre, however, the experience and ethnic background of residents in this *banlieue* is far from homogenous. As I will argue throughout this dissertation, contemporary controversies in the *banlieues* of France have affected Maghrebian immigrant men, women and their children differently. These differing gendered experiences are noteworthy. The banning of conspicuous religious symbols in public schools and government offices in September 2004 largely affected the rights and social comportment of young women, while I would argue that the rioting and heated protests in the *banlieues* in the fall of 2005 especially underscored the discontent and socioeconomic disenfranchisement of young men.<sup>11</sup> I will suggest in this dissertation that, in a broader

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<sup>11</sup> The riots of October-November 2005, strangely, affected Petit Nanterre very little insofar as there were no pronounced altercations between police and young men. These altercations occur frequently – I once witnessed a young man jump eight stories to flee a police officer, breaking his leg on impact – but there was no notable increase of violence during this almost two-week period. Sociologists Stéphane Beaud and Michel Pialoux note that outer-city young men are often profiled by police, even when they have not committed a crime (2001; see also Wacquant 1999, Body-Gendrot and Wihtol de Wenden 2003). This harassment is often spoken about in Petit Nanterre as unfair and prejudiced.

Why rioting did not occur on a large scale, as in many similar neighbourhoods, in Petit Nanterre is unclear. As Benoit, the president of a local community centre conceded, “I think it was random in a way. Speaking for myself, I asked myself every evening whether things would explode in the neighbourhood” (November 16, 2005). Some residents suggested that the tight control exerted by the drug traders in Petit

sense, notions of French-ness are challenging traditional notions of gender, religion and family relationships within North African identities.

This first chapter begins by reflexively describing my own research in this *banlieue*. I then describe the family with whom I lived and the features and history of the neighbourhood, with special attention to its vibrant community organizations, and its religious demography. I depict some of the challenges faced by this neighbourhood which extend beyond the high unemployment rate, drugs and delinquency that have become normative for the *banlieues*. The location of the largest homeless shelter for the city of Paris in Petit Nanterre and the lack of public transit in the evenings create unique issues for this *banlieue*. I also contextualize the historic context of my fieldwork from 2004-2006 which was partially precipitated and inspired by an interest in the application and reception of a law banning obvious religious symbols. I conclude this chapter by assessing a new urban renovation project known as the *Projet de Renovation Urban et Social* (PRUS or Urban and Social Renovation Project) and compare its agenda to the mandate of a local community centre, Zy'va, which tellingly in *verlan* means *Vas-y* (or 'Get Going'), and encourages young people to leave the area in order to be successful.

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Nanterre – the neighbourhood is a significant location for the trafficking of hard drugs like heroin and cocaine – ensured that no one rioted so as not to attract undue attention and interrupt business. Others put a more positive spin on the relative quiet (there were two fires in some large rubbish bins), saying that the number of community associations and connection amongst locals meant that young people felt less disenfranchised and less willing to destroy public spaces.

One thing is definite: while some media sources have pointed to the then Interior-Minister (and in 2007, President) Nicholas Sarkozy's characterization of North African youth as "scum" or *racaille* as the last straw for young people in the *banlieues*, as one of my respondents, Hafid from Zy'va explains, "In the *banlieues*, it's not words like 'karcher' or 'racaille' that make things explode . . . it's a complete inequality for more than 30 years. All this discrimination does not give people the desire to go on, it only gives a desire to break things" (Interview February 26, 2006). Another respondent who works as a social worker in the Cité des Canibouts but lives in the south of Paris, admits it can be discouraging to try to motivate young men to focus on their studies, when there are few opportunities and discrimination is encountered even by those who succeed academically.

These two projects offer diverging visions for the future of Petit Nanterre. I finish this chapter by briefly introducing the chapters of the dissertation.

### **Ethnographic Engagement in the Community**

As part of the ethnographic component of this dissertation research, I lived five days a week from January to December of 2005 with a family of Algerian origins in their two-bedroom apartment in the Canibouts section of Petit Nanterre (see Appendix One). I met the adult female head of household, whom I call “Aïcha,” through volunteering at the Association Nadha in Petit Nanterre, where she had worked as a social worker. Beforehand, from September to December 2004 I made daily visits to the neighbourhood; after my full year of living with Aïcha’s family, from January to June 2006, I visited Petit Nanterre three to four days per week, depending on community events or interviews I had scheduled. I was fortunate to have been invited to join Aïcha’s family in their apartment, as there is a long waiting list to obtain subsidized housing. Moreover, as a foreigner I would not have qualified for an HLM apartment in the area. The director of the municipal office in the Place des Muguets (across from the Nadha Hair Salon) told me that in cases deemed routine, residents could wait for up to 7 years for socially-assisted accommodation. Because I did not have a room of my own and slept in the common room of Aïcha’s apartment, I chose to keep a student residence room in the southwest of Paris where I wrote fieldnotes, did laundry and kept my personal belongings. Undertaking this shift from Paris to Petit Nanterre highlighted, on a weekly basis, a tremendous



juxtaposition in sights, smells, language, ethnicity, and social services from one space to the next.

The family with whom I lived is atypical of most families in Petit Nanterre. It is comprised of a woman (a widow, born in Algeria in 1958) and her two daughters, born in 1993 and 1995 at the local *Hôpital de Nanterre* on the other side of Petit Nanterre's main street, Rue de la République.<sup>12</sup> Aïcha, whose life-story as I discuss in greater detail in Chapter Three, immigrated to Nanterre through the family reunification process, following her marriage in Algeria to her cousin, a French citizen born in Algeria. He had immigrated with his family when he was eight years old and lived for a decade in the shanty-town, eventually moving into their current dwelling in the Cité des Canibouts with his parents and two siblings in the mid-1960s. Aïcha's immigration path - - involving family reunification from North Africa after marriage to a man with legal French papers - - is extremely common among families in Petit Nanterre. Aïcha's husband Mounir was born in Algeria but received French citizenship as an adult. Aïcha herself was born in Algeria during the War of Independence in the mountainous Kabylia region. Her mother did not register the birth, because she was fearful of drawing attention to herself, particularly when her husband had gone missing in combat. Aïcha claims that her mother once hid her and her two older sisters in a closet and covered herself in cow manure to

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<sup>12</sup> The frequency of single-parent family units is lower in Petit Nanterre than the French national average. In her sociological study of Algerian immigrants in four locations in France in the early 1980s, Yeza Bahria Boulahbel (1991) underlines the importance of the familial unit in regrouped familial structures in France, noting that if she met a single mother of Algerian-origin it was invariably because she was widowed. Boulahbel notes that even in the most difficult cases, family solidarity ensured the survival of the collective (1991: 361). Significantly during my fieldwork, many women told me that divorce is becoming increasingly prevalent for the first time, particularly in cases where the marriage was unwanted by one or both parties.

dissuade French soldiers from approaching her; several Kabylia female neighbours had been raped. Today on her French identity card, Aïcha's birthday is listed as the end of July when her mother believes she was born. Aïcha's remaining siblings have stayed in Algeria; she has one aunt (her mother's sister) who lives not far from Petit Nanterre in Colombes, with whom she keeps regular telephone contact. Kabylia, where she grew up is an isolated mountainous region, so Aïcha attended a French boarding school in Tizi-Ouzou, coming home to visit her mother on the weekends. Her father was presumed dead as his body was never found. Aïcha spent her early years focused on academics, eventually becoming a schoolteacher and mastering both French and Arabic; she spoke Kabyle with her mother at home. Although she claims to have had many admirers and one suitor who was particularly interested in marriage, she focused on her studies and worked as a school teacher while continuing to live with her mother.

Aïcha met her now-deceased husband at the wedding of one of their mutual cousins in the late 1980s. He had come to Kabylia on vacation and was in search of an Algerian bride. While many vied for his attention, it was then 30 year old Aïcha who caught his eye. They married several months later in an elaborate traditional wedding ceremony in her hometown and then began the immigration process so she could migrate to France. During this period of paperwork and waiting, Aïcha visited Mounir on three-month long visitor visas until all of her papers were in order. Mounir worked alternately as a security guard and as a bodyguard and the couple settled with Mounir's family in the same two-bedroom social housing apartment in Petit Nanterre where Aïcha now lives with her daughters. Over time, Mounir's brother and wife left to live in their own

apartment and, following the retirement of his father from the Renault factory, his parents returned to Algeria to live permanently. Aïcha and Mounir had two daughters, one born prematurely at six months. Mounir died of a heart-attack in their apartment in 2000; his absence clearly continues to influence their family life and, although to a far lesser degree, my own project.<sup>13</sup> The absence of a male family member, along with enforced sexual segregation in the neighbourhood meant that I had little daily contact with local men.

Aïcha's daughters shared one small bedroom, sleeping on bunk beds and their mother slept in the other small room; I slept on the couch in the living room. As I mentioned, the apartment was on the third floor of a set of buildings within the *Cité des Canibouts*. This section of the neighbourhood is characterized by particularly dilapidated buildings, a higher concentration of Algerians than in other parts of Petit Nanterre, as well as visible delinquency of young men and the sale of narcotics. Most surprising to me when I first moved to Petit Nanterre was a strong division which split this suburb in two.<sup>14</sup> Relationships among locals were sometimes acrimonious, and focused on a visible

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<sup>13</sup> The events and emergency response to his death have since garnered controversy. A pathologist informed Aïcha that he believed Mounir's death was caused by the long delay of the response to their emergency call. Moreover, when an ambulance finally did arrive, the emergency dispatch had sent volunteers and not regular staff. These errors, Aïcha believes, resulted in part from negligence caused by discrimination when calls come from Petit Nanterre. With a copy of the coroner's report and a lawyer obtained through Legal Aid, she has launched an investigation into the circumstances surrounding Mounir's death.

<sup>14</sup> Petit Nanterre is larger than these two spaces (the Canibouts and the Pâquerettes), although it is characterized by them. On the other side of the main street, Rue de la République, the Cité des Potagers has 66 dwellings in five storey buildings and run by the *Société Nationale de Construction pour les Travailleurs* [SONACOTRA or the National Society of Construction for Workers (for more on this organization see Diop and Michalak 1996)] a private housing company which works in parallel with French social housing, as is the Cité de Jeanne-D'Arc. The Castors project runs along the main Rue de la République and is located behind a number of private homes which were built and sold at reduced rates to attract home buyers to the region. These homes have a mix of *Français de Souche* ("French French") and citizens of Algerian origin. Social relationships among people living on this block seem positive, although the two "French French"

separation between two sides, marked by the differing ownership and management of the apartment blocks. One side is privately owned and operated and now visibly more dilapidated and run-down; this is the Cité des Canibouts. It has 650 public housing apartments, either in 5 storey walk-up buildings or in 11 storey towers, and was built by Logirep, a private building company, from 1961 to 1964. The other side of Petit Nanterre, the Pâquerettes, was previously less desirable, but since undergoing renovations, now fares much better. The state built 1222 dwellings in five and mostly seventeen storey buildings beginning in the late 1950s; the project was renovated in the 1980s and 1990s.

The division in the neighbourhood has an important history. Both sides of Petit Nanterre have a community centre. The Canibouts has a prevention club for young people (the GAO, an acronym for *Guider, Accompanyer, Orienter* or Guiding, Assisting, Orienting) and the Centre Social des Canibouts; the Pâquerettes has three active associations, the Centre Social Valérie Méot, the Association Nadha and Zy'va. Although the physical separation is clearly marked by a central street, rue de l'Agriculture, the division has a deeper social differentiation based on physical improvements to the Pâquerettes side. Renovations began for 19 months in 1983. These notable enhancements and the greater number of community organizations make the Pâquerettes a more desirable *cité*, although this side of the *cité* is not always viewed favourably. When the buildings were initially erected, the Canibouts was the desirable side in which to settle; the apartments were larger and considered better. Logirep, the private company that runs the Canibouts, was not interested in undertaking renovations concurrently with the

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families that I knew living there sent their children to a private Catholic school in Nanterre Ville and had little social contact with their neighbours.

Pâquerettes during the initial Urban Renovation Project. Now the Canibouts buildings are largely dilapidated; electricity and plumbing is precarious. Although windows were replaced in the 1990s, residents often complain about the lack of proper general maintenance and cleanliness.<sup>15</sup> Hallways are dark and laden with graffiti; the elevators in the 11 storey buildings are often broken and smell of urine. Architecturally, the Canibouts project was mostly built in a circle with high rise apartment buildings facing one another and more recently a landscaped soccer field in the middle, along with a small children's park and École La Fontaine, the local public elementary school on the other side. Arguably, instead of fostering a greater sense of community, this architectural arrangement has created what I call in Chapter Five a "Panopticon" effect. The *cité* is therefore more enclosed than the Pâquerettes side. Residents claim that this proximity has created closer social ties. Like Aïcha's former husband Mounir's family, many families on the Canibouts side have lived there since its creation, transmitting the subsidized apartments through the generations.

I often overheard pejorative comments on both sides of the neighbourhood divide: the Pâquerettes are seen as snobby and over-privileged and the Canibouts as dirty and drug-laden. Yet, when I asked residents in formal interviews about their positions, many

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<sup>15</sup> When the then mayor of Nanterre, Patrick Jarry, a member of the French Communist Party, visited Petit Nanterre for a special public town hall meeting to discuss the PRUS (the Urban and Social Renovation Project) on April 21, 2005, local people in the Canibouts were disgusted when clean-up teams arrived in the neighbourhood at dawn the same morning to plant a few flowers and pick up garbage around the buildings. Some residents yelled from their apartment windows as the mayor arrived at the École La Fontaine, "It's a lie! Come up here [to our apartments] and see the conditions in which we live!" One woman came down to speak with Jarry's assistant, insisting that he see her apartment, which had been affected by severe water damage for some time and had not yet been repaired by Logirep. Jarry agreed to see the apartment, and later promised to contact the Logirep city representative. Jarry himself grew up on the Pâquerettes side of the neighbourhood. Because of the possibility of destroying these buildings if the PRUS project comes to fruition, Logirep is not interested in undertaking structural repairs.

became far more polite. It took much probing of the outspoken president of one of the community associations, Hafid Rahmouni, the president and co-founder of Zy'va, a drop-in centre for young people with special programs for their mothers on the Pâquerettes side, to describe what he believed were some of the more tangible differences. In our conversation in his office at the end of February 2006, I asked him about a film made by the young people in the GAO group (*Guider, Accompanyer, Orienter* or Guiding, Assisting, Orienting). As I describe in greater depth in Chapter Five, the film dealt primarily with gender mixing, or *mixité*, in Petit Nanterre and critiqued the double standard which exists in social comportment for young men and women. Hafid told me:

Well, that's something that we don't feel as much at Zy'va because I have more girls than boys enrolled at Zy'va. If we go on an outing, it has to be mixed [the posted sign-up sheets are separated by gender]. There aren't parents who tell us, 'Well, my daughter's not going with you,' And yet, in the same neighbourhood, in the Canibouts, they don't have the same mentality. They go on outings with boys only. On the other side, 50 meters from here [at the *Centre des Jeunes* or the GAO] they only go on outings with the boys, and it's always the same. I don't necessarily think it's reflective of a local problem in this neighbourhood, but the moment we assist parents so they feel confident, to have trust in their child and in the structure that welcomes them . . . I think we then can go on trips, and with more girls than boys. And yet there are lots of trips planned by the city where there are only boys [because the parents don't trust them], where there is one girl for every ten boys [. . .]

It's the same for boys eh, here at Zy'va. We had some boys who weren't picking up after themselves. Me, I responded, 'Ok, but we're not in the *Bled* [Arabic for a North African country of origin]' (Interview 24 February 2006).<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Hafid : « Donc nous c'est un truc qu'on ressent pas à Zy'va parce que j'ai plus de filles que garçons inscrites à Zy'va. Si on fait une sortie il faut qu'il soit mélangé. Y a pas de parents qui nous disent, 'Eh bien, ma fille ne vient pas avec vous'. Et pourtant, au même quartier, au Canibouts, c'est pas du tout la même chose. Ils font des sorties que avec les garçons. L'autre côté, à 50 mètres d'ici [Centre de Jeunesse] ils font des sorties que avec des garçons, et c'est toujours pareil. Donc je pense pas que c'est nécessairement un problème local du quartier, mais au moment où on accompagne les parents à faire confiance, à faire confiance à leur enfant et à la structure qui les accueille aussi . . . je pense qu'on arrive à bien faire des séjours, et avec plus de filles que de garçons. Et pourtant il y a plein de séjour fait par la ville et compagnie où il y a que des garçons, ou une fille pour dix garçons [. . .] C'était pareil pour les garçons eh, ici à Zy'va. On avait des garçons qui ne ramassaient pas après eux-mêmes. Moi, je répondait, 'Oui, mais on est pas au Bled' » (Interview 24 February 2006).

Hafid, who is of Moroccan origin and grew up in the neighbourhood, opened this youth drop-in centre in 1994 with two other friends. When I asked him why there is such a difference between the Pâquerettes and the Canibouts projects, he explained that the Canibouts is too closed in on itself, that because there is so little open public space and because everyone can see one another, people are always concerned with how they, and especially their daughters, are perceived. Also, although drug use and delinquency affect all of Petit Nanterre, Hafid claims that relative to the Pâquerettes side, the Canibouts has been more touched by these issues, adding that he estimates that 80% of the families there have been affected in some way by drug trafficking, use or overdose.<sup>17</sup> Years of alienation and drug abuse have made residents wary of becoming involved in community-related events, he said. Hafid claims that drug-related tragedies have meant that the locals have been somewhat coddled by community organizations. Hafid says that the philosophy behind Zy'va is that parents must become involved in the organization in order for their children to become members. The organization facilitates meetings between volunteer

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<sup>17</sup> A life-long inhabitant of Petit Nanterre whose parents immigrated to France from Guadeloupe, Patricia, a single 39 year-old mother of a seven year-old son, notes that one improvement in the Canibouts has involved public awareness of HIV/AIDS. She claims that in the late 1980s and early 1990s, entire families were infected by shared intravenous drug use and unprotected sex. One of the community centres' presidents concurs: "At that time in the neighbourhood [in the 1980s], there were ravages. First there were drugs, heroine especially, which led to the big problems with AIDS. The generation 20 years ago, all the young people knew someone in their family, or a friend, who died" (Interview 16 November 2005). I heard from a local social worker that there were still some Petit Nanterrians suffering from AIDS, although I was never able to talk to them because the disease remains a taboo subject, particularly with practicing Muslims. On International AIDS Awareness Day in December 2004 and 2005 information was made available at the Centre Social Valérie Méot, Association Nadha and the Centre Social des Canibouts. The only occasion when I noticed that AIDS became a topic of conversation among the first-generation Maghrebian women I knew was when a local woman of Algerian-origins, sadly with three young daughters, committed suicide. Her suicide was very public, as she had thrown herself out of a high-rise window into the parking lot in front of the local grocery store ED in June 2005. Gossip following this tragic event focused on her unhappy marriage and how she had recently learned she was HIV positive, and had been infected by her husband, a known drug-user. The children were placed in the care of their maternal grandparents, also living in Petit Nanterre, and were cared for a great deal by two Catholic nuns living above the Centre Social des Canibouts.

tutors, teachers, students and their parents when necessary. Residents of the Canibouts would surely disagree with Hafid's analyses, which portray the Canibouts as drug-laden and characterized by parents who are not involved in their children's lives. In fact, I heard many critiques in the Canibouts about Hafid and his association. His opponents say that Zy'va's success stems from his alignment with Right-wing political parties in order to gain greater access to funding. Now-president Nicholas Sarkozy visited Zy'va once when he was Interior Minister to leave a cheque and take photos; a small plaque commemorating his visit is on display in the entranceway to the Centre. Hafid also is known for openly voting for the Right, while most people in Petit Nanterre continue to elect Communist representatives.

I began my fieldwork by arriving at the site and undertaking "extreme volunteerism" or a great deal of volunteer activities for the initial four months. I introduced myself and the research I wished to undertake and requested to volunteer and participate in specific activities. There are four community centres in Petit Nanterre; I participated in the activities of each to varying degrees. At the Centre Social Valérie Méot, I took weekly Algerian dialect Arabic courses with three other adults on Wednesday afternoons and participated in all their social events and community meetings. At Zy'va, I participated in many of their social activities, particularly those tailored for the adult women of registered children. Because it is a centre aimed at the scholarly success of school-aged children and young people, I gave weekly after-school English lessons and tutored two teenagers who were preparing for the BAC (Baccalaureate) English exams. At the Centre Social des Canibouts, I participated in some



of their daily literacy classes as a volunteer, but was more involved in preparing food and social events, and in providing informal assistance for members with their housing and personal problems, especially by reading mail for adults unable to read French. I focused most of my time and attention on the Association Nadha, which has an office to support local people with all types of social issues, as well as running a not-for-profit hair and beauty salon for women called *Nadha Coiffure*. I spent many hours “hanging out” with neighbourhood women in the hair salon, worked for several months two mornings a week as a social worker in Association’s Nadha’s reception office and assisted with afternoon literacy and social integration classes for immigrant women four days per week. I also participated in all of Nadha’s excursions and activities. I met Aïcha, with whom I later lived, when she worked as a social worker in Association Nadha’s office space in the fall of 2004.

Beyond the time spent in these more formal activities, I met casually with women around the elementary school entrance to chat with them as they dropped off their children. I often accompanied Aïcha’s youngest daughter (although sometimes her eyes rolled!) to school in the morning or would go and pick her up at lunch time. I spent as much time as possible in other public spaces frequented by women, for instance monthly meetings on the health and safety of children, and, more regularly I passed by the public marketplace when it was open and ran errands in ED, the local grocery store. I attended community meetings and festivals and elementary school events. This involvement as well as my physical “Otherness” as a tall Caucasian Canadian gave me a visibility and a

profile so that eventually I was known by most people in Petit Nanterre, particularly by those who used local social services or participated in community centre events.

Living in the neighbourhood was indispensable to this research project, particularly because of the community's physical and social isolation from neighbouring areas. For instance, until December 2005 Petit Nanterre did not have public bus service after 8:30pm, making participation in evening activities difficult. The frustration and deep-seated anger of residents about this curfew-like transportation issue, the living conditions in the apartments, and a sense of fear in the evenings when young men descend into the square to meet and deal narcotics became clearer over the 12 months I lived in the *cité* almost full-time. So did things as mundane as washing one's hair with cold water in the winter months when the hot water worked irregularly. As in most ethnographic projects, constant interaction with Aïcha's family and the area's residents also allowed for more casual and natural conversations (rather than simply interview-style questions and answers) as well as greater acceptance by and familiarity with locals. In short, living in the Canibouts ensured the seriousness of my project and my engagement in the neighbourhood. I conducted more than 70 long interviews with women in Petit Nanterre, mostly with first-generation female North African immigrants who make up a sizable portion of the adult female population of the area. Wanting to capture the intergenerational transmission of cultural practices and values of these women to their daughters and their perception of their French-born daughters, in several cases I interviewed elderly women in the neighbourhood and their second-generation adult daughters. In two cases, I was able to interview three generations of women within a

family. Although I had a great deal of interaction with young people in Petit Nanterre through the two pre-teen daughters in my adoptive family and by volunteering in a youth centre, I chose not to conduct formal interviews with women under 18. I also conducted another dozen interviews with non-residents who worked in local associations, schools, the Imam of the local mosque and the three local nuns.

Lastly, owing to my interest in the construction of gender norms in and around this social space, I became involved with the local branch of a French feminist organization, *Femmes Solidaires*, located in nearby Nanterre Préfecture. This group is a subsection of a larger national organization, originally called the *Union des Femmes Françaises*, which grew out of social movements following the Second World War. I undertook ten interviews with active members of *Femmes Solidaires*, organized a round table discussion, and participated in their activities over a two-year period, especially their bi-monthly Saturday morning *cause café* (or “coffee break space”) drop-in meetings. I discuss my involvement with this group and findings in greater detail in Chapter Six.

## **Immigration to France for Work**

What is an immigrant then? An immigrant is essentially a workforce, and a work force that is provisional, temporary and in transit. In virtue of this principle, an immigrant worker (worker and immigrant being, here, almost a redundancy), even if he began life (and immigration) in immigration, even if he is called to work (as an immigrant) his life long in the country, even if he is destined to die (in immigration) [he is always Other] (Sayad 1998: 61).

Immigration to France in large numbers from North Africa began following the First World War as a temporary means to ensure an unskilled workforce in industry. There has been a radical shift in the economic component of this migration, however.

With the slow demise of industrial work beginning in the 1980s, unskilled workers, some unable to read or write in French, now experience increasing difficulty in obtaining legal work.<sup>18</sup> This difficulty in obtaining employment is endemic for second-generation Maghrebians who are literate Francophones, as well. Recent statistical studies published in *Le Monde* reveal that young people of North African origins born in France, even with equal or better qualifications than a *Français de Souche*, have far less success in obtaining employment than other applicants (see Michel 2006, Hargreaves 2007:58). One local unemployed man in Petit Nanterre told me that when employers see his postal code (92000) they immediately know he lives in the *banlieue* and not in Paris (75000) and are less willing to hire him, even for an unpaid work placement. According to the correlation that French sociologist Abdelmalek Sayad proposes -- between immigrant and worker -- the unemployed immigrant in France has become socio-politically intolerable (1998).<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Much of the analysis of this dissertation rests on the notion of diaspora or of transnational community. These terms refer to the connection of multiple communities of a population, in this case, formally colonized Maghrebians dispersed in a Parisian suburb. Following James Clifford's definitional distinctions (1994), I too prefer 'diasporic community' to 'ethnic neighbourhood' to highlight a people with separate histories from the host nation, who also remain a part of the adopted nation (1994: 311). In the modern increasingly globalized world, these relationships are facilitated by transport, communication and labour migration (for more examples, see Clifford 1994: 304). As William Safran notes, the consciousness and sense of solidarity of diasporic groups is defined by a continuous relationship with their homeland (1999: 268). Still, Clifford reminds us that "a shared, ongoing history of displacement, suffering, adaptation, or resistance may be as important as the projection of a specific origin" (1994: 306). Clifford adds that these groups are always gendered; he notes a tendency in the scholarship on diaspore to normalize male experiences (1994: 313). Moreover, for all transnationals, new roles and demands may be opened by diaspora interactions:

Life for women in diasporic situations can be doubly painful – struggling with the material and spiritual insecurities of exile, with the demands of family and work, and with the claims of old and new patriarchies (1994: 314).

At the same time, some transnational first-generation Muslim Maghrebian women are able to be selective in their attachments, depending upon their economic situations and social networks.

<sup>19</sup> There is a popular conception promoted in part by the media in contemporary France that the country is being invaded by an onslaught of (mostly illegal) immigrants, that these immigrant families have elevated birth rates and that immigrants suffer from higher unemployment. National statistical data from INSEE both confirms and negates these stereotypes. In 1999 when France had more than 58 million inhabitants, 90.4% were French by birth, 4% by acquisition (that is, through permanent residency or

## “Hardly Paradise”

Three novels chronicling migration from Algeria to Petit Nanterre capture the mixed emotions of children as they settled in the 1960s, arriving with their families as their fathers began nearby industrial jobs.<sup>20</sup> In one, *À Bras-le-Cœur*, Mehdi Charef describes meeting his father in Petit Nanterre after a long journey from the Oman region of Algeria by bus, boat and train with his mother and younger brother:

The taxi left us at the Pâquerettes. That's the name of the neighbourhood. I notice there are a lot of Arabs. My father moves toward the shack. I understood. He didn't dare give the real address to the taxi driver, probably because of the mud. I watch my mother. I can't see her expression concealed behind the *haïk*. My dad is ashamed. He walks quickly (Charef 2006: 154).

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acquired citizenship), and 5.6% of the overall population were foreigners. According to this same INSEE data, the origins of migrants to France have shifted. In 1999, 44.4% of immigrants to France arrived from European nations (especially from Portugal: 13.3%), down from 78.7% in 1962. African immigration on the other hand has grown steadily from 11.6% of the overall immigration to France, to 39.3% in 1999 (13.3% from Algeria, 12.1% from Morocco, 4.7% from Tunisia and 9.1% from remaining African nations). The motivations of these permanent immigrants from African nations vary; 19 014 persons arrived through the family reunification immigration policy, 13 122 because they have immediate family that are French (for instance parents whose children are French), 2097 because they are permanent workers and 4 314 as refugees (in this instance 4072 were fleeing from non-Maghrebian countries, particularly the Ivory Coast). The *Indicateur conjoncturel de fécondité selon le pays de naissance* (or the “birth rate according to country of origin”) demonstrates that on average, immigrant families have 2.4 children, with Algeria, Morocco and Tunisia falling somewhat higher (at 2.7, 2.8 and 2.8) while Spain (1.8) and Portugal (2.4) fall below. There is more statistical evidence for popular assumptions about unemployment, however. On a national level in 1999 France had a 10% unemployment rate, 18% of the unemployed were immigrants and 9% were non-immigrants. This percentage has since increased, and some estimate the proportion of immigrants who were unemployed to be as high as 30%. ‘Active’ immigrant men fare slightly better than women. In the 25-39 age range, 17% of immigrant men and 28% of active immigrant women were unemployed; in the 40-49 range, 14% of immigrant men and 18% of women; in the 50+ category, the gap lessens again with 14% of men and 16% of women. There are two caveats to this data, however: first this category of ‘active’: many immigrant women living in nuclear families are not actively seeking employment and second, overall levels of unemployment in France have worsened since 1999, suggesting that rates of joblessness for immigrants have also escalated.

<sup>20</sup> North African migrant memoirs, now for the first time focused on the experiences of young women, have become increasingly popular in the French literary scene. One of the most powerful and popular examples is 19 year-old Faïza Guène's *Kiffe Kiffe Demain* (or “More of the Same Tomorrow”). Guène's forceful narrative style tells of her experience in the *banlieue* in a housing project called Paradise (like Nanterre Préfecture) three metro stops from Paris, living with her single Moroccan-born mother. Her mother cannot read or write and makes an unfairly low wage as a chambermaid. Leïla Djitli's *Lettre à ma fille qui veut porter le voile* (2004) offers a powerful plea to the author's daughter Nawel, 17, not to wear the headscarf. Djitli says, “If you [Nawel] want to be respected, you must find other methods, other ammunitions. They exist, darling, and they are worth more than a piece of cloth or than the sand under which the frightened ostrich hides, it seems, its head. You are not an ostrich!” (2004 : 68).

Benaïcha Brahim captures his own naiveté about what was awaiting him prior to moving to France:

‘We’re going to leave for France – we’re going to Paradise – we’re going to the country of trucks and beautiful clothing.’ All of our friends were impressed by this news. Already in their eyes we could read the distance there was between us. Their air of questioning seemed to ask, ‘You’re really going to leave us?’ (Brahim 1992: 25).

Brahim writes that he later realized he was to live a violent meeting between two civilizations, with little common ground. As a child he had hoped that the highly anticipated acquisition of a television 10 years after their arrival in France, when they had finally moved into an apartment in the Canibouts, would bridge gaps between his parents, his siblings “born in the desert” and his siblings born in France. Instead, as he describes, it served to further widen the divide between his parents and his siblings (1992: 175).

As noted earlier in this chapter, Petit Nanterre was previously the site of one of the largest *bidonvilles* (shanty-towns) in France, owing to its large open fields and nearby factories.<sup>21</sup> Post-war France experienced an acute housing shortage; immigrant workers arrived to work in construction to remedy the problem but were not part of the planned beneficiaries of these buildings (see Diop and Michalak 1996 on male migrants in suburban foyers). As Alex Hargreaves explains, in France more generally, these immigrant workers faced tremendous discrimination and with their low disposable incomes were relegated to living in marginal sectors like inner-city slums or shanty-towns (2007: 166). Local historian Jacques Mondolini explains that the open space available in Petit Nanterre suited the needs of a variety of groups: it was convenient for employers

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<sup>21</sup> Despite their former prominence, the Renault factory’s buildings in Petit Nanterre, remain now eerily quiet and are used to store new vehicles before they are shipped to Paris.

who wanted a stable work force, it was convenient for the police who could better control the immigrant population, and it was convenient for the immigrant population who sought work and housing in France. However, Mondolini observes, as the poor and the unemployed were channelled into the space, conditions approached that of apartheid (2004: 102). As described in literary works and in oral narratives of the former residents, the shacks of the *bidonville* were dismal: one or two shared beds, a coal stove, large tins for water, and suitcases filled with clothing.

Abdelmalek Sayad, a student of French sociologist Pierre Boudieu, wrote the only ethnography of the shanty-town and of Petit Nanterre in the early 1950s, briefly describing the difficult living conditions and the constant threat of rats, water, mud and fire (1995: 46). Sayad's census in 1953 counted approximately 2100 North African workers in Nanterrian factories and between 4500-5000 North Africans, mostly Algerians, living in the shanty-town. Other studies point to how in France more generally Algerians constitute the oldest and largest immigrant group of colonial origins (Silverman 1992; MacMaster 1997; Hargreaves 2007).<sup>22</sup> Of those living in Petit Nanterre in 1953, Sayad adds, only between 2000-2500 had social security cards and were working legally (Sayad 1995: 21). By 1953, this population had increased 14 times over that of 1946. More difficult than the extreme physical conditions, according to Sayad, was the acute psychological trauma experienced by migrants who expected improved means upon

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<sup>22</sup> In his statistical analysis of French immigration, Alex Hargreaves demonstrates that although Moroccans now exceed Algerian nationals in number, their migratory history is more recent (2007: 70). Trica Danielle Keaton usefully describes and warns against a type of "Algerian exceptionalism" which drives much of the scholarship on immigration to France (2006: 3). This attention stems from historical linkages between the two countries: Algeria was a colony (and not a protectorate) of France from the 1830s to 1962; both were marked by the long war for Algerian independence from 1954-1962; there was massive immigration and family reunification from Algeria to France; and many Algerians hold both passports.

arriving in France, and instead often endured a lifestyle more precarious than they had experienced in North Africa:

He [the North African migrant] continues, most of the time, to live provisionally and precariously, this precariousness linked to his condition; the passport, the residency card that are issued to him are, by definition, temporary. Work instability is ensured by an always terminable contract. Precariousness in where he lives, sometimes a simple shack on a building site; sometimes even a heap of sheet metal and boards we call a shanty-town, and where there are no traces of the camps which had been there beforehand (Sayad 1995: 6).

Most interestingly, Sayad engages the physical, symbolic and economic qualities of the shanty-town, in particular its “Arab-ness” (1995: 112) and its consequent rejection by the larger city of Nanterre. Built using scrap metal and other available inexpensive materials, the shanty-town in Petit Nanterre mimicked or caricatured the real city to which it was related in name and location. Relative to the city of Nanterre, the shanty-town, says Sayad, was an extremely public space, for it hid and protected nothing (1995: 43). Still it was insular insofar as interactions with people living outside were quite uncommon. At that time taxis or emergency service vehicles sometimes refused to enter the area for fear they would be robbed, that there would be “trouble” or that they would not be paid. Significantly, this phenomenon continues to the present. The shanty-towns in Petit Nanterre became the largest in the region, based on what Sayad calls “a phenomenon of contagion,” particularly among Algerians. People living within its confines, he argues, encouraged their parents, friends and acquaintances to *se bidonvilliser* or to “shanty-town” themselves (1995:32).

Sayad also notes the viable economic nature of the shanty-town, due to its stand-alone economy. First he remarks how with time, the shacks themselves became commodities and part of a real estate market in which they were rented, sold, bought and



exchanged. A large well-situated shack might yield up to 200 000 francs; Sayad claims that at that time this amount was equivalent to almost a year's salary. The average price was between 60-80 000 francs, but became more competitive when there was less space for immigrants to build their own shacks. Many of the local people with whom I spoke who had grown up in the shanty-town remember the local grocery store and the butcher, in particular. The butcher would visit once a week, offering strictly *halal* meats. In Petit Nanterre today there are two *halal* butcher shops, one of which is run by the son of the man who originally sold meat from his refrigerated truck in the shanty-town. Benaïcha Brahim remembers how the butcher would tell his customers not to worry, that "The meat is expensive, but kosher" (a far better slogan in French: "La viande est chère mais cachère.") (1992: 41).

These fictionalized memoirs as well as Abdelmalek Sayad's brief ethnography say little about the lives of women. Many women spent their days within their shacks, cooking, cleaning, and raising a great number of children while their husbands worked often physically demanding jobs in local factories. When I interviewed women who had arrived in the *bidonville* and raised children, I was surprised at how they often remembered this period fondly, rarely mentioning the presumably difficult physical conditions. François Lefort offers this passage about his mother's experience in his memoir, *Du bidonville à l'expulsion : Itinéraire d'un Jeune Algérien de Nanterre* (1980) :

My mother spent the entire day in this room and she did everything there. [In] the kitchen, she hovered over the little gas camping stove. The only thing she did outside was the laundry. It wasn't a life to always stay inside [the shack], but where else would she go? For a stroll in the shanty-town? She didn't know anyone and she was scared to go out, she thought that people were against her. It's true that often the French could care less about her because she didn't dress like them. That's why we never saw her smile. My mother's

face was always sad, not angry, but tired; you could say she was working herself to death, that's all. For immigrants, women have the most important difficulties (1980: 52).

Historian Jacques Mondolini adds that while it was difficult for the women who arrived to this “Paradise,” for the men, these women were a “God-send,” that they brought “quelque soin au taudis” or “some care into the hovel” (Mondolini 2004 : 13-14). One of the women I interviewed described how her mother, while extremely unhappy living in such conditions, was trapped. Mondolini similarly describes the general experience of women in the *bidonville*:

The woman resigns herself to elude boredom, as she is there isolated, the husband, at the beginning, he even confiscated her papers, forbid her to go out, to communicate with the other women who live on the other side of the zone – to be sure she doesn't meet them, the husband runs all of the errands, on his way back from work, or sends one of the children – to go to the Co-op, to the Arab grocer on the corner, will be her first challenge, her first victory against her husband (2004: 87).

Confined in her deplorable home, she washes, she rewashes, peels [. . . ] cleans the little ones, domestic tasks are the only escape from boredom, and to not become depressed she believes herself invested in a mission: to ensure her children do not take in too much of this foreign world. She incarnates tradition, religion, the culture of origin. It's unthinkable of dying and being buried here (2004: 88).

Many women who arrived in Petit Nanterre during the 1960s and 1970s admit that they always believed when they first immigrated that they would return to North Africa to live permanently after their husbands retired. One Tunisian-born woman who arrived in 1952 with her five children, and who now cares for her deceased daughter's two children full-time, confides that while she always dreamed of returning that she does not necessarily feel at home in Tunisia either. She observes that she is always seen as a French person there, despite the fact that she has chosen not to apply for French citizenship.<sup>23</sup> This sense of being “in-between” two locales is akin to what Abdelmalek Sayad calls the “double

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<sup>23</sup> This Tunisian woman claims that her daughter was inadvertently murdered by a drug lord, events which I was unable to confirm.

absence” (1999), by which he means that the immigrant is a full citizen of neither his country of arrival or departure. More than the administrative situation of the subject, this double absence refers to the symbolic and psychological experiences of migrants. Despite Sayad’s interesting comments on this phenomenon, most women I encountered are not like this Tunisian-born woman and formulate more positive equations, claiming to identify themselves as both Algerian/Moroccan/Tunisian *and* French.

Some families are able to make transnational connections thanks to the number of children they have, each born at different moments in the family’s history. Benaïcha Brahim explains how his parents were better able to understand the lives of their youngest children, born in France, thanks to the older children born in Algeria who worked to bridge these differences:

The years and time create a particular family structure in the shanty-town. There are two types of families. On the one hand, large families like ours, where the head knows the desert well, the shanty-town, and school and the factory. The older children know the desert, the shanty-town and school. The younger children know only the shanty-town and school. Thus, we can notice that in the larger families the social chain is not broken, that certain links are really fostered. They are far calmer and the evolution will occur harmoniously. Above all, they do not lose track of the passage of time. On the other hand, there are small and medium size families where the head knows the desert, the shanty-town and the factory and the children, born later, know only the shanty-town and school. Here, the social chain is broken at birth, as there is no “gateway of sand” between the parents and the children. For these children, the desert is far away. The whole equation creates something explosive (Brahim 1992: 241).

Some of the women I interviewed spoke of a “Nostalgeria” and conceded that, years later with their children and grandchildren in France, many find it difficult to leave.

Many former *bidonville* residents remember the controversial period during the Algerian War for Independence from France which took place between 1954 and 1962. 17October 1961 in particular was a key moment when the large Algerian population in

the *bidonville* joined with the FLN (the National Liberation Front) and organized a protest in the streets of Paris. Local residents in Petit Nanterre still rarely speak of the events of 17 October 1961, unofficially known as the “Paris Massacre”, when the French police attacked an unarmed demonstration of Algerian protestors; in 1998 the government publicly acknowledged 40 deaths, although some estimates put the number of casualties closer to 200. The head of Paris police at that time, Maurice Papon, was convicted in 1998 on charges of crimes against humanity for his role in the Vichy regime during the French occupation.<sup>24</sup> French historian Benjamin Stora explains that the French state could not tolerate the power and importance of the FLN among the Algerian population in France. A curfew was established in the *bidonville* between 8:30pm and 5:30am to impede circulation of covert information and secret meetings (Stora 1992: 67). Farida, one of the women I interviewed who arrived in Petit Nanterre as a four-year-old, remembers this period. In particular, she recalls her mother’s anger when the police arrived to search their shack. The police went through everything in search of documents, believing her father was supporting the FLN movement in France. The police created a disarrayed mess, pulling their clothing out of the suitcases piled high at the far end of the shack which they used as dressers to store their belongings.

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<sup>24</sup> A chilling 2005 film directed by Alain Tasma, *Nuit Noire*, (Black Night) captures the chaos and violence of this altercation. Early parts of the film which depict the shantytown of the Algerians and members of the *Front Libération Nationale* (FLN or National Liberation Front) who were among the 11,000 who protested against the war in their native country were filmed in Petit Nanterre, in roughly the same area where the original shanty-towns had been located. Although I did not interview local residents on this subject, it was known in the community that several older men had participated in the event. One Algerian man whose brother was among the dead spoke at a public screening of the film in the community in July 2005.

Another important development, during the era when the housing project apartments were being built in the 1960s, was the opening of the first local elementary school, École Élémentaire La Fontaine. It was later remodelled and expanded in the early 2000s; I describe this school and contemporary controversies about secularism in Chapter Three. Historian Gilbert Wasserman claims that by the mid-1960s, there were almost 14,000 people living in the *bidonville* in Petit Nanterre (1982 : 162). By the 1970s, the neighbourhood increasingly became an urban and racial ghetto as lower-income “French French” citizens began leaving the neighbourhood as factories closed. Anthropologist Trica Danielle Keaton (2006: 61, 136) in her description of a similar neighbourhood outside of Paris, terms this departure the “white” or “franco-flight.” Those that remained were increasingly disadvantaged families, the unemployed, industrial workers, and immigrants. According to Jacques Mondoloni, prejudice against this population led to increasing disregard for the maintenance of the *cité* by both private and municipal authorities (2004).

Still, despite the difficult conditions in the *bidonville* and its “Otherness” relative to the city of Nanterre, a sense of solidarity and a viable internal economy prevailed. Most former *bidonville* residents who still live in Petit Nanterre recall that during the shanty-town period there was greater solidarity among residents, and that the extreme conditions unified residents (see Sayad 1995: 32). Today nostalgia remains for this period when people allegedly shared more among themselves and looked out for one another more than they do presently. Also, relative to the contemporary situation, there were fewer problems with drugs and delinquency during the shanty-town era.

## Contemporary Situation: A Focus on Community-Based Organizations

Petit Nanterre today has a number of active and well-developed community organizations funded to differing degrees by the municipality and the State. As 55 year-old Benoit, the president of the Centre Social des Canibouts explains, he left a comfortable position with the Mayor's Office to rebuild the floundering and fiscally-uncertain association because the *tissue associatif* (the social fabric of the association) drew him. "The community councils [in Petit Nanterre] are very lively meetings; people talk, they debate with one another and then there are real debates, discussions, and I find that [kind of participation] absolutely interesting" (Interview 16 November 2005).<sup>25</sup> Certainly my own arrival and integration into the community was facilitated by these groups and their willingness, for the most part, to welcome me. On the far eastern side of the Pâquerettes is the Valérie Méot Community Centre, named after a local councilwoman who was tragically assassinated at the City Hall of Nanterre in 2002.<sup>26</sup> This centre was initiated by four residents in 1981. As its former name, *Mieux Vivre au Petit Nanterre* (or Living Better in Petit Nanterre) suggests, the goal of the centre is to ameliorate living conditions in the neighbourhood. It is financed largely by the City of

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<sup>25</sup> "Les conseils de quartier sont des réunions très vivants; les gens parlent, ils s'engueulent et voilà, il y a des vrai débats, des discussions et ça je trouve tout à fait intéressant » (Interview Benoit 16 November 2005).

<sup>26</sup> This tragic assassination took place in the municipal council chamber in Nanterre Ville on the evening of 27 March 2002, when a lone gunman killed 8 council-people and wounded 17 others. The assassin, Richard Durn, committed suicide immediately after the event. One of his victims, Valérie Méot was a school teacher who worked in Petit Nanterre and was extremely involved in the community. She lived in a housing project beside the Centre which now carries her name and photograph at the entrance. A local amateur hip-hop band in the Canibouts, L'Art Mûrit, wrote a song in 2005 in commemoration of the event entitled "Hommage à nos élus" (Homage to our elected politicians). The refrain: « Dead while we slept. But today nothing will be the same, the truth is carried away in the flames of hell, the 27<sup>th</sup> of March 2002, the slaughter in Nanterre » ("Mort pendant notre sommeil. Mais aujourd'hui rien ne sera plus pareil, la vérité est emportée à jamais dans les flammes de l'enfer, 27 mars 2002, tueries de Nanterre »).

Nanterre, the Department of Hauts-de-Seine and the CAF (*Caisse d'Allocations Familiales*). In 1985 it was given a space on the main floor of the Iris Housing Block, eventually changing its name in 2002 after Méot's death. Today it has moved again, and following an addition completed in June 2004, has a large space of 380m<sup>2</sup>. In 2002 this group and its president became involved in the development of the PRUS, the *Programme de Réhabilitation Urbaine et Sociale*, or the Social and Urban Rehabilitation Project to which I will turn momentarily.<sup>27</sup> Its director, Jacques Guével boasts that unlike many of the other centres in Petit Nanterre, half of the staff members live in the neighbourhood. The centre offers practical and artistic workshops (calligraphy, painting, ceramics, opera singing – *Une Diva dans les Quartiers* - and sewing), Legal aid services and a public notary are present once a week (the *Relais d'Accès aux Droits*). There are also public meetings (like *Café des Parents* or Parents' Coffee Meetings) and the centre houses a variety of social and computer facilities to encourage employment and assist those in need. Most of the members and frequent users of the centre are immigrant women, and children to a lesser extent. Men attend the social and cultural programming far less frequently and are more interested in assistance with administrative procedures or problems such as obtaining help with income taxes or housing requests.

The association with which I had the most contact was Association Nadha. It is strategically located in the centre of the neighbourhood, in the Place des Muguets, with the idea of attracting women from both the Canibouts and the Pâquerettes. Nadha, which

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<sup>27</sup> This involvement led to a separation in 2003 between the director of the overall organization and of this urban renovation and a second director in charge of the community centre's activities. Including these directors, there are six staff members (an accounting secretary, one social worker, one multimedia director and one receptionist, as well as 15 volunteers).

in Arabic means “effort and resistance” was created in 1982 by Nejma Belhadj. It carries out many of the same social assistance functions as the Centre Valérie Méot with the addition of a non-for-profit Hair Salon, *Nadha Coiffure*. Nejma is a single parent of a son in his 20s. She was born in France but spent most of her youth in Algeria, before returning to France in the early 1970s. I believe that she returned to France to give birth to her son. Nejma began working at the Centre Social des Canibouts in the late 1970s, and eventually wanted to open her own centre more focused on women’s issues. In a short article in the French women’s magazine *Avantages* from August 2004, Nejma explains the philosophy behind the hair salon:

The salon works like a space of integration, a place where women can discuss things over a cup of coffee, a nearby business where female clients are the actors of their own development. Beauty does not need to be reserved for the elite nor does it need to be uniform, for it belongs to all women. To feel good [about oneself] is also a way to find one’s place in the world in which one is surrounded, to find confidence in one’s own capabilities (Bois 2004: 24).

The brochure literature produced by the Association in 2005 for its 23<sup>rd</sup> anniversary celebrations highlights its increasing focus on *le cheminement du concept de l’intégration à celui du développement inter-culturel*, that is, it claims to be less focused on integrating new immigrants in Petit Nanterre and more aimed at creating inter-cultural linkages. Based on my extensive experience and participant observation over 22 months with this association, I suggest that in practice this inter-cultural harmony is difficult to achieve. Because of shifts in citizenship law, in its French “cultural classes” the organization pushes French cultural and linguistic literacy exclusively. According to their 2004 and 2005 activity reports, the Nadha Association had 350 active members and nine full-time employees: Nejma as president, four people working in the drop-in centre and giving



French language and culture classes, one part-time legal expert, and the remainder in the hair salon. According to the Association's own statistics, 40% of the people using their drop-in services are men who are more than 50 years old. They often need help with paperwork related to their pensions or taxes. The remaining 60% are women, most of whom were between 30-50 years-old. Interestingly, 60% of the immigration population who used their social centre services in 2004 (outside of the French classes) had been in France for more than 10 years (Nadha 2004 Report: 9). This statistic suggests that those who have spent more time in France feel more comfortable using community centre-based assistance.

During the first year of my fieldwork (2004-2005), the women in this class worked much more on their writing and grammar skills. By 2005-2006, there was a notable shift in the mandate of the courses by the Association's director. She reconceptualized the courses to centre upon what she called "social integration." The curriculum has been reframed to reflect a push toward acquiring French spoken language and cultural literacy skills instead of written French.

A certain number of activities are organized for them [the female participants in the afternoon Nadha classes] to protect the knowledge of some, and to construct a base for the social insertion/socialization of newly-arrived women, of which there are many in the neighbourhood [of Petit Nanterre]. Goals for these women are centered upon the emergence of a personalized life project through the acquisition of basic knowledge of French society (Nadha Activity Report 2004: 12).<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> Article 2 of the Association's statutes clearly indicates that Nadha's focus is upon ameliorating the social integration of the Maghrebian community in France (Nadha Activity Report 2004: 1). In their 2005 Activity Report they note that those most fragile and in need to encouragement and help are those women without training or education, without work, and without knowledge of the basic proponents of French culture and society (Nadha Activity Report 2005 :12).

Unlike in the first year of my attendance when there was a greater focus on grammar and pronunciation, the women now learn practical information and focus much less on literacy and linguistic skills. This shift in the focus of the course is due to the demands placed on the Association by various French state organizations which provide it with funding and because the director believes that this type of practical learning is far more useful for women who have just arrived, particularly those who wish to attain citizenship. The women therefore receive lessons on French geography, touristic sites in Paris, how to read a metro plan, and where to find the ANPE (*L'Agence Nationale Pour L'Emploi*, or The National Employment Agency). They share recipes and find occasions to have afternoon parties, bringing home-cooked desserts and listening to traditional music on CDs. The group which has greater facility in French also share ideas and information about the acquisition of French citizenship and memorize the lyrics and melody of *La Marseillaise* (the French national anthem).<sup>29</sup> They have also memorized the Republican mantra of *liberté, égalité et fraternité* and understand the meaning of each term. Although they do so rarely, sometimes one of the two teachers, both Algerian-born, repeat information in Arabic.

Particularly for those who have recently arrived in France, these “socialization and integration” courses (no longer called “French courses” within the Association itself) facilitate social encounters, establish information networks, and provide a scheduled

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29 Interestingly, for International Women’s Day in March 2006, the primary teacher of these language and cultural classes for women created a song for the women to memorize and sing to the tune of *La Marseillaise*: « Come on women of all origins / The day to believe is here / Against us is ignorance / Knowledge for us is sacred (bis) / Listen to us in our housing projects / Fight for and Defend our rights / To overcome indifference / And at last feel integrated.” [ “Allons femmes de toutes origines / Le jour de croire est arrivé / Contre nous de l’ignorance / Le savoir pour nous est sacré (bis) / Écoutez-nous dans nos cités / Nous battre et defender nos droits / Pour vaincre l’indifférence / Et enfin se sentir intégrées.”]

moment to leave their apartments for a few hours. One class member, a 21 year-old recently married Moroccan-born woman, Sara, who arrived in Nanterre four months earlier, explained how excited she was when she came to her first French class and met another young married woman, who came from the same neighbourhood where she grew up in Casablanca. These women became fast friends and according to Sara, this friendship eased the difficulties she had arriving alone in France and living with her Mauritius-born husband, whom she had not known beforehand.

As mentioned previously, I was also involved in Zy'va, a drop-in centre for young people to provide help with homework after school. The centre opened in June 1994 in a small 20m<sup>2</sup> space on the Pâquerettes side of the neighbourhood and had, according to one of its founders, Hafid, approximately 30 students in attendance. In the booklet produced in honour of their 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary, Hafid states, "I always believed that social success stemmed more from school than from sports or show biz. For that reason, I participated in creating Zy'va ten years ago" (Zy'va Anniversary Booklet 2004: 7). Hafid has been director for the past five years; he devotes most of his time to organizing and recruiting volunteers. Based on my own observations he is also the primary disciplinarian of the children when they visit. Hafid is a rarity among other community association directors in that he was born in the Cité des Pâquerettes. He grew up in a polygamous family; he is one of the younger children of his father's first wife. His father has since passed away. Hafid and his father became estranged over his father's desire for a third wife. Hafid claims that this disagreement stemmed not necessarily from criticism of his father's decision, for he understood that his father would want a young bride from Morocco. Also,

from the young woman's perspective, to arrive in France was desirable. But, from Hafid's mother's perspective, the situation was less tolerable for she would have had to live with another wife, who would have become her responsibility as well (Interview 24 February 2006). Hafid claims that he wishes there had been something like Zy'va during his childhood, particularly for his older siblings who have not fared well in adulthood. Hafid was the first in his family to complete the BAC. Those who followed him achieved much better results in school than his older siblings. Hafid has more than 12 brothers and sisters; one half-sister, Houria also works for Zy'va. According to Hafid, all of his siblings live in the neighbourhood and his older brothers in particular have become involved in taking and dealing narcotics. He sighs, adding that a quiet place to do homework would have been a welcome change for him as a teenager.

More than 10 years after it opened, the association now has more than 300 students, eight people on salary (three full-time) and, according to Hafid, more than 80 people who volunteer. They now have four large spaces (one of which is a multimedia room with computers available) and, in 2003, an operating budget of more than 250 000 Euros (approximately \$347,000 CAD), financed by eight different government initiatives. I will return to the success and interesting philosophy of this association in this chapter's conclusion.

The last association with which I volunteered is the Centre Social des Canibouts which organizes a variety of community events for locals, as well as literacy classes, a day-care, and the GAO, a youth centre which began in 1964. This community centre has been plagued in the recent past by scandals, the latest involving the embezzlement of

funds by the former director. It now has a new staff and renewed desire to welcome locals to its services. The GAO employs seven *éducateurs* (youth workers) as well as the director and a part-time secretary. Like Zy'va, it organizes a variety of activities and trips for young people between the ages of 10-20. Mariette, its director for more than 25 years, claims the organization's highest priority is the social integration of young people. For 26 Euros/year young people have full access to all of the centre's resources (Interview 22 October 2004). Young people not fully committed to the Centre's activities or to receiving homework help are asked to leave the organization.

### **Religious Geography**

One does not need to spend a great deal of time in Petit Nanterre to notice the number of publicly-visible Muslims in the neighbourhood. Many women wear headscarves and loose-fitting robes. Some people in the neighbourhood say that increasing numbers of women have adopted these styles in recent years. One local Catholic nun, Marie Josée, notes that "We're not sure why. It's very strange. Is it to protect themselves?" (Interview 10 March 2006). Men also often wear loose-fitting robes; some have long beards. Moreover, during the summer in particular when people spend more time outdoors and leave their windows open, one can hear the faint melodic sounds of traditional North African music or *Rai*, Arabic hip-hop music. There are few commercial enterprises in the area. These include one Taxi Phone offering internet connected computers and inexpensive rates for long distance telephone calls, two bakeries, one Greek take away restaurant, a pharmacy, a dark café for a male clientèle

which also has some gaming and slot machines, Nadha Hair Salon, a post office, the grocery store ED, a store for odds and ends, and two *halal* butcher shops. When locals need to shop for clothes they typically go to the outdoor market in neighbouring Colombes or take the bus to La Défense which has a large shopping centre. Petit Nanterre might therefore be considered a “Muslim space” (Metcalf 1996: 5).

One of the most impressive buildings on Petit Nanterre’s main street is the local mosque (see photo in Appendix 2). According to the current Imam of this Sunni Mosque, the mosque was built in 1964 and remodeled in the mid-1990s. The Imam, a well-spoken and bilingual sub-Saharan Algerian, claims that approximately 100-300 men attend the mosque regularly, that is, almost daily. During major festivals, particularly during Ramadan there may be between 1500-1800 people in attendance, as attendees come from neighbouring *banlieues*. It was difficult to gauge the number of people present during the handful of visits I made to the mosque, as the women’s entrance and space is completely separate from the main male entrance. Indeed, the women’s entrance is on the street behind Rue de la République; women pray in a separate house and listen to the Imam by a loud-speaker connected to the main mosque. Certainly there seemed to be hundreds of people in attendance for Friday prayers. Since the mosque does not have its own parking lot, parking in Petit Nanterre is often a problem on Fridays.

Muslim cultural and religious events extend beyond the mosque into the community. In response to the desires of community members, many local social centres’ social events also cater to ‘Muslim-cultural’ events. Although he pointed out that “in the Centre’s statutes we don’t combat or promote things which are political or religious,” the

president of the Centre Social des Canibouts admitted that attendance increased exponentially when ‘Muslim-cultural’ elements are incorporated into the centre’s events. During Ramadan in 2005, for instance, the centre held two evening pot-luck dinners *dans l’esprit du Ramadan* (in the spirit of Ramadan). The president was also particularly pleased with a number of visits he had organized promoting Arabic and Muslim culture, to the *Institut du Monde Arabe* (World Arab Institute) and to the *Mosquée de Paris* in Paris’ 5<sup>th</sup> *arrondissement*. These visits were more popular, he noted, than organized visits to other museums in Paris.

I discuss the Centre Social des Canibouts in particular because of its unique positioning next to what is known in the neighbourhood as the “illegal” mosque (see photo in Appendix 2). This mosque is considered illegal by some because it is not officially registered as a religious site and therefore does not have any signage (except the word ‘Allah’ written in Arabic on a sign-post outside the door). The Imam of this mosque does not speak French and was unknown to the women I knew in the neighbourhood. Women do not attend this mosque and I too was not able to enter it, nor were my furtive glances in its windows very welcome. According to local people I asked, it is run by the Muslim Brotherhood and prescribes a more fundamentalist Islam than that practiced in the much larger mosque down the street. The Centre Social des Canibouts runs out of the main floor of this same five storey apartment building. The mosque is located on the ground floor. The president of the Centre Social explains the complicated nature of this mosque’s presence and arrival. Originally the space it now occupies had served for decades as a sports-room for a disbanded association. The space thus became available

and a group approached the Centre (which operates the entire building, including the neighbouring day-care) and asked whether it could use the large room for an Arabic-language association. Benoit and the committee agreed, although Benoit claims that it soon became clear that Arabic instruction was not a priority. In fact, he adds, there are no desks or chalkboards in the room. He has never seen any pupils. He explains:

It's a little bit complicated. The Imam from that mosque receives his mail here. We're not going to put it in the garbage. Afterwards, it's true, I still have some hesitations [. . .] Except that in Petit Nanterre, there is a mosque [referring to the large mosque on Rue de la République] and so it's a prayer room that's actually meant to be a classroom. So, it becomes somewhat more complicated. [But] These are people, of course, who have the right to practice their religion (Interview 16 November 2005).<sup>30</sup>

Benoit admits that although the mosque makes him feel uncomfortable, particularly because of the rumours about its radicalism, he does not want to be the whistle-blower. He adds, “in this neighbourhood, I want to work with everyone and I don't really want to become angry with the people down there” (Interview 16 November 2005). It remains unclear how long this “illegal” mosque will continue to operate, but for now residents seem content to allow it to remain open under the radar.

On occasion among the majority of visible Muslims in Petit Nanterre one comes across Jeannette and Marie Josée, two of the three Roman Catholic religious sisters who share an apartment with another more elderly sister above the Centre Social des Canibouts. These sisters are members of the *Auxiliaires du Sacerdoce* (or Auxiliaries of

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<sup>30</sup> “C'est un petit peu compliqué. L'Imam de la mosquée il reçoit du courrier ici. On va pas le mettre à la poubelle [that is, he uses the Centre Sociale as the mosque's official mailing address]. Après, c'est vrai, j'ai quand même des hésitations [. . .] Sauf que dans le PN, il y a une mosquée [sur la Rue de la République] et donc, c'est une salle de prière mais c'est constitué comme une classe. Donc ça devient un peu plus compliqué. C'est des gens, bien sur, qui ont le droit de pratiquer leur religion » (Interview 16 November 2005).



the Priesthood).<sup>31</sup> This religious group has been present in Petit Nanterre since 1962, when two nuns arrived to work as nurses in the shanty-town. When the *HLMs* were constructed in the early 1960s, the sisters were given an F3 (or a three-bedroom apartment) in one of the original apartment buildings in the Cité des Canibouts. At that time they continued to provide healthcare services from their apartment. Marie Josée described how the two nuns at that time used one of the bedrooms to administer vaccines and other minor treatments, and the eating area was used as a waiting room. The order continued offering these health services for a couple of years, but eventually the arrangement became untenable as the number of patients and hours of work increased. For a couple of years, they moved this local healthcare centre out of their own apartment downstairs (to the space where the GAO is now housed). Eventually, in the late 1970s when the modern state-run centre was opened on the other side of the *Maison des Jeunes* (where the Nadha classes for women are now held), near the Pont de Rouen, the religious sisters decided to cease their services.

Marie Josée has lived in Petit Nanterre since 1996, and has worked for the past three years with different community organizations, devoting much of her time to helping to teach French at the Centre Social des Canibouts. When I asked her about proselytizing and Christianity in Petit Nanterre, Marie Josée admitted that there are very few Christians in the neighbourhood. There are a handful of congregants from the Antilles Islands and from Haiti, but the order has had no success in converting Muslims to Christianity. In my

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<sup>31</sup>This religious organization began in 1926 with the name *Petites Auxiliaires du Clergé* (or Little Auxiliaries of the Clergy) thanks to a young woman, Marie-Magdeleine Galloïd (born in 1886) who had a strong “priestly love” for the Son of God.

visits to the local chapel run by the nuns on Sunday mornings, there were fewer than 12 people in attendance. One February morning was especially cold as they chose to economize on heat by lowering the temperature. A couple of Haitian students from nearby Nanterre University came to the services, one with two scarves wrapped around her head to keep warm. Despite a changing congregation with the arrival of foreign students at the nearby university and the dwindling number of Catholics, both Jeannette and Marie Josée are pleased they were assigned to Petit Nanterre. They are highly respected by locals for their dedication to social work and their piety. The sisters spoke of the physical changes to the neighbourhood over their stay, and noted shifts they have observed in their work with the Centre Social des Canibouts. Marie Josée noted that while there are now more head-scarved women than previously, more women are participating in community events and more residents seem interested in the skills training which is available to them such as computer basics and resumé building classes.

### **French Religious Landscape and the Fieldwork Context**

I arrived in France to commence my fieldwork in late-August 2004 anticipating public reaction to the beginning of the academic year to be heated. In March of the same year following the Stasi Commission Report, the government voted to ban conspicuous religious symbols in government offices and public schools in order to reinforce cultural, historical and political Republican values of French secularism or *laïcité*. As I argue in Chapter Three, this law primarily targets publicly visible and practicing Muslims. While I hurriedly left Canada to arrive in Paris by the end of the summer in time for the beginning

of classes in public schools, a surprising turn of events unfolded. Two French journalists and their Syrian driver were taken hostage in Iraq. Their disappearance and subsequent ransom demands and negotiations mobilized a very different response to the law on conspicuous religious symbols than anyone had expected. With the capture of Christian Chesnot, Georges Malbrunot and Mohamed al-Joundi on 28 August 2004, members of the Islamic Army of Iraq demanded that the French government retract this law in exchange for their release. Al-Jezira ran an amateur video of the two men pleading to the French State to retract the law. The French government refused to negotiate on these grounds, eventually sending Dalil Boubakeur, president of the *Conseil français du culte musulman* (CFCM, or the French Council of the Muslim Tradition) to Baghdad to discuss the situation. As one editorial in the 2 September 2004 edition of *Le Monde* aptly summarizes,

Far from dividing the Muslim community in France, far from reinforcing its most radical wings, far from digging an impassable trench between French society and the roughly five million Muslims in the country, the kidnapping of the two French journalists gave rise to a national communion movement, almost a sacred union, still highly improbable only a short time ago (*Le Monde* 2004: 22).

A public march of 3,000 at Trocadéro Square on the afternoon of 30 August 2004 and other public condemnations of the hostage taking from a variety of religious and non-religious organizations unified a national response. All parties sought to bargain for the release of these journalists.<sup>32</sup> President Jacques Chirac echoed this request in a television and radio announcement 29 August 2004 in which he called for French citizens to remain united.

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<sup>32</sup> Ultimately, as *Le Figaro* reported, the Syrian driver was freed 13 November 2004, the two French journalists, 21 December 2004.

Still, on 2 September 2004 as schools opened, the public mood was decidedly tense: most French journalists expected public demonstrations against the law, particularly by French Muslims. The president of the CFCM explained in an interview in *Le Parisien* three weeks later that many Muslims felt that to act against the law was to collaborate with the Iraqi hostage-takers. More to the point, Boubakeur added that many young Muslim women in France wanted “Pas de sang sur mon foulard” or no blood on their headscarf (Baverel 2004: 11). Therefore, just three weeks following the beginning of classes in public schools, the French minister of education, François Fillion proclaimed that “la laïcité a gagné,” that, in the midst of early uncertainty surrounding the application of the secular law, secularism had won against the fundamentalist Islamic forces which once threatened it (Le Fur 2004: 11). In spite of 101 cases of girls who refused to remove their headscarves, mostly in Strasbourg, Lille, and Créteil, the Republic was, according to government officials, newly reunified in supporting secularism within public schools.

I assumed after the safe return of the journalists to France at the end of December 2004 that attitudes toward the law might shift, that held-over resentments might surface. Again, among the first and second generation women of Petit Nanterre I interviewed, this was largely not the case. While prior to entering the field I anticipated tremendous controversy about veiling, most women in the *banlieue* where I undertook fieldwork remained largely unfazed by the law banning ostensible religious symbols in public schools and government offices. Locally what captured the attention and fury in this *banlieue* was a controversy regarding non-*halal* (non religiously observant) meat products in École La Fontaine, the primary school in the Cité des Canibouts. Parents also had

concern about *mixité*, or the social and academic mixing of boys and girls, as they were concerned about possible moral transgressions. Yet, despite this seemingly general acceptance of the law recommended by the Stasi Commission, paradoxically, most long-term residents in Petit Nanterre reported that a greater number than ever before of local women wear the headscarf. My own initial research project thus focused a great deal on the *hijab* (Islamic headscarf) and on what I anticipated to be more notable public debates or another “headscarf affair” (like that of 1989). While it is impossible to know how events and the response to the law might have affected Muslim women living in the *banlieue* with the beginning of the school year had these French journalists not been taken hostage, I admit my own surprise (and near disappointment!) that there was not greater controversy. Despite this lack of interest in public protest in the *banlieues* themselves, the headscarf remains central to contemporary debates. Far more important for the Muslim women in Petit Nanterre, particularly for the large and constant number of first generation migrants, were issues of proper religious practice, the maintenance of the nuclear family, and discrete sexuality.

### **Future Possibilities in Petit Nanterre**

To conclude with this brief introduction to Petit Nanterre, I return briefly to my fieldwork to describe two diverging tendencies which emerged in discussions on the future of Petit Nanterre and that of the young people who grew up in its *cités*. The first is the PRUS (Urban and Social Renovation Project) which began making plans in 2000 for radical physical transformations in Petit Nanterre. The largest changes include the demolition of ten high-rise housing project apartments, almost all of which are located on

the Canibouts side. The new architectural plans include more green space and mixed housing, as well as five new apartment buildings in Petit Nanterre and five new social housing apartments in Nanterre Ville, outside of the neighbourhood. While residents like the idea of leaving their dilapidated apartments for improved conditions, some worry they will be “lost in the shuffle” between demolition and relocation. Unlike the urban renovation of the Pâquerettes from 1983-1985, residents will not return to the same apartment complexes and to the same apartments. The new configuration would mean that some residents would be forced to leave the neighbourhood. Residents also feel uneasy that improvements to the buildings will mean increased rents. In general, this multi-billion dollar (and still under-funded and therefore stalled) project aims to ameliorate social conditions in Petit Nanterre by improving the aesthetic and geographical landscape and architecture.

Hafid and his team at Zy’va have a radically different approach. They encourage young people to leave Petit Nanterre as soon and as often as possible to better their chances in the future. Hafid himself espouses this belief, and now lives in a privately owned apartment in the south of Paris, in the 14<sup>th</sup> arrondissement near the Porte d’Orleans. While it means he has a long commute every day, he feels it is important to show young people that there is a future and happiness beyond the periphery of the *banlieue*. He feels sure that other young people will emulate his example:

What we notice as a difference today compared to ten years ago is that young people are more preoccupied with their futures in relation to pursuing a higher education [...] [Before] there weren’t any kids who asked if they could work on Sunday. As for myself, who grew up in this neighbourhood, Sunday wasn’t for that. To work on a Sunday night at Zy’va with so much motivation and enthusiasm, so much willingness, that is, to believe

in education and that it was possible to attend the best schools [never used to be the case] (Interview 24 February 2006).<sup>33</sup>

My own thoughts on the future of Petit Nanterre are mixed. In many ways while some immediate improvements to some of the apartments in the Cité des Canibouts are necessary, the PRUS does little to alleviate more pressing socio-economic issues, in particular the high unemployment rate among members of the neighbourhood as well as the high number of homeless people from the CASH. Also, there is neither discussion in the PRUS literature nor in public meetings about drug trafficking and the relationship between youth and local law enforcement officers. The encouragement that Hafid and Zy'va are offering to young people to leave the neighbourhood entirely also seems unsatisfactory. Few are able to find full-time employment with a *CPI* (*Contrat de Periode Indeterminé*, or Unlimited Term Contract) which would allow them to be financially independent and afford the high cost of private apartments outside of the housing projects.

In addition, the population has a rich and long history in Petit Nanterre, and many young people reclaim the space with pride, etching graffiti on trees and walls in the neighbourhood which pronounce the superiority of the 92000 *Département* and their particular *Cité*. The grandfathers of many of the children at Zy'va first came to Petit Nanterre in search of work, eventually bringing their wives and raising their children in the *bidonville*. To willfully create a cultural amnesia of sorts by completely abandoning

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<sup>33</sup> « Ce qu'on a noté comme différence par rapport à il y a 10 ans c'est que les jeunes aujourd'hui sont plus préoccupés par leurs avenir par rapport à la poursuite d'études à niveau supérieur [...] Il n'y avait pas de gamins [avant] qui demandaient de travailler le dimanche. Moi, pour avoir grandi dans le quartier, le dimanche c'était pas ça. De travailler un dimanche soir à Zy'va avec tant de motivation et tant d'enthousiasme, tant de volonté, c'est-à-dire, croire en l'école et que c'était possible d'accéder les plus grandes écoles » (Interview 24 February 2006).

Petit Nanterre is both ill-advised and short-sighted, in my view. One *éducateur* from the GAO explained that “Those who can, they leave and it [Petit Nanterre] becomes a ghettoized neighbourhood. They go to the private [owned apartments], or they buy a home in a suburb, and they’re replaced by people who don’t have a choice [about where they live]” (17 February 2006).<sup>34</sup> Abandoning this neighbourhood is unfathomable for many. The *cités* are part of the transgenerational “chain of memory” that connects these men, women and children who live in Petit Nanterre.

## Chapters

The second chapter moves outside the specifics of my fieldwork in the *banlieue* to engage the theoretical categories underpinning my work. I engage the much-utilized categories of “Islam” and “Muslim woman” to consider the Western academic, anthropological and political implications in the production and reproduction of these terms. Contemporary anthropological investigations of Islam have produced a number of theoretical positions (Redfield 1956; Geertz 1968; el-Zein 1977; Said 1978; Asad 1986, 1993; Abu-Lughod 1989; Lukens-Bull 1999; Varisco 2005). The second section of Chapter Two similarly engages the politics of representation inherent within the category of the “Muslim woman” (Cynthia Nelson 1974, Marilyn Strathern 1987, 1988, Spivak 1988, Abu-Lughod 1985, 1986, 1989, 1990a, 1990b, 2001, Mohanty 1984, Ong 1999). Following a literature review, I critique the remarkable and thought-provoking works of Saba Mahmood (2001, 2005) and Ruba Salih (2002, 2003) who propose alternative

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<sup>34</sup> “Ceux qui peuvent, s’en vont et ça devient un quartier ghetto. Ils vont dans le privé, ou ils s’achètent un pavillon en banlieue, et ils sont remplacés par des gens qui n’ont pas de choix. » (Johan, GAO, 17 février, 2006).



notions of “agency” and “tradition” in their attempts to better reflect on Muslim women’s experiences. I conclude this chapter by evaluating these theoretical approaches as they pertain to my own ethnographic research, following Donna Haraway’s notion of “situated knowledge” (1988).

Chapter Three examines how debates about contemporary French secularism became manifest in Petit Nanterre. I focus on a *halal* meat controversy which emerged at the local primary school. I then begin a theologically comparative and contemporary philosophical discussion of the terms “secular,” “secularism” and “*laïcité*.” I seek to unpack the relationship between conceptions of secularism and Christianity, which, I propose, serve to exclude classical Islamic theological conceptions of religion and society. This position of exclusion is also evident in more recent academic and popular literature and French public debates on secularism and its relationship with Islam. I then examine the 2004 Stasi Commission Report and its proposal for a law which banned visible religious signs, the Islamic headscarf in particular.

The fourth chapter traces the life experiences and immigration trajectories of first-generation Maghrebian Muslim migrants in Petit Nanterre, most of whom immigrated under the family reunification French immigration policy. Once settled in France, many women choose to take French language and culture classes with Petit Nanterre’s *Association Nadha*. Drawing from the variety of experiences of women in this space, some living in France in precarious, illegal situations, others having had difficult marriages, I examine two phenomena I observed over the course of my fieldwork: first, that many of the women of the neighbourhood are first-generation migrants even if their

husbands or their families have lived in France for several generations. That is, many French-born husbands in this suburb openly prefer “traditional” North African wives to women born in France, even if these French-born women are Muslim or have North-African origins. This phenomenon is also known as Father’s Brother’s Daughter’s marriage (see Barth 1954; Murphy and Kasdan 1959; Ottenheimer 1986; Boddy 1989; Kraus 2003; Altunek 2006). Within the arguably postcolonial and diasporic context of North Africans living in France, I consider this marriage-partner preference with reference to central theoretical linkages between gender and nationalism (Mosse 1985, Kandiyoti 1991, Yuval-Davis and Anthias 1993, Chatterjee 1993, McClintock 1995, Nagel 1998, Rao 1999). Second, and I suggest relatedly, I unpack the claim made by several new immigrants and longer-term residents that, although as women they feel they are afforded greater liberties in work and schooling opportunities for themselves and their children in France, at the same time, they have an impression of greater scrutiny and social control of their dress and social comportment in Petit Nanterre than they experienced in their country of origin. These collectively assumed and assigned cultural mores both powerfully protect and control women in Petit Nanterre.

The fifth chapter also focuses on Petit Nanterre and explores how notions of Islam, femininity and sexuality are discussed concretely by mostly first-generation Muslim Maghrebian women. These perceptions of womanhood in this French *banlieue* often become most salient with reference to their daughters, born and educated in France. Following an introduction to the literature which foregrounds contemporary experiences of immigration for women (Chant and Radcliffe 1992, Sassen 2003, Manalansan 2006), I

examine the centrality of marriage and motherhood within their conceptions of femininity and social roles. I also examine how these social values are enforced and maintained through local gossip, which is structured by the values of honour and shame, and by the Panopticon-like architecture of the housing projects. I propose a tripartite division of the functional uses of this gossip. I conclude that while these first-generation women are often socially and economically marginal in larger French society, they play an essential role in constructing and maintaining the image of Islam in France, particularly through the ways in which they conceive of and shape a “proper” upbringing for their French-born and educated daughters.

The sixth chapter begins by examining the linkages between feminism and *laïcité* in France’s media and popular discourses as well as by a French feminist organization, *Femmes Solidaires*. I suggest that this focus on the strict segregation of religion into the private sphere places publicly-visible Muslim women in Petit Nanterre (particularly those who wear the headscarf) outside the accepted boundaries of women’s rights that traditional feminism has fought to secure. Significantly, the same North-African-born Muslim women that these feminists often characterize as oppressed have their *own* notions about the traits that characterize the French women who are so keen to “save” them, akin to Rachel Bloul’s notion of ethnicization (1996). Both perspectives – here necessarily essentialized – revealingly judge one another utilizing similar criteria: “religious” practices, and morality, social comportment, dress and personal relationships with men. Both essentializations create two constructions that I (with trepidation) here call the “French Feminist Whore” and the “Oppressed Muslim Woman.” This chapter is

thus based on the fieldwork with *Femmes Solidaires*, a national French feminist organization with a local office in nearby Nanterre Préfecture. I consider the complexity of feminism “in practice” for women in Petit Nanterre through events revealingly related to International Women’s Day in 2005 and 2006. In my separate conclusion, I briefly summarize the main arguments of the dissertation, point to possible areas of future research, and consider the imagined hybrid third space created and contested by Maghrebian immigrants in Petit Nanterre.

### **The Challenges of Representivity: Writing about “Islam” and the “Muslim Woman.”**

The main challenge for the study of Islam is to describe how its universalistic or abstract principles have been realized in various social and historical contexts without representing Islam as a seamless essence on the other hand or as a plastic congeries of beliefs and practices on the other (Eickelman 1982: 18; see also 1987: 5).

This chapter moves away from the *banlieue* space where I conducted fieldwork to consider some of the theoretical implications of the project. Like any category created to understand a group of phenomena, “Islam” is not a stagnant a-historic artefact. It holds “multifarious manifestations” (Kazmi 2004: 245). I begin this section with a methodological discussion of the anthropological category of “Islam” and conclude by examining the implications and politics laden within Western representations of the “Muslim woman.” While theoretical projects are sometimes dismissed as capricious or, in a negative sense, overtly “post-modern,” this examination is intended as more than a theoretical make-work project. I suggest that the manner in which “Islam” and “Muslim women” are conceived and conceptualized in contemporary scholarship and popular or normative perspectives shapes both the social and political legitimacy of these categories, in particular “Muslim women’s” “ability” or “inability” to exist within secular democracies.<sup>1</sup>

American anthropologist Talal Asad claims that “one’s conception of religion determines the kinds of questions one thinks are askable and worth asking” (1986: 12). Therefore to ignore Foucaultian issues of power in the creation and continuance of knowledge, particularly from a Western anthropological perspective historically mired in

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<sup>1</sup> In a broader sense, I seek to move past tepid ecumenism, and beyond overstating similarities between the Christian West and Islamic “Orient”, which does little to advance scholarly categorizations of Islam.

imperialism and colonialism, serves to promulgate and propagate specious conceptions. In recognizing that the discipline of Anthropology was initially largely formulated by Western colonial interests and that its base-line subject-matter, assumptions and methods were originally conceived by colonial projects (see Asad 1973), some discussion of latent power dynamics in representing the “Other,” particularly Muslim “Others,” is in order.<sup>2</sup> To do so, I consider how these categories have been articulated. Several Western anthropologists have examined Islam, and how its definition shapes academic inquiry, analyses and results (see especially el-Zein 1977; Asad 1986; Lukens-Bull 1999). I conclude by applying some of these ideas to the analysis of my own fieldwork, to assess the efficacy of these methods in practice.

More specifically, this chapter analyses scholarly literature on anthropological interpretations of Islam, beginning with Robert Redfield’s central separation of “Great” and “Little” traditions in *Peasant Society and Culture* ([1956] 1967). From this largely theoretical framework, I turn to anthropologist Clifford Geertz’s widely-read *Islam Observed* (1968) and the critical responses of Talal Asad (1986, 1993) and Daniel Martin Varisco’s (2005) to this work. Abdul Hamid el-Zein’s examination of the anthropology of Islam in the late 1970s is an early but still relevant contribution to this field. Moreover, while el-Zein appreciates Geertz’s desire for a multi-localized and ritualized

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<sup>2</sup> I propose similar conceptualizations of the categories of religion and secularism in Chapter Three. There I argue that a French understanding of secularism, itself a Christian derivative, precludes the social legitimacy of practicing Muslims in Europe. This position is not uncommon; many contemporary theorists seek to demonstrate the inability of Muslims to adapt to Western ideals of secularism, democracy and women’s rights (see Fukuyama 1992, Barber 1995, Huntington 1996, Lewis 1993, Étienne 2003, Asad 2003). These judgments are presented from a “Christian” secular position and demonstrate the inability of “Muslims” to adapt. The title of Bernard Lewis’s *Islam and the West* (1993) is an apt example. In this historical overview of the West (as Monolith) and “the Rest” (Islam), Lewis characterizes a subtle power relationship between “us” (as Europeans) and “them” (or Middle Eastern ‘Others’ as all Muslims).

understanding of Islam, he critiques Geertz's continued use of a single Islamic discourse. El-Zein prefers the discursive description of "islams" (1977). Although he does not address Islam specifically, literary scholar and cultural theorist Edward Said's formative *Orientalism* (1978) is seminal to any theoretical analysis of "non-Western" groups because of his influential critique of Orientalist scholarship. Said claims that previous scholarship on the Orient, both implicitly and explicitly, objectifies and politicizes the "East." In this section, I also examine Lila Abu-Lughod's helpful tripartite categorization of the anthropology of the Arab world (1989), as well as the later scholarship of American anthropologists Dale Eickelman (1992), John Bowen (1993) and Ronald Lukens-Bull (1999), all of whom successfully illuminate the political implications underscoring categorizations of Islam.<sup>3</sup> I conclude this first section by problematizing Redfield, el-Zein and Asad's scholarship with reference to interpretative categories of "global" and "local" Islams I encountered over the course of my own fieldwork in Petit Nanterre.

In this chapter's second section, I narrow this discussion of anthropological interpretations of Islam to consider the political and academic implications of Western scholars who represent "the traditions" of Muslim immigrant women. I begin with reference to the notion of "feminist anthropology" (Nelson 1974; Strathern 1987, 1988; Abu-Lughod 1990b) and move to the formative scholarship of anthropologists Saba

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<sup>3</sup> Many of the scholars to whom I turn following an analysis of Said's contributions to the field, particularly Asad (1986), Abu-Lughod (1989), and Lukens-Bull (1999), have systematically charted previous scholarship in the development of the Anthropology of Islam, rendering an in-depth re-reading of these formative texts unnecessary. Nevertheless I propose some of these key texts do merit a second glance with reference to my own fieldwork site in France, because of its differential historical (post-9/11) and gendered focus.

Mahmood (2001, 2005) and Ruba Salih (2002, 2003) on this subject. I seek to underscore how, not only in recent controversies in France treating the Islamic headscarf but also in recent North American debates like that surrounding religious law in family law arbitration in Ontario, Canada (known in 2005 as the *shari'ah* debate”), the “Muslim woman” has appeared as a downtrodden subject incapable of agency and constrained by her religious affiliation and community. Often missing from these categorizations are Muslim women’s voices and the ethnographic perspective more broadly. Also, these types of judgments on the agency of “Muslim women” assume a certain *kind* of woman (headscarved, downtrodden, uneducated), and presume that not only are such pronouncements acceptable, but that, from a “civilizing” or democratizing perspective, they are necessary to save her.<sup>4</sup>

The victimized Muslim woman who can be rescued by ‘Westernization’ has shaped normative discourse on Muslim women since colonial times and arguably

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<sup>4</sup> Here, I aim not simply to condemn these judgments in themselves, but to point to their pervasiveness and political expediency. The most recent politically-charged engagement between “East” and “West” with regards to the agency of Muslim women was the American-led “liberation” of Afghan women in 2002. In a radio address on 17 November 2001, American first-lady Laura Bush called on Americans to support the War on Terror campaign because “The brutal oppression of women is a central goal of the terrorists” and “The severe repression and brutality against women in Afghanistan is not a matter of legitimate religious practice” (2001: Website). Ms. Bush characterizes this fight for the honour of Afghan women as one based on respect and humanity. This rhetoric suggests that, after the solecistic “Crusades” reference by her husband to inspire loyalty to the American cause, no good American would want to impede the liberation of oppressed and physically-endangered Muslim Afghan mothers, sisters and daughters. This move to “save” these women in “social missions” parallels previous Western missionary or colonial projects. Lila Abu-Lughod, Gayatri Spivak, and Lata Mani point to how religio-cultural judgments of “Othered” women were utilized for post/colonialist interests. Gayatri Spivak (1988) and Lata Mani (1998) also argue how the prohibition of *sati* by the British in 1829 secured countering positions of nationalist historiography and central elements of colonial discourse. Mani argues that widows themselves were marginalized in debates and the court proceedings on the prohibition of *sati*. This policing has been exacerbated post-9/11. Charles Hirschkind and Saba Mahmood claim that Hollywood celebrity interest in freeing women in Afghanistan rightly points to atrocities occurring under the Taliban, while effectively maintains silence about the US’s role in creating these situations. While under the guise of liberation, the “neat circuit” of women’s oppression, the Taliban and Islamic fundamentalism continues unchallenged (2002: 342). Abu-Lughod draws parallels with the War on Terror in Afghanistan, and the British “saving” of women in India from *sati* and child marriage, and similar projects in Egypt and Algeria (2002: 784-785).



continues to mark current thinking.<sup>5</sup> I suggest however that a differing ethnographic and/or anthropological approach highlighting the intersections of power and resistance, however, may reveal an alternative position, whereby some Muslim women, assuming this category remains an appropriate identifier, are able to enjoy culture or religion, while having their rights as women protected. Here I draw largely from American anthropologist Saba Mahmood (2001, 2005). Mahmood offers a varying position on determining agency, by radically altering the situatedness of power: “I want to suggest we think of agency not as a synonym for resistance but as a capacity for action that historically specific relations of subordination enable and create” (2001: 203). As Mahmood and others have argued, religious practices in general, and ones rooted in Islam in particular can inform rather than solely constrain women’s agency. In this chapter’s second section I engage this scholarship by looking specifically at the issues which arise when, as a non-Muslim female (and ostensibly feminist) outsider, one (here, myself) interprets Muslim women’s agency in ethnography. How and why do Western academics determine the agency of non-“Western” (these categories are themselves unclear) women, particularly when separated by representation and education? How can or should, as Gayatri Spivak asks, ethnographies allow the “sub-altern” to speak? Should such a perspective be possible, what might characterize an anthropological focus on gender from a decidedly feminist anthropological approach? I conclude by considering how this positioning on power, following Donna Haraway’s notion of “situated knowledge”

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<sup>5</sup> As I depict in Chapter Six, these depictions and stereotypes affect both “sides”; my fieldwork analysis suggests that in their typical characterization of “French Women,” North African first-generation Muslim immigrants also often negatively portray their agency and sexuality.

(1988), might look methodologically when interpreting my own ethnographic data with Muslim women in Nanterre, France.

### **Anthropological Constructions of “Islam”**

No discussion of anthropological approaches to the study of Islam could begin without reference to the central universalized model proposed by anthropologist Robert Redfield (1967 [1956]). Redfield suggests that the study of world religions can be divided between “Great” and “Little” traditions, both in content and in scholarly approach (see Lukens-Bull 1999: 4-5):

In a civilization there is a great tradition of the reflective few, and there is a little tradition of the largely unreflective many. The great tradition is cultivated in schools or temples; the little tradition works itself out and keeps itself going in the lives of the unlettered in their village communities. . . . The two traditions are interdependent. Great tradition and little tradition have long affected each other and continue to do so (Redfield 1967: 42).

Problematic in this straightforward bifurcation of these traditions is the typical placement of the “greater tradition” as theologically, politically and socially superior to the little/ “lesser” tradition (Redfield 1967: 49). Scholarship treating the great tradition may also have traditionally been granted greater attention in the academy. Elite, orthodox and philosophical traditions have often been approached by classical textual scholars, while the Little tradition’s focus on more local forms of tradition and practice of the “ordinary” have been far more accessible to anthropologists undertaking fieldwork studies. These categorizations are therefore not without power-laden and political repercussions.

Disciplinary divisions oftentimes determine what is studied and by whom. Ethnographic approaches may accord the possibility of transcending these categories as

they may transcend disciplinary boundaries in their analyses. Redfield explains that a classical anthropological approach necessitates a focus upon a community as local and immediate, but within the larger framework: “When he [the anthropologist] comes to study a peasant community and its culture, the context is widened to include the elements of the great tradition that are or have been in interaction with what is local and immediate” (1967: 52). In his reading of Redfield’s methodological contribution to the anthropology of Islam, anthropologist Ronald Lukens-Bull highlights how local customs necessarily engage with and sometimes become part of the larger tradition by examining the *djellaba*, a loose dress-like garment worn by Muslim men and women. Lukens-Bull notes how the incorporation of this dress into normative Islamic practice cannot be traced back to the Qur’an, for its origins stem from Arab cultural practices (1999: 6). Today, however, the *djellaba* has become a centrally important cultural and religious marker for Muslim women. We can likely chart a similar opposing movement between Great and Little culture, where the “religious” becomes a “cultural” tenet, perhaps particularly in more secularized spaces, and may lose an inherent “religiousness.”<sup>6</sup> Of course, these reflections demand clear distinctions between cultural, ethnic and/or religious practices, which themselves are not so idiosyncratic. Moreover, as some theorists have pointed out (see el-Zein 1977; Eickelman 1982), the Great/Little division may no longer reflect multi-disciplinary scholarship which melds both perspectives. Furthermore, as John Bowen

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<sup>6</sup> The Canadian Broadcasting Corporation’s (CBC) production *Little Mosque on the Prairie* features a humorous instance of this shift from Great to Little tradition when the prairie town’s local Imam tells the Muslim children, who want to go “trick or treating” for candies, that they can celebrate “Hallal-oween” so long as they dress up as Qur’anicallly-inspired objects, like a date or an olive (broadcast 7 February 2007). This is a comical example of a cultural notion shifted into a religiously-appropriate practice across religious traditions and time.

elucidates, Great/Little scholarship may place the “Orientalist” tag unduly on textual/Great scholars (1993).

Anthropologist Abdel Hamid el-Zein examines these categories in his still-relevant 1977 essay. Beginning by problematizing the juxtaposition of “anthropological” and “theological” perspectives (1977: 227), whose definitions themselves are debated, he reveals differing theoretical assumptions concerning the nature of religion. El-Zein explains his academic uneasiness with the *sui generis* nature of the categorization of Islam in *both* approaches:

In all approaches, *the meaning of religion as a universal form of human experience and of Islam as a particular instance is presupposed, invariable, and incontestable.* Consequently, all claim to uncover a universal essence, the *real Islam*. Ironically, the diversity of experience and understanding revealed in these studies challenges the often subtle premise of the unity of religious meaning” (my emphasis; 1977: 227).

For el-Zein, a singular “true” or “real” Islam is does not exist and cannot be represented. Rather, any religious tradition like Islam emerges within a continuity of culturally-shared significance. Akin to historian Eric Hobsbawm’s later formulation of cultural and religious traditions as “invented” (Hobsbawm 1992), for el-Zein, religious categories themselves are meaningless and carry no inherent reality.<sup>7</sup> More representative, posits el-Zein, are the lower-case “islams”, which highlights the plurality and lack of authority or uniqueness in determining religious categorizations. As Dale Eickelman notes, “This approach emphasizes the multiplicity of Islamic expression and asserts that in all historical and social contexts the islams of elite and non-elite, literate and illiterate,

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<sup>7</sup> El-Zein’s presentation of religion precedes a later corpus of scholarship treating the category of religion, particularly the scholarship of Jonathan Z. Smith who famously declared there to be “no data for religion” (1982). This proposal spawned a great number of other investigations into academic categorizations, particularly related to conceptualizations of both “religion” and the “sacred.” (see: Paden 1992; Bell 1996; McCutcheon 1997; Lincoln 1999; Anttonen 2000; Arnal 2000; Braun 2000).

theologians and artisans, tribesmen and peasants, are equally valid expressions” (1987: 19; see also 1982: 1). This multitudinous notion may also be read as a reaction against fundamentalist movements in the religious tradition itself, which like most religiously fundamentalist traditions, aim to fashion and mould “the” Islam.<sup>8</sup>

Before el-Zein’s perspective on “islams” came to the fore, and perhaps the precursor in these anthropological definitions of Islam(s) from a “Western perspective” is Clifford Geertz’s *Islam Observed: Religious Development in Morocco and Indonesia* (1968). Geertz seeks to “lay out a general framework for the comparative analysis of religion” and “apply it to a study of the development of a supposedly single creed, Islam, in two quite contrasting civilizations, the Indonesian and the Moroccan” (1968: ix). While this pairing may seem initially anomalous, one a tropical “synchronistic” Asian country with a Dutch history and the other an arid more “puritanical” Mediterranean one within a former French colony (1968: 4), they share a predominantly Muslim population. Geertz “observes” Islam in these highly disparate spaces and offers theoretical proposals to highlight the factors and details (ritual, scriptural, theological) entailed within “Islam,” shifting from the localized to the universalized. Although Geertz’s work appears dated when placed alongside more recent methodological concerns and analyses, his premise of contrasting differing socio-political contexts successfully problematizes the notion of a singular religious practice and tradition. Thus, although later critiqued for his definition of

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<sup>8</sup> Problematic, however, is that the ‘islams’ approach may not reflect the beliefs of Muslims. Thus while it is definitionally useful in reflecting historicized, shifting perspectives on Islam, it may not be as ethnographically useful in grouping religious beliefs among Muslims. Normative beliefs in the tradition are then not properly represented when always speaking of *islams*. More important for scholars of Islam, says Eickelman in his critique of this perspective, is to elicit the implicit and explicit criteria which shape the normativity of one Islam above another (1987).

religion, notably by el-Zein (1977), Talal Asad (1986, 1993) and Daniel Martin Varisco (2005), Geertz himself responds to preceding problematic scholarship in *Islam Observed*, namely anthropological debates treating the “noble” savage.<sup>9</sup> *Islam Observed* (1968) is clearly a product of its time, but Geertz convincingly depicts how religious change depends upon a mixture of symbols and social arrangements.

While widely-read and written in the poetic style for which Geertz is known, this text is not without its contemporary critics. Largely at issue is Geertz’s now-controversial conception of religion, present in *Islam Observed* and best exemplified in “Religion as a Cultural System” (1973). Anthropological theorist Talal Asad’s understanding and presentation of “religion” differs greatly from Geertz’s symbol-based “cultural system” model. Asad seeks to link the study of religion with an appreciation for its inherent configurations of power. Following Nietzsche, Asad terms this approach as “genealogical.” Far from constructing a truism or a universal category, Asad’s “religion” aims to move away from a post-Enlightenment theologically-motivated, tacitly-Christian approaches (which is his characterization of Geertz’s model) to that of “power-based” constructionist model (Asad 1983). Indeed, Asad’s larger body of work readily critiques “Religion as a Cultural System” and, in a general sense, follows a larger academic trend that rejects metaphysical inquiry (1983, 1993). El-Zein concurs that such theologically-motivated questions are inappropriate in scholarship treating Islam: “While the saints of Morocco and the saints of Indonesia might play a similar role as condensing metaphors,

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<sup>9</sup> Geertz characterizes anthropologists Bronislaw Malinowski as representing a primitive pragmatist position and Lucien Lévy-Bruhl, primitive mysticism (1968: 90). Geertz suggests that the earlier debates of these thinkers represent an “unreality,” that the dichotomy created by this debate was itself false. Central to these categorizations, from Geertz’s perspective, is the relationship between the commonsense rational and the religious (1968: 91).

their meanings will never be the same” (1977: 231). For el-Zein, despite Geertz’s appreciation for diversity with the larger theological category, Geertz presents a single unified Islam, and refers to *the* “Islamic,” and never to “islams.” Presumably for Geertz, however, a non-metaphysical approach to religion like Asad and el-Zein’s ignores central symbolic meanings and is, ultimately, reductionist and overly functionalist.

Much more scathing in its critique of *Islam Observed* (1968) is Daniel Martin Varisco’s close (and often witty) reading in *Islam Obscured: The Rhetoric of Anthropological Representation* (2005). Varisco notes:

Despite the claims, *Islam Observed* is neither scientific nor ethnographic. First, there is virtually no analysis of primary texts – certainly not in Arabic – here, no novel historical interpretations based on a thorough survey of all relevant sources, no context depth and little cultural thickness of any kind. Second, the ethnographic data appear to have been left back in the village. What we get is Geertz’s read; the only narratives in sight are those viewed generically through the lens of the absent ethnographer’s own highly crafted rhetoric. Flesh-and-blood Muslims are obscured, visible only through cleverly contrived representation and essentialized types (2005: 29).

Varisco’s first critique of Geertz’s textual and historical treatment of Morocco and Indonesia is unmerited. Although he does offer literary textual analysis of key texts in both cultural traditions, Geertz does not claim in his introduction or elsewhere to be primarily concerned with such matters. More pointedly he seeks to undertake comparative analysis in two spaces which have undergone “Islamization” in order to comment broadly on the nature of religion and specifically Islam, both complicated categories “sustained in this world by symbolic forms and social arrangements” (1968: 2). Varisco’s second allegation, however, is more on the mark. Geertz’s last chapter, entitled “The Struggle for the Real,” aptly characterizes the work’s greatest limitation. Geertz offers few references to his fieldwork, and little evidence which would denote an engagement, academic or

personal, with people in either location. Perhaps the omission of fieldnotes or interview citations was a stylistic choice to simplify the comparison of two such disparate fieldwork locations, but the “observation” element of *Islam Observed* is largely absent from his discussion. Instead Geertz relies, in my reading, too greatly on unobservable historical analysis. Varisco’s judgements of Geertz as a “victim of his own symbolizing” (2005: 37) and, worse, as an “armchair dilettante” (2005: 31), go too far, given Geertz’s then-new and significant theoretical contribution to multi-sited and variant “Islam” and his critique of the primitive hypothesis then in vogue in anthropological circles.

Talal Asad, as I mentioned, also critiques Geertz’s general perception of religion, notably Geertz’s positioning of the religious as part of a “transtemporal conception of reality” (1968: 2). In his essay “The Idea of an Anthropology of Islam” (1986), Asad evaluates the scholarship which preceded him, primarily targeting Geertz and British anthropologist, Ernest Gellner. Asad suggests that one of the problematic ways in which Islam is understood is as a dichotomy, a position which characterizes the work of both these thinkers (1986: 6). Asad characterizes their notions of Islam as a “drama of religiosity” turning all Islamic behaviour into “readable gesture” (1986: 9). Their primary methodological hindrance, Asad adds, is their reliance upon the “Orientalist distinction” of Robert Redfield’s Great and Little Traditions (1967). While these two categories correlate nicely with the social and political structures of *shari’ah* law and the *ulama* in the cities, and variable customs and saints among the tribes (1986: 6), the schema, says Asad, is problematic because it de-historicizes and schematizes its actors. In Gellner’s account, Asad remarks that both women and peasants are not depicted as *doing* anything



(Asad 1986: 13). For Asad, these structuralist distinctions may create arbitrary distinctions.

Asad usefully groups scholarship on the anthropology of Islam into three methodological approaches.<sup>10</sup> He dismisses the first two approaches: first, that there is no such theoretical object as Islam. Thus, while “Islam” may exist, it cannot be properly categorized or conceptualized. Second, Islam acts as a label for a heterogeneous collection of items, designated as Islamic by Muslim informants. Thus, no matter the practice or belief, it is “Islam” if people in the field deem it as such. This idea – that Islam is simply what Muslims everywhere say it is – will, according to Asad, “not do, if only because Islam is not really Islam at all” (1986: 2). The third approach identified by Asad is the view of Islam as a historical approach which helps to organize societies. This position is similar to Gellner’s *Muslim Society* (1981) which Asad characterizes as an anthropological model of the characteristic ways social structure, religious belief and political behaviour interact with each other in an Islamic totality.

Asad proposes his own conception of what a proper anthropological approach to Islam might entail. First, he defines Islam as a tradition, and points to the Qur’an and the *Hadith*. Central is his claim that “Islam is neither a distinctive social structure nor a heterogeneous collection of beliefs, artefacts, customs, and morals. It is a tradition” (1986: 14). Tradition is defined as historically-based discourses which instruct practitioners on the correct form and purpose of a given practice. Importantly, this

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<sup>10</sup> Like other theorists, Asad considers the insider/outsider issue, adding that moral neutrality is no guarantor of political innocence (1986: 17).

category is not a catch-all; not everything a Muslim does or says necessarily should be categorized within the Islamic discursive tradition (1986: 14). Wanting to move away from the phenomenological, metaphysical or *sui generis* accounts of religion, Asad aims for a contextualized and historicized Islam.

In the wake of Geertz's anthropological study of Islam came American literary and cultural theorist Edward Said's decisive methodological critique of Orientalist scholarship, and the West's abuse of its own cultural power. This Orientalist research includes anyone engaged in teaching, writing or researching about the Orient, post-Enlightenment (1978: 2). *Orientalism* (1978) does not specifically address interpretations of Islam as a field of study or as a religious tradition, but Said's critique of Orientalist scholarship remains pivotal to any scholarship critiquing the politics behind knowing or studying spaces or peoples beyond traditional Western locations<sup>11</sup>. One of the main theoretical underpinnings of his analysis of the Orient may have been secularism (see Anidjar 2006: 56, 66 who argues that Orientalism is a form of Christian imperialism). Said notes the historical legacy of East/West conflicts, centred upon Islam:

For Europe, Islam was a lasting trauma. Until the end of the seventeenth century the "Ottoman peril" lurked alongside Europe to represent for the whole of Christian civilization a constant danger, and in time European civilization incorporated that peril and its lore, its great events, figures, virtues, and vices and something woven into the fabric of life . . . the European representation of the Muslim, Ottoman, or Arab was always a way of controlling the redoubtable Orient (1978: 59-60).

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<sup>11</sup> The case of Muslims in France challenges these West/non-West cultural spatial positions. First-generation North African immigrants are French colonial subjects. Colonialism has thus problematized these distinctions, creating, as I explain in my conclusion, hybridized diasporas and eliminating facile East/West distinctions. I noted in my fieldwork, that these identifiers become more scrambled on an individualized identity level. For instance, the thirteen year-old French-born daughter of the family of Algerian-origins with whom I lived often complained of the lack of respect shown by her "French" classmates. She, of course, is herself French, but did not want to identify herself with a "Western, non-Muslim" type of comportment.

Said also notes Islam's geographical, cultural, and theological proximity to Christianity likely created uneasiness for "Westerners" (1978: 74), despite their Abrahamic connections. India or the Hindu religious tradition(s), for instance, never posed a similar threat.

Inspired by Said, Gordon E. Pruet (1984: 43) goes further in his analysis of the effects of Orientalist scholarship on Western interpretations of Islam, noting it to be

a powerful enemy; an exotic and deviant growth of the Near East; a semi-inert, introverted mass; a failed civilization in need of restoration and revision; a mission field; and a fanatical, even suicidal, reaction against the trends of modern time.

Asaf Hussain claims that these developments in Orientalism can be traced back to Christian missionaries, many of them studying Islam and Muslims and motivated to discredit them (1984: 7; see also Anidjar 2006: 60, 65). Later Orientalists were also likely politically-inspired in aiding colonial administrations by providing interpretations to dispute the "natives'" perceptions of Islam.<sup>12</sup> Politically-charged theological investigations are easily detected, as well. Orientalists typically understood the Qur'an as evolving from Judaism or Christianity, and as a forgery of pre-Islamic Arab customs and practices (Hussain 1984: 15). Still, historically speaking, what is deemed "Islamic studies" emerged from this Orientalist scholarship. In these cases, Europe's Orient corresponded largely to the contemporary Islamic Middle East.

More generally within *Orientalism* (1978), Said's work makes three principal claims. For my own purposes, here I focus more upon how his claims shape social

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<sup>12</sup> Hussain makes an important distinction between the goals of anthropologists and of Orientalists. He writes that "both served colonialism but in different ways. Anthropology evolved much later than the former at a time when colonialism had spread far and wide into the non-Western world and colonialists needed concrete methodologies as to how to bring about political, economic and social changes among the colonialized" (1984: 10).

scientific representations of the Orient rather than on approaches which treat the Middle East.<sup>13</sup> Said's analysis does not focus upon gender-representivity, but he remarks that, particularly in literature and artwork, the Oriental woman is portrayed as distant, passive, exotic, subservient, veiled, and reacting to events; she is never a participant. Said pays particular attention in his examination to Gustave Flaubert's portrayal of women. In *Salammô* (1862) for instance, Flaubert proposes an almost uniform association between the Orient and sex (Said 1978: 6, 188).<sup>14</sup> Said's greatest contribution is his demonstration that although it purports to be an objective, disinterested, and esoteric field, Orientalism functions to serve political ends. Said is quite clear about this causal sequence: "To say simply that Orientalism was a rationalization of colonial rule is to ignore the extent to which colonial rule was justified in advance by Orientalism, rather than after the fact" (1978: 39). The first 'Orientalists' were nineteenth-century scholars who translated the writings of 'the Orient' into English, based on the assumption that a truly effective colonial conquest required knowledge of the conquered peoples. By knowing the Orient, much like the now-common anthropological postcolonial critique, the West came to own it. By the late twentieth century, the field helped preserve American power in the Middle East and defended what Said calls "the Zionist invasion" and "colonization of Palestine." Said examines contemporary situations, concluding that present-day Israeli policy, and

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<sup>13</sup> Said's approach to these historical, literary and artistic instances is indeed broadly historical and anthropological (1978: 23).

<sup>14</sup> While *Orientalism* does not treat gender or sexuality specifically, its influence is clear. Lila Abu-Lughod's survey of ethnographic literature on women in the Middle East claims plainly that: "Said's stance, that one cannot divorce political engagement from scholarship, has presented Middle East gender studies and debates about feminism with some especially knotty problems, highlighting the peculiar ways that feminist critique is situated in a global context" (Abu-Lughod 2001: 101). Stereotypes and representations of the Orient have often fallen on the space of women, particularly upon women's public roles, marriage, and domesticity.

deciphers between those who are “good” Arabs (those who do what they are told) and “bad” Arabs (who do not and are therefore terrorists) (1978: 306).

As a disciplinary field therefore, Orientalism helped to define Europe’s self-image. The construction of identity, Said maintains, involves establishing opposites and “Others.” This interpretation happens because “the development and maintenance of every culture requires the existence of another different and competing *alter ego*” (1978: 331-332). Moreover, Orientalism led the West to see Islamic culture as static in both time and place, as “eternal, uniform, and incapable of defining itself” (1978: 301). The West consequently saw itself as a dynamic, innovative, expanding culture. Arguably, this cultural perspective became part of its imperial conceit. Lastly, according to Said, Orientalist scholarship and culture produced a false description of Arabs and Islamic culture because of its tendency to essentialize, so that it became possible and desirable to define the essential qualities of Arab peoples and Islamic culture. Unsurprisingly, these qualities were typically depicted in uniformly negative terms.

When applied to the current socio-religious situation in France, this Saidian perspective illuminates the way in which many French and international media depictions of North African Muslims correlate Islam with violence and theological and cultural inflexibility, and understand the “Muslim woman” as a culturally and politically unified and unchanging entity. French Neo-Orientalist perspectives work to characterize immigrants of North African Muslim origin as devoutly religious, observing principles of Islamic law fundamentally, and thereby create an essentialized Muslim, largely non-existent in reality, which is then oftentimes placed in opposition to equally static modern,

democratic and secular French values in opposition. These perspectives are exemplified contemporarily in American political theorist Samuel Huntington's influential *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order* (1996).<sup>15</sup>

While methodologically useful in exemplifying often latent power dynamics within the representations of Islam, in the Middle East in particular, Said's critique is not without critics. First, as a cultural and literary theorist, Said makes it clear that he is not attempting to treat Oriental Studies entirely. Rather, he focuses on how English, French, and American scholars have approached the Arab societies of North Africa and the Middle East. Accordingly, he fails to treat other Orientalists like the Dutch, Spanish, or

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<sup>15</sup> Huntington predicts that in the wake of the Cold War, global conflicts will no longer focus on ideologies, such as capitalism or communism; instead, he claims world politics will return to old battles rooted in culture, and that these clashes will define the future. Generally, Huntington's civilizational approach predicts the rise of the nation-state, but that its interests, associations, and conflicts are increasingly shaped by cultural and civilizational factors (1996: 36). Although Huntington identifies nine contemporary civilizations, three monopolize his attention: the West, Islam "Muslim militancy" and the Sinic civilization, or "Chinese assertion." Civilizational disputes, he suggests, are particularly prevalent between Muslims and non-Muslims. He argues that these tensions between the West and Islam are not a modern consequence of a handful of terrorists, but reflect a lengthy history of conflict, beginning with the initial move of Muslims into the Iberian Peninsula in 710 C.E. In short, Huntington suggests that the critical conflicts in the coming decades will occur because of challenges to the West from Islam and China and that "In the post-Cold War world flags count and so do other symbols of cultural identity, including crosses, crescents, and even head coverings" (1996: 20).

Huntington presents "facts" which paint an aggressive and conflict-laden future. He claims that the imperialist conceit may be overstated, that while the world is modernizing, it is not necessarily Westernizing. In fact, he adds that modernization may actually work to reduce the relative power of the West: "In fundamental ways, the world is becoming more modern and less Western" (1996: 78). He also claims that Asia, despite its ups and downs, is expanding militarily and economically; "Islam," (we can presume which geographical regions he is referring to) he adds, is exploding demographically. "Islam" as category remains enmeshed in its "religiosity" while the others are geographically determined. These factors suggest that the West may be declining in relative influence. Still, says Huntington, Western beliefs that parliamentary democracy and free markets are suitable for everyone will bring the West into conflict with civilizations—notably, Islamic and Chinese—that think differently.

The French, according to Huntington, are not necessarily racist, but they are "culturalist." Integration is fine, but headscarves are not (1996: 200). Thus, the often-asked question: "Can Muslims assimilate into European societies?" presupposes a radical opposition between Islam and the West – one that formed the basis of Orientalism and theories of Islam and politics like Huntington's. These characterizations thus overlook variations in Muslim belief and practice due to migration and new environment and artificially oppose Islam and modernity, stereotyping Islam in Europe as an invasion or a conquest. These depictions fall under Said's conception of "Latent Orientalism," as an unconscious, untouchable certainty about the nature of the Orient.

Portuguese. Furthermore, the period he covers is more restricted than the scholarly field, too, extending only from the late eighteenth century to the late 1970s, whereas European scholarship on the Orient dates back to the Middle Ages. Lastly, it is sometimes unclear as to where the “Orient” is located. Said’s *Orientalism* is also functionalist insofar as he offers no examples which fall outside or challenge his paradigm.

Said suggests within his central argument that the need for an ‘Other’ is built into human nature, both individually and collectively. This position, however, leads Said into a direct contradiction with one of his core methodological dicta: his rejection of essentialism. As Fred Halliday elucidates, Said makes a methodological assumption about the relation between the genesis of ideas and their validity, namely that if ideas are produced within a context of domination, they must be invalid (1993: 159). Halliday also comments on the essentializing nature of Said’s project, and questions the over-extension of his comments across academic disciplines claiming he has hubris in such an overextension (1978: 330). Said’s legacy and the importance of the Orientalist critique, however, is undeniable. What to do in the wake of the Orientalist critique is less clear; Said calls for a “spiritual detachment and generosity” (1978: 259) in examinations of Islam and/or non-Western cultures.

American anthropologist Lila Abu-Lughod recognizes and synthesizes Said’s contribution within the framework of anthropological work undertaken in the Middle East in her useful synopsis of the “Zones of Theory in the Anthropology of the Arab World” (1989; see also 2001). While examining popular trends and theorizations in contemporary Anglo-anthropological scholarship, Abu-Lughod considers the politics of fieldwork and

the relationship between this encounter and the production of ethnographic texts within the context of the Arab World. How is knowledge about the Other gained and how is this knowledge then disseminated? Abu-Lughod is particularly concerned with the unequal power between the ethnographer and her subjects (see 1989: 270). Significant power dynamics between those in the societies being studied and those undertaking the study clearly shape the resulting project: researcher and subject in these cases meet with differing social and political capital, and presumably often with differing goals and interests. The writer, however, maintains authorial control.

Abu-Lughod comments on the anthropology of Islam within her tripartite separation of theory in the Arab World as: segmentation, the harem and Islam. Segmentation studies, or research on tribal social organization, have historically generated tremendous Western interest, and though no longer in vogue, have been readily critiqued for their structuralism, so-called idealized functionalism, and for their focus on men, politics and violence. Of note in this scholarship says Abu-Lughod, “Women either are not considered at all or are viewed as that which men must protect or defend to maintain their own honor” (1989: 285).

Abu-Lughod devotes most of her brief analysis of Islam to a close reading of Asad’s project. She claims that most problematic is his inherent association of Islam with the Middle East and the defining of Muslim history as a mirror of Christian history (1989: 295). She also points to other important reflexive and innovative works ignored by Asad, which allowed him to make easy generalizations. Most interesting in her intellectual ‘zoning’ of anthropological scholarship, presumably due to her own interest in this area,



is Abu-Lughod's focus on 'harem' research. Again, academic gender politics overwhelmingly influence interest relating to women and sexuality in the Arab World. These gender politics also shape the availability and possibilities afforded to anthropologists. Abu-Lughod contends that

If Arab society is popularly known for its sharp sexual division of labor and its high degree of sexual segregation related to an extreme distinction between public and private, a look at the anthropological literature suggests that such patterns are not confined to the society being studied. Nearly all the segmentation theorists are men, while nearly all those who theorize about women are women (1989: 287-288).

Of course, there are practical reasons for this interest; strict sexual segregation and social decorum hinder "non-gendered" fieldwork for both male and female ethnographers in the field where the ethnographer seeks to join, observe and interact with already-present social structures (see also Nelson 1974: 553, 560).

Abu-Lughod points to common political sensibilities amongst anthropologists in this "harem"-focused scholarship, particularly a common desire by feminist academics to debunk stereotypes of passivity and subordination pertaining to their subjects. Focusing on other symbols and alternative power structures, for instance, allows scholars to depict how seemingly "oppressed" women actively "strategize, manipulate, gain influence, and resist . . . sexual segregation" (1989: 291). Based upon her reading of ethnographic writing on issues of power in depicting nomadic and sedentary societies in the Middle East and deconstructing the segregation of women in the "domestic private" realm, Cynthia Nelson demonstrates how conventional Western cultural notions of authority have blinded ethnographers to the ways women participate in decision-making and the

workings of society (see Nelson 1974; Abu-Lughod 1989: 291). I discuss Nelson's work in greater detail in the second half of this chapter.

Following Abu-Lughod's useful look into Islam, her third category, several decades later, British anthropologist Richard Tapper enters this debate on academic representations of Islam with a differing approach: "Islamic Anthropology" (1995). This perspective is based on what Tapper considers as Islamic values and principles, and utilizes analytic techniques "inspired" by Islamic texts and traditions. Tapper links this approach to earlier works by Akbar Ahmed - his *Toward Islamic Anthropology* (1986) - and by Merryl Wyn Davies – notably her *Knowing One Another: Shaping Islamic Anthropology* (1988). In his review of the literature on Islamic anthropological perspectives, Tapper characterizes three broad approaches: within the first, traditional Western anthropological precepts are accepted and Muslim ideals foregrounded; the second focuses centrally upon the Qur'an and the *Sunnah*; the last completely rejects "Western" perspectives and calls for an entirely "Islamic" approach (1995: 190). Tapper argues that while this last method has been critiqued for being overtly value-based, when delineated explicitly, it bears theoretical similarities to Marxist, feminist or applied anthropological perspectives (1995: 185).

In my estimation, Tapper's contribution to this debate is his brief consideration of the insider/outsider issue, often broached in this literature with trepidation or ignored entirely. Although the researcher's own political or religious background is ideally bracketed in any academic endeavour, some reflexivity is warranted and necessary, particularly in light of the power-dynamics between the often very different social and

political locations of researcher and subject(s) in this research area. Notions of authority are also contestable. Nevertheless, Tapper concludes too quickly that “the best and most persuasive reflections and suggestions, have come from scholars originating in the Muslim world but trained in the West, such as Abdul Hamid el-Zein (1977) and Talal Asad (1986)” (1995: 191). Tapper, claims that because of their personal histories, el-Zein and Asad’s work lends power and credence to non-Western modes of representation, which is important insofar as non-Europeans have had until recently little recourse in the development and construction of anthropological discourse (1995: 186), particularly in relation to the secularized social construction of religion. Yet, Tapper’s point is a simplified association, which demands clarification. How would he classify self-identified “halfies” like Lila Abu-Lughod (see Abu-Lughod 1992) or Kirin Narayan (Narayan 1993)? More importantly, Tapper shies away from a clear delineation of what might be the agreed-upon, or at least explicitly stated, set of conceptual orientations of Islam. Western academic literature on Islam/islams suggests that “Islam” is hardly an agreed-upon concept and far from an ahistorical abstracted ideal; determining exactly what Tapper means by Islam is therefore of critical importance. While he points to the centrality of the Qur’an in this anthropological approach, Tapper includes little reference to *how* he might read it or what he would emphasize.

If nothing else, Tapper’s promotion of an “Islamic” perspective in anthropological work is one of many Islamic perspectives following the Saidian critique of Orientalist scholarship and a growing interest in the politics of representation in the wake of post-colonialism. Like Asad and Abu-Lughod, social anthropologist Dale F. Eickelman offers

a useful literature review of shifts in depictions of Islam (1987: 13-15). How is Islam thus best studied from a Western anthropological perspective? Eickelman deems the previous Great and Little traditions approach an analytical tool which inherently promotes a disjointed relationship, for rather than being compared, elite and folk contexts are juxtaposed and separated. Other anthropologists purport to synthesize both perspectives like American anthropologist John Bowen (1993).

While previous theorists have discredited Redfield's paradigm, in "Discursive Monotheisms," Bowen makes several useful theoretical steps toward positively complicating ethnographic analyses of Little and Great Islam. Bowen analyses how ritual forms practiced by Muslims in Morocco are typically shaped by both universal Islamic scriptural imperatives and by local cultural concerns. From a Redfieldian perspective, Bowen therefore undertakes a mix of Great and Little traditional sources to depict the larger implications of an annual community religious ritual. Based on ethnographic fieldwork in two locations, Bowen claims Islamic rituals "fit comfortably neither in an ethnographic discourse of bounded cultural wholes nor in an Islamicist discourse of scripture-based normative Islam" (1993: 656). Bowen claims that anthropologists (or those who study the Little Traditions) and Islamicists (as experts in the Greater Tradition) need to examine both the universal and the local in studies of ritual phenomena. Conscious of how his approach parallels that of Geertz's *Islam Observed* (1968) by examining Muslims in Sumatra and Morocco and their understanding of the Feast of Sacrifice, Bowen claims his work differs: "My emphasis is less on global cultural

typifications (Moroccan or Indonesian styles) than on the diversity of ideas and forms within as well as among Muslim peoples” (1993: 660).

Bowen arrives at these conclusions in part through a close reading of American anthropologist M. Elaine Combs-Schilling’s “noteworthy achievement” in *Sacred Performances: Islam, Sexuality and Sacrifice* (1989). Bowen studies the same sacrifice, and agrees that it is inherently patriarchal and serves to promote the prestige of the monarchy (Bowen 1993: 657). Yet, while Bowen generally concurs with Combs-Schilling’s conclusions, he critiques her analytical approach to ritual practice. Bowen suggests that a differing multi-vocal analytical perspective would offer broader perspectives, including the public forms of ritual, the ritual’s larger social meaning, and a comparison of ritual form in two or more societies, thereby pointing to a broader synthesis of Islam. Bowen’s suggestion indicates, however, that to reach a broader notion of Islam in its locality and its definition, one must likely undertake broad comparative projects. Ronald Lukens-Bull articulates this point similarly, suggesting the development of a Geertzian comparative study of local “islams”: “Although anthropologists base their careers on the intensive study of one society (ethnography), they also are concerned, at some level, with a comparative venture (ethnology). An ethnology of Islam is needed” (Lukens-Bull 1999: 17).<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> This kind of work may not, however, be desirable or even feasible for many ethnographers of Islam who do not have unlimited time or resources in the field.

## Conclusions

This brief methodological foray into the contemporary anthropology of Islam within Western scholarship highlights the tremendous diversity within Islamic traditions, practiced in differing geographical (North Africa, Middle East, and South Asia), political and gendered spheres. No longer can we turn to Huntington or Fukuyama's comparatively simplistic comparative paradigms. Geertz's "thick description" likely works better to capture the "multifarious manifestations" of Islam (Kazmi 2004: 245). But do these new paradigms focusing on "islams" fare better, or are they too defensive, confusing, open-ended and a sign of the anxiety on the representativity of this subject at this time?

In this first section of this chapter, I have reviewed prominent theoretical proposals in social and cultural anthropology, beginning with Robert Redfield's structural proposal, passing through the critiques of Said and Asad to Bowen, who considers how these perspectives can look in ethnographic analyses. Essential to the analysis of the various approaches to the different Muslim traditions, is a 'reflexive' approach which can provide some consideration of how issues of representation affect the academic perception and categorization of Islam. I also scrutinize how the field of research is historically and culturally shaped by Western preoccupations.

Yet, in conclusion, I wonder how viable and reflective of social reality the local/global separation that most of these theories presuppose is when treating Islam in a post-colonial diasporic context. While the global component is related to what is known as the *ummah*, or community of believers, local variations are more difficult to map in a

legally-secular space. While second generation Muslim-practicing children of North African origin may be deemed as “locals” in their practice and knowledge, having learnt and practiced the tradition in a Parisian suburb, these separations are not so tidy. For instance, while a local mosque may be understood to be allied with the Muslim Brotherhood, and thereby necessarily linked globally to Sunni political reform movements originating in Egypt, and typically quite vocally critical of the impacts of Western colonialism on Islam, these undertones appear more muted in Petit Nanterre, where members apparently preferred its basement space to the established mosque down the street because of the latter’s more conservative Imam and Arabic-only prayers.<sup>17</sup> While women are not allowed in this secondary mosque, other Great tradition signifiers like social class and education do not seem to stratify the group.

As a diasporic postcolonial urban space, the global and the local seem to be entirely intertwined in Petit Nanterre. Unlike Sayed’s notion of the “double absence” (1999), many women I interviewed saw themselves as equally French and North African, no matter their length of stay in Petit Nanterre, whereas some of the second-generation children born in France did not see themselves as French, but as North African. In the same sentence French-born children can talk about watching an Algerian entirely-Arabic program on Quranic recitation and the French “morally-provocative” karaoke competition “Star Academy” on the same digital satellite dish.<sup>18</sup> People in Petit Nanterre, arguably

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<sup>17</sup> See Chapter One for more details about this “illegal” mosque and perceptions of the Muslim Brotherhood in the neighbourhood.

<sup>18</sup> Although, as of February 2006, the BBC reported that “Star Academy” had been removed from Algerian television programming as it was deemed a “provocation against society and attacked its moral values” by the main Islamicist political party (see [http://news.bbc.co.uk/nolpda/ukfs\\_news/hi/newsid\\_4696000/4696866.stm?id=3965](http://news.bbc.co.uk/nolpda/ukfs_news/hi/newsid_4696000/4696866.stm?id=3965)).

like most modern individuals, construct their identities by incorporating the local *and* the global. Many families in Petit Nanterre own satellite dishes (see Hargreaves 2007: 80; Hargreaves and Mahdjoub 1997). Here, Great/Little or Local/Global are categories that are no longer useful to describe how people understand themselves and their religious and/or social practices. From a methodological point of view the best paradigm, while not necessarily reflecting the views of practitioners who do not view the tradition so polyvalently, is the theoretical perspective that posits multiple “islams.”

### **Approaching *the* “Muslim Woman”**

The vexing relationship between feminism and religion is perhaps most manifest in discussions of Islam. This is due in part to the historically contentious relationship that Islamic societies have had with what has come to be called “the West,” but also due to the challenges that contemporary Islamic movements pose to secular-liberal politics of which feminism has been an integral (if critical) part (Mahmood 2005: 1; see also Mahmood 2001: 202).

This chapter’s second section seeks to unpack political implications in the anthropological study of Muslim women. Possible power differentials and issues of representativity have increasingly been put into question, particularly in a post 11 September 2001 climate when policing Muslim communities in the name of gender equality continues to be practiced.<sup>19</sup> While living with a family of Algerian origins, I engaged with North African and French women of all ages and of varying educational, economic and religious backgrounds. Notwithstanding my obvious authorial power in the

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<sup>19</sup> This monitoring of Muslim women occurs in a variety of locations, such as in the Middle East, Europe and North America. Afghan women (cf footnote 4), and women around the world who wear headscarves or engage in publicly-visible Muslim religious customs have come under increasing attention, as wars, laws and legal controversies surround them, particularly in 2005 with the ongoing “War on Terror,” the law on Conspicuous Religious Signs in France and debates on *Shari’ah* and family law arbitration in Ontario, Canada.



undertaking of the project, throughout my fieldwork I was acutely aware, as a privileged, educated, Caucasian North American woman, that while this community's generosity granted my entrance and movement within its spaces, I was able to and eventually intended to return to the ideological and physical comforts and opportunities I enjoyed in Canada (see Abu-Lughod 1993). As anthropologist Janice Boddy eloquently notes in her ethnography of the Zār Cult in Northern Sudan, the female ethnographer and her informants may share a common biology, but do not necessarily share the same experience of gender (1989: 56). I lived, ate, shopped, shared and learned a great deal with and from women in Petit Nanterre and their families. Many became friends; older women called me *binti* (Arabic for "my daughter"), and despite my good health and relative youth, expressed thoughtful concern over my health, the health of my family and my unmarried marital status. Common greetings outside the apartments involved the French *bises* (two to four kisses on the cheek) and questions about my well-being, that of my family in Canada, and that of my adoptive family in Nanterre.

When I arrived in the neighbourhood I was extremely frank about my motives and research agenda (see for example a research pamphlet, Appendix 3). Nevertheless, I often wondered over the course of the 22 months I spent with them, as several women bore children, lost family members, separated from husbands, traveled to the *Bled* (or country of origin), and went about daily living, how conscious they remained about my work and my *raison-d'être* among them. Many felt motivated to tell their private stories sensing an opportunity to enact social change. I worried, and continue to be concerned, about their disappointment in the results of a PhD dissertation. They may not have appreciated how

many lives – as a researcher, PhD student, Canadian, woman, advocate, partner, daughter, friend - I was living (see Abu-Lughod 1990b).<sup>20</sup> I mention these lives or “selves” in the hope of avoiding egotism: everyone is multifaceted. Moreover, I surely thought about the people in Petit Nanterre far more than they did about me. However, combining this more personal social involvement in overtly “activist” roles in local community organizations and as an impromptu social worker alongside research can create a paralysis of sorts between one’s own political views and the more “distanced” ethnographic work at hand.<sup>21</sup> These questions of power and representation are by no means novel, particularly in postcolonial contexts and within reflexive ethnographic writing. I mention them in some part to ease my concerns about appropriate representation, and also to highlight, no matter the context, the always-present power differentials in author-subject relationships.<sup>22</sup>

To consider this dis-ease within my own ethnographic writing, I engage three queries: first, I begin by examining definitions and some of the implications of explicitly Western feminist anthropological approaches. That is, how do anthropological and feminist agendas dis/engage one another? I then consider the ways in which anthropologists have endeavoured to conceptualize agency and how women’s alternative

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<sup>20</sup> In the presentation of my life and opinions, while I often (silently) disagreed with some of the women’s ideas, I privileged fitting in over winning ideological arguments. As anthropologist Celia Rothenberg explains in the context of her integration as ethnographer into a Palestinian village in the 1990s, “It became clear to me that I should privilege villagers’ claims about who I was for them in the context of their lives and social world over my own” (1999: 143; see also 2004b: 16).

<sup>21</sup> For more on perceptions and gossip that I later learned about myself in Petit Nanterre, see Chapter Five.

<sup>22</sup> Methodologically-alternative ethnographic forms such as dual-authorship and collaborative research are becoming more developed in anthropological scholarship. Such perspectives allow community members to become co-researchers or collaborators and not solely research participants. Ideally, this more overt cooperation makes both the process and findings more accessible and relevant to people’s lives, and allows for a stronger examination of power relations (see discussion in Israel et al, 1998; Minkler et al 2003).

voices and power can be characterized, particularly in sexually-segregated societies. What models of non-Western women's agency are available and have been developed? I conclude by pointing to the larger politics of ethnographic and advocacy projects in academia. Are there important differences between theoretical and feminist endeavours, and if yes, what might these tensions tell us about the questions or projects we embark upon in relation to "Non-Western" women?

Many scholars have charted important forays into feminism and anthropology. As more and more women joined the field, this emphasis was likely inevitable:

The issue of gender arises because we (ethnographers) do fieldwork by establishing relationships, and by learning to see, think and be in another culture, and we do this as persons of a particular age, sexual orientation, belief, educational background, ethnic identity and class (Bell 1993: 2).

While women have been actively engaged in the discipline of anthropology since the early twentieth century, the subfield of feminist anthropology gained momentum and attention in the 1970s. Early notable work in "feminist anthropology" includes Sherry Ortner's seminal structuralist framework for the cultural construction of gender, which asked "Is Female to Male as Nature is to Culture?" (1972); Michelle Rosaldo's call for greater feminist theorization in ethnography focused on women's experiences (1980); and Henrietta Moore's overview of the state of affairs in *Feminism and Anthropology* (1988). Rosaldo points to how scholars must look beyond previous interpretive categories, for like Asad's later adage on religion (1986), "what we *can* know will be determined by the kinds of questions we learn to ask" (her emphasis 1980: 390).

For the purposes of this investigation treating "non-Western" women in a Western space, I begin with the interface of feminism and anthropology as related to Muslim

women in Cynthia Nelson's provocative critique of representations of women within anthropological works on the Middle East (1974). I then turn to Marilyn Strathern (1987, 1988) who initially investigated the "awkward relationship" between anthropological and feminist perspectives (see also Caplan 1988a, 1988b and Lutz 1990), and Lila Abu-Lughod who asked more explicitly "Can there be a Feminist Ethnography?" (1990b). Other anthropologists follow these early methodological ventures, applying these observations within their own ethnographies on women and power. In general, these thinkers also begin critiquing the use of binary structures common within earlier feminist scholarship, and begin utilizing "gender" to stress the social constructedness of sexual divisions. Also relevant to my own interests are projects which consider the influence of colonialist or Orientalist discourses, like the work of Chandra Talpade Mohanty (1984) and Aihwa Ong (1999), as well as Saba Mahmood's examination of Egyptian Muslim women and agency (2001, 2005) and Ruba Salih's portrayal of the politics of representation of migrant Moroccan Muslim women in Italy (2002, 2003). In this chapter's second subsection, I pay particular attention to Lila Abu-Lughod's conception of power from a Foucaultian perspective and other "Third-World" feminist anthropologists, and follow with Saba Mahmood's assessment of Abu-Lughod's conception of agency, and then my own critique of Mahmood's tripartite separation of the scholarship in this area.<sup>23</sup> I conclude this section by considering the larger political implications of feminist ethnography in academia.

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<sup>23</sup> These authors focus upon how intersections of power, agency and the politics represent the experiences of women whose socio-political contexts and relationships with patriarchy or democracy differ from their own. My uneasiness with my own "feminist" ethnography would surely dissipate were I working solely with *Femmes Solidaires* (that is, native-French, Caucasian, educated women) and not first-

### **Early Feminist Anthropological Writings**

Based upon her reading of ethnographic writing on issues of power in nomadic and sedentary societies in the Middle East, Cynthia Nelson demonstrates how conventional Western cultural notions of authority blinded ethnographers to the ways non-Western women participate in decision-making and the workings of society (Nelson 1974; see also Abu-Lughod 1989: 291). With reference to ethnographic studies in the Middle East by female and male Western anthropologists, Nelson challenges the then widely-assumed position that power was limited to men in the “public” sphere: “women can and do exercise a greater degree of power in spheres of social life than has heretofore been appreciated” (1974:554). Despite this attentiveness to alternative social capital in depicting women’s experiences, Nelson concludes by wondering how to conceptualize such findings within societies which are unmistakably patrilineal, patrilocal and patriarchal (1974: 560). Nelson’s study thus points to an early interest in examining alternative sources of power.

Examining this issue of representation in a broader sense, Marilyn Strathern points to the uneasy relationship between anthropology and feminism, in part because of feminism’s then-methodological-newness and in part because of uneasiness within the larger field about accepting its overtly-politically motivated analytical perspectives (1988: 23). Strathern claims that the field of feminist anthropology differs importantly from

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generation North African women (who are typically socially-marginalized Muslim immigrants of visible minorities). On this point, I am certain that my critique of this large French feminist organization’s “neo-Orientalist” positions toward Muslim women in Chapter Six likely stems from my suspicion of their privileges of power and their ability to participate and shape local and national political discourse. This analysis in no way reflects my positive experiences with this group and its members in Paris and in Nanterre.

other ‘normative’ or universalist investigations, which typically describe hierarchal relationships in the historical context of private ownership; feminist anthropology, on the other hand, offers an ‘evolutionist’ approach which examines inequality in all forms, particularly related to gender (1987: 284-285). Although this attention to reflexivity is now emblematic of a larger post-modern turn in anthropology,<sup>24</sup> in her introduction to *Problems with Women and Problems with Society in Melanesia* (1988) Strathern notes one cannot simply extend Western feminist insights onto the case of Melanesian women (1988: 7-8). In light of theoretical work like that of Nelson and Strathern, feminist anthropologists sought to underscore that it is clearly no longer warranted to reflect unselfconsciously about the status and situation of women, particularly in non-Western contexts.

Lila Abu-Lughod asks more explicitly whether feminist ethnography is possible given the differing agendas of each approach: general ethnography seeks objectivity (again, which has been questioned) while feminism typically critiques normative structures and demands subjectivity. Abu-Lughod claims that “to argue for feminist ethnography would be to argue for a biased, interested, partial, and thus flawed project” (1990b: 9). Of course, this bias might be the desired end result. Catherine A. MacKinnon claims that feminism “does not see its view as subjective, partial, or underdetermined but as a critique of the purported generality, disinterestedness, and universality of prior accounts” (MacKinnon 1982:22-23 in Strathern 1988: 29). Abu-Lughod moves toward

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<sup>24</sup> The ‘new ethnography’ of the late 1970s and 1980s sought to deconstruct anthropology’s role in the maintenance of Western hegemony. As James Clifford pointed out in 1986, ethnography is “always caught up with the invention, not the representation, of cultures.” This collection was later critiqued for the complete absence of a feminist perspective, something Clifford himself admits “cries for comment” (1986: 19).

the ‘liberating’ force of reflexivity, appropriate given its acceptance as an approach to ethnographic data, but then warns of how it may be misused. She points to Evelyn Fox Keller’s *Reflections on Gender and Science* (1985) as an apt example of how objectivity is questionable due to its association with masculinity in Western academia, and how it positions other binaries in opposition to one another (Abu-Lughod 1990b: 13).<sup>25</sup> The politics of these issues goes beyond the theoretical. Abu-Lughod notes how such perspectives may be perilous for untenured faculty (1990b: 19); Catherine Lutz adds that while the number of women in Anthropology departments has grown steadily, tremendous gender disparities remain in salary hiring, promotion and part-time status as well as publication and citation compared to their male cohorts (1990: 612-619). The political affects the professional.

### **Alternative Conceptions of Power**

Following Nelson (1974) and Strathern (1987, 1988), several anthropologists have endeavoured to examine new configurations of power, particularly for women living in sexually-segregated groups. This gendered separation has been well documented in Muslim societies (see Bourdieu 1977; Beck and Keddie 1978; Messick 1987; Abu-

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<sup>25</sup> Abu-Lughod finds the new turn towards subjectivity suspicious, and warns of academic gate-keeping, that feminism may be undermined with reflexivity. Nancy Hartsock’s query illustrates this problem well. Hartsock asks, “Why is it that just when subject or marginalized peoples like blacks, the colonized and women have begun to have and demand a voice, they are told by the white boys that there can be no authoritative speaker or subject?” (1987: 196 in Abu-Lughod 1990b: 17). Also problematic within overtly feminist ethnography, particularly within sexually-segregated societies, is a possible over-emphasis of the feminine, which in turn does little to address the dualism which allowed for the initial hierarchy. Henrietta Moore shares this concern about a scholarship of women writing about women, concerned this critique may further marginalize feminist interests (1988: vii; see also Caplan 1988b: 14; di Leonardo 1991: 1). What Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza deems a critical feminist “hermeneutics of suspicion” is useful in contextualizing the allowance of subjectivity vis-à-vis engaged feminist scholarship.

Lughod 1990a; Mahmood 2001, 2005; Salih 2002; Foley 2004) and focuses on women who are often doubly subordinate, by gender and social class.

Brinkley Messick posits that within Muslim societies social mores of male dominance and female subordination are anchored and legitimated by the Qur'an. Messick points to verses such as "men are a degree above them [women]" (2:228) and "men are more in charge of women, because Allah hath made the one of them to excel the other" (4:34) (Messick 1987: 218). While convincing, a textual explanation only sheds partial light on this stratification. Moreover, certainly in Petit Nanterre, many Muslims were unable to read the Qur'an (in Arabic or in French translation); this textual explanation thus fails to account for the gender hierarchy in this contest.<sup>26</sup>

During previous work sex segregation among Hutterites, "this is the way things are" and "this is how we like it," were typical responses when I asked women why they organized their lives completely separately (Selby 2002). With hindsight I recognize that questions like "Why do you live in sexually segregated groups?" were not evocative of their experiences. In this subsection I consider how feminine power in overtly patriarchal societies has been portrayed in recent ethnographic literature, focusing on Lila Abu-Lughod's work in Egypt (1985, 1990a), that of Brinkley Messick in North Africa (1987), Yeza Bahria Boulabhel's work with Algerians in France (1991), and Rebecca Foley's understanding of the empowerment of women in Malaysia (2004). Some of the "pitfalls" to avoid in such ethnographic renditions – namely, delineating personal and/or academic interests and neo-Orientalist tendencies in depicting non-Western women – are usefully

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<sup>26</sup> Illiteracy rates among first-generation North African immigrants in Petit Nanterre are high, particularly in comparison with the larger French population. See longer discussion in Chapter One.



illustrated by Elizabeth Enslin's use of "situated knowledge" within her work in Nepal (1994), following Donna Haraway (1988), and more theoretically by Chandra Talpade Mohanty (1984, 1991) and Aihwa Ong (1988). In light of these treatments, I examine and critique Saba Mahmood's study of women in Egypt (2001, 2005) and Ruba Salih's work with Moroccan women in Italy (2002, 2003).<sup>27</sup>

Lila Abu-Lughod explores alternative forms of agency in her work among Muslim nomadic Bedouin women in Egypt, seeking to move away from popular harem and seclusion depictions of Arab women and elaborate upon Foucaultian or Gramscian frameworks of resistance. Abu-Lughod lived in a desert camp within a "subociety" of women and their children for nearly two years (1985: 639). One woman explained to her the strong ties the women have with one another:

We [the women in the core community] have lived together for seventeen years and never has any woman brought women's talk to the men! In our community we have one way. Women don't tell the men what goes on between women. Even the old women – why, they talk to the men, but they don't expose the secrets (1985: 645).

Abu-Lughod claims she can discuss power afforded to these women quite readily, without misattributing to these same women "forms of consciousness or politics that are not part of their experience something like a feminist consciousness or feminist politics" (1990a: 47). Like other post-structuralist, postmodern scholarship, Abu-Lughod questions the implications of imposing a specific normalizing cultural frame of reference upon

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<sup>27</sup> The danger in these depictions is to point to various sources of power, but essentialize the women in the group, where there are also likely disputes and dislocation. We must ask ourselves, as does Abu-Lughod (1990b: 21-22): Which woman? What kind of feminine? And what about race and social class? Humans and relationships clearly embody more that is characterized by diverse relations than solely within consolidated groups. Mohanty also critiques the universal categorization of women, oftentimes characterized as a singular group on the basis of shared oppression: "What is it about cultural Others that make it so easy to analytically formulate them into homogeneous groupings with little regard for historical specificities?" (1984: 340).

another system of values and mores. Moreover, she notes that the Bedouin sense of identity is far less focused on personhood and individualized rights relative to that in the West.

Abu-Lughod claims that women resist patriarchal power structures within Bedouin sexually segregated society, by keeping secrets and fostering silences within their relationships to men, so that smoking in hiding, covering stories for trips, and most importantly, allowing discursiveness into the recitation of oral lyric poetry, work to their advantage. Abu-Lughod's theorizing on these power strategies is multi-faceted, for she usefully charts the "flip-side" of an adopted position of Western-femininity, in her examination of the practices and beliefs of the second-generation women within her adopted Egyptian family. She describes how two of the youngest single women in the family purchased negligee, which in the Egyptian context is a greatly tabooed action because of its perceived economic impracticality and sexualized immodesty. She concludes that despite their desire to move away from "traditional" notions of femininity and disempowerment to more "empowering" Western ones, these young women found themselves in a new power structure, that of Western consumerism and sexualization, for which they were unprepared. Although moral judgments are unnecessary, these young women are clearly not "better off" or more liberated by engaging in what they perceive as a Westernized feminine practice.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> Though not as methodologically sophisticated, Yeza Bahria Boulahbel's analysis of Algerian immigrant women echoes Abu-Lughod's work in demonstrating points of resistance within the oppression and repression of Muslim women in various locations in France (1991). Boulahbel notes that far from being minor actors, isolated inside their homes and dependant, on the periphery of the world around them, Algerian immigrant women in France are full social actors, entirely aware of the detours and the challenges of the host society (Boulahbel 1991: 16-17).

Emphasizing the “subordinate discourse” of women in sexually segregated societies, Brinkley Messick’s “Subordinate Discourse: Women, Weaving, and Gender Relations in North Africa” (1987) highlights the technical and symbolic qualities of women’s-only domestic weaving in North Africa. Messick notes that women’s empowerment is characterized by “the distinctive qualities of this women’s discourse of weaving, especially its relationship as a mode of expression to the public, patriarchal ideology of Islamic gender conceptions” (1987: 211). While these Muslim women participate in some capacity within public, male-dominated spaces, Messick claims women also access and control secondary locations, as well, although to a lesser and lesser extent. Weaving in North Africa is a disappearing activity as markets and commercialized interests shift and women have found more lucrative work or have begun a formal education (1987: 219). Messick does not qualify or engage “Muslim” practice in this article. More unfortunate is that this brief ethnography does not cite any North African women’s voices.

Turning to a very different space, both culturally and geopolitically, Rebecca Foley points to two central ways in which Muslim women have challenged Islamic Law in Malaysia (2004). Foley’s work is interesting for, unlike Messick, she is interested in theorizing about the implications of a feminist position within a religious tradition.<sup>29</sup> Foley claims that over a long period in Malaysia, Islamism has sought to eliminate ‘wrong’ cultural traditions that have supposedly permeated Islam. For women, these

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<sup>29</sup> Foley observes that a clear religious agenda characterized much of ‘first wave’ Western feminism informed by Christianity by theologians like Carol Christ, Phyllis Trible, Rosemary Radford Ruether and Rita Gross (2004: 54), even if their work is often explicitly theological and therefore oftentimes marginalized in the larger feminist discourse.

traditions might include the wearing of so-called Western dress, the mixing of the sexes, gambling, prostitution and the consumption of alcohol and other non-*halal* products (Foley 2004: 55). This stringent policing also includes a push toward assuming ‘naturalized’ gendered roles. For women, this means assuming the roles of wives and mothers. Two strategies, one based on equity and the other on equality, are prevalent in women’s responses to Islamic reform in Foley’s fieldwork analysis.

Equity-based reform is centred on a model of complementarities (see a longer critique of this model in Chapter Six), which holds that men and women have different natures based on innate characteristics resulting in “separate roles”: Women are best suited as mothers and wives; men are providers. Their rights are thus conceptualized as being different but of the same value. Men and women share equity as an indication of difference based on a notion of fairness (Foley 2004: 59). Foley suggests that the strength of this model in Malaysia is that women who subscribe to it generally retain male and public support as their proposals do not challenge accepted gender roles or the current characteristic division of labour. There are gains to be made, as well. Women are also able to demand of men certain practical obligations – food, clothing and shelter in marriage and in divorce. In return they provide unpaid domestic labour and accept their husbands’ roles as heads of household. Foley claims that the Prophet Muhammad’s first wife Khadijah is often heralded in women’s arguments for her work outside the home

while remaining true to her womanly nature and domestic duties.<sup>30</sup> Work outside the home must be *halal* (or permitted by Islam) and appropriate to women's natural abilities.

The equality model represents a departure from the more dominant equity discourse and argues for complete equality of the sexes based on a reinterpretation of the Qur'an, *Sunnah* and the *Shari'ah*. This framework is far more radical for it rejects the notion of innate characteristics and holds that rights must be equal. While women in this social action group challenge the status quo, they carefully couch arguments in Islamic idioms and remain within theological precepts. Under the premise that the *Shari'ah* is a human-created entity, they claim it can be opened to new interpretation. Foley notes, however, that this position receives very little public or clerical support.

Foley claims that while the complementarity model has been steadily critiqued in feminist circles in recent years, Asian and other non-Western discourses can be understood on their own terms and not immediately contrasted against the 'universal' Western paradigm (2004: 70). Foley characterizes the central divergence between Asia and 'the West' as a differing emphasis in the conception of 'rights' by Muslim women on communitarianism. Asian women, she claims, typically have greater ties to their families, and community responsibilities are given greater emphasis than individual rights. Here I have positioned a question posed by Abu-Lughod:

how might we account for the fact that Bedouin women both resist and support the existing system of power (they support it through practices like veiling, for example), without resorting to analytical concepts like false consciousness, which dismisses their own understanding of their situation, or impression management, which makes of them cynical manipulators? (Abu-Lughod 1990a: 47),

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<sup>30</sup> Chandra Talpade Mohanty critiques scholars who argue that patriarchal families are carried over from the time of the Prophet Muhammad as overtly ahistorical, and therefore without merit (1984).

alongside (although she does not read Abu-Lughod in this piece) Foley's claim that:

Those Muslim women [in Malaysia] who conceptualize women primarily as mothers and wives are not victims of false consciousness. Within Islam, this role for women is highly valued and those who subscribe to the separate but equal thesis can be considered to fight for women's rights (Foley 2004: 71).

Representations of these women in ethnographic accounts must therefore aim to be far more heterogeneous; this ethnographic heterogeneity will demonstrate the sometimes contradictory ways women (and all people) engage with larger discourses.

### **Methodological Considerations**

Examining ways in which politics and history shape categories of knowledge, Chandra Talpade Mohanty proposes a discursive reading which focuses on certain modes of appropriation and codification of "scholarship" and "knowledge" about women in the Third World. She proposes that analytic categories employed in writings on the subject necessarily take as their referent feminist interests, as they have been articulated in North America and Western Europe (1984: 333; see also Ong 1988: 80). The power politics within this scholarship, Mohanty suggests, work to create Western feminists as true "subjects," while Third World women never rise above their generality and their "object" status. Moreover, adds Aihwa Ong, Western standards and goals like rationality and individualism are used to evaluate the power and location of non-Western women (1988: 80). Like the Saidian characterization of the Orient, essentialized images of the "Third World woman" as veiled, chaste, and virginal bring into sharper focus assumptions about Western women as secular, liberated and having control over their own bodies and lives (Mohanty 1984: 352). These "representations" become conflations of imperialism in the

eyes of particular Third World women. Mohanty suggests, therefore, that there is a need in the field of feminist studies to examine the *political* implications of *analytic* strategies and principles (1984: 336).

Gayatri Spivak also considers the radical decentring of the Third World colonial subject with reference to how power is characterized by Marx and Derrida and how Western intellectual production mirrors Western international economic interests (1988: 271). Spivak writes of the epistemic violence inflicted upon the “subaltern woman” who reflects the silent signifier of a conflict between tradition and colonial modernity. She claims that there is no discursive space afforded to this woman where she might formulate an utterance; the ideological construction of gender and of colonialism ensures male and Western dominance. Thus, Spivak reads the 1829 abolishment of *sati* or widow sacrifice by the British as white men saving brown women from brown men (1988: 297). Spivak juxtaposes this “saving” with the notion that “the woman [the self-immolating woman] actually wanted to die” (1988: 297) and looks to ancient Hindu texts, the *Dharmashastra* and the *Rig Veda*, for the origins of the practice to rediscover what modernity has “repressed.” Although Spivak acknowledges the “epistemic violence” done upon Indian subalterns, she suggests that any attempt from the outside to ameliorate their condition by granting them collective speech invariably and erroneously creates cultural solidarity among a heterogeneous people, and justifies Western intellectuals to “speak for” the subaltern condition rather than allowing them to speak for themselves. As Spivak argues, by speaking out and reclaiming a collective cultural identity, subalterns will in fact reinscribe their subordinate position in society.

Interestingly, Mohanty also points to complications in describing power, for women are produced through the social relations which oppress them, and are implicated in forming them:

while it is possible to see how the *structure* of the traditional marriage contract (versus the post-colonial marriage contract) offered women a certain amount of control over their marital relations, only an analysis of the political significance of the actual practice which privileges an initiated girl over an uninitiated one, indicating a shift in female power relations as a result of this ceremony, can provide an accurate account of whether Bemba women (of Zambia) were indeed protected by tribal laws *at all times* (her emphasis, 1984: 341).

Ethnographers must seek therefore to resist drawing simplistic conclusions that depict power as emanating from a single source, or as I mentioned beforehand, strive for a heterogeneous ethnography. As Michel Foucault claims in his analysis of power in *The History of Sexuality* (1980), “Where there is power, there is resistance, and yet, or rather consequently, this resistance is never in a position of exteriority in relation to power” (1980: 95; see also Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992 on relations of material and symbolic domination). In *Politics, Philosophy, Culture* Foucault echoes that “as soon as there is a power relation, there is the possibility of resistance” (1988: 123). Foucault claims power is relational and productive.<sup>31</sup> Abu-Lughod agrees that this position on resistance is fruitful for ethnographic portrayals because “it enables us to move away from abstract

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<sup>31</sup> In his two lectures within *Power/Knowledge*, Foucault claims that power circulates within a network of social relations (1976: 98). This characterization of power as relational is useful for feminists in particular interested in the over-determined nature of inequality (Cooper 1994: 435). Feminist Foucaultian Davina Cooper explains, “Relational approaches to power have an intuitive advantage, for they reflect a principal way in which power is generally understood: as a relationship of inequality” (1994: 442). The limitation to this relational approach is that it tends to equate power with domination and subordination. On the productivity of power in Foucault’s work, please see a longer discussion of the “Panopticon Effect” from *Discipline and Punish* in Chapter Five. Applied to feminism, the Panopticon can be a metaphor for women’s internalization view of the ‘other’ to produce self-monitoring toward the standards of femininity (see also Bourdieu 1992 on the internalization of “symbolic violence”).



theories of power toward methodological strategies for the power in particular situations” (1990a: 42).<sup>32</sup>

While these studies respond nicely to Cynthia Nelson’s call twenty years earlier for greater theorizing of women in socially segregated spaces, more innovative and useful in conceptualizing these power dynamics is Donna Haraway’s notion of “situated knowledge” (1988). Haraway considers the implications of writing culture as a feminist practice. Elizabeth Enslin also uses Haraway’s work to consider how she was able to conduct fieldwork in rural Nepal in light of the complicated relationships she developed in the field. Enslin was uniquely situated as an American married to a native of the village where she worked (he was a fellow graduate student at Stanford), while living with her Nepalese parents-in-law and giving birth to a son during this same period.<sup>33</sup> Her account of this distinctive fieldwork situation serves well to challenge disciplinary distinctions between cultural and applied anthropology, particularly whether feminist ethnography

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<sup>32</sup> Abu-Lughod utilizes Foucault’s paradigm on power to trace how power relations are formed historically, especially in light of modern states and capitalist economies. She is not alone. Ethnographers have often turned to Foucault’s notion that power permeates all levels of society, and that resistances are coextensive (Gupta and Ferguson 1997: 5; see also Ortner 1995: 174-175). These same scholars often conclude, unsurprisingly, that women are able to gain some status and prestige in seemingly patriarchal systems.

<sup>33</sup> These ‘complications’ have inspired an interesting literature on the intersections of one’s personal and professional life in the field. Oonagh O’Brien (1993), for one, describes the impact of the visits of her family to the field, and how the presence of her parents and older married sister in this Catalan village in the 1990s in particular, fleshed out her own identity toward villagers and were useful in gaining access to peoples previously closed to her (her father allowed some entrance to the male world and her married sister, to other young married couples). It was especially her eventual marriage to a Catalan which cemented her acceptance and commitment to these people. This ‘opening’ was certainly the case in my fieldwork. Because we were unmarried, although I spoke about and showed pictures of my fiancé, he did not visit me in the field. My mother’s visit in 2005 garnered much attention by the women I worked with, however. They were interested in seeing her after having spoken so much to me about their own experiences as mothers and daughters. My mother is an Anglophone and was unable to speak to them, but when we attended a special evening at the local hair salon, local women embraced her warmly and invited her to join them in a meal. Later a group of women confessed to me how curious they were to see my mother. In my presence their conclusions were complementary; they wondered why she had traveled so far without my father, and agreed that she was very young looking and seemed “intelligent” (Fieldnotes 21 October 2005).

should be considered more applied than a solely “anthropological” perspective (1994: 539). She describes the pressure she felt from her husband’s family and friends to use her work to enact decisive social change. While the categories “theoretical” and “applied” remain distinct in theory, in practice, in thinking of the community’s expectations for her project, Enslin notes the limits of writing with regards to activism. For this reason, Enslin claims that feminist ethnography is more of an ideal than a practice (1994: 538).

Jennifer Nourse offers another perspective on the politics of representation and activism in the field based on an incident during her fieldwork in Indonesia, when she discovered one of the locals had stolen some articles from her room. Information she received about the theft, as well as her own reaction and that of the community made her re-examine who was “exploiting” whom in the field (2002). While Nourse entered the field aware to critique post-Saidian/post-colonial power dynamics within her anthropological approach, these culturalist critiques may set up an impossible task for the ethnographer: positing that there is Truth available to be analysed, but that anthropological approaches are far too jaded or indoctrinated in Western culture to yield noteworthy results. These approaches may position anthropologists as domineering and all-powerful in relation to their subjects, which, on the ground, is often not the case (and I would wager for women especially). In considering why a local would have wanted to take something from her and how later calls for the “American to go home” affected her, Nourse asks how motivations can be accessed. She questions whether one should ask respondents directly why they do the things they do. She left her fieldwork in Indonesia wondering

How do we know locals even think in terms of motivation, intention, strategizing, and action? Is this not just another form of Western positivism, a way to translate all human action, intention, and motivation in terms of cause and effect, where the cause is often attributed to an unconscious, unarticulated desire or motivation? (2002: 39).

While a degree of translation of experiences in the field in writing styles and language accessible to a Western educated audience is necessary, I do not agree with Nourse that these anthropological interpretations necessarily involve “symbolic violence.” However, Nourse does usefully point out that locations of agency are diverse, that empowerment can be silent, and that an agent can strategize power so that her own positions is heard without being vocalized.

Elizabeth Enslin advocates Donna Haraway’s notion of “situated knowledge” (1988) rather than an overtly Western feminist representation of women. “Situated knowledge” seeks to position political interests in knowledge production. Haraway explains that this knowledge can also move away from the dichotomies inherent in focusing on gender issues, itself a field of structured and structuring difference (1988: 583). This positioning therefore allows for the exercise of privilege in ways deemed responsible and ethical. “Situated knowledge” highlights the context and relationality of knowledge, and ideally produces more modest, partial, and locatable academic research. This situatedness does not mean findings are insignificant, however. Rather, Haraway’s paradigm serves well to capture the epistemological and embodied experience of fieldwork, sometimes difficult to translate into written academic work.

Along the lines of these scholars’ examinations of structures of power and agency afforded to women in Malaysia, Nepal and Indonesia, Saba Mahmood offers a more complex model for understanding women’s agency in Muslim societies (2001, 2005). In

her discussion of agency and the discourse of female participants in the Islamic Revival movement in contemporary Cairo, Mahmood describes women who actively support a faction which, from a classical Western feminist perspective, appears to be inimical to their own interests and political situation. Mahmood's study is timely in the post 9/11 period when American policy in the Middle East is focussed on the emancipation of women, so that active participation in an Islamic piety movement seemingly creates a quandary for feminists. Should women's choices be respected, in line with the view that they are entitled to actively make choices which might seem to limit their possibilities and cultivate passivity and submissiveness, within the context of a broader discussion of the limits and parameters of "agency"? Or should "international" Western mores be enforced to protect women from themselves?

While some feminists have critiqued the capacity for full agency within "groups" (typically non-Western) whose cultural values and practices constrain women (see especially Okin 1999), Mahmood underlines how women might have capacity for action because their "culture" gives meaning to their subjectivity (see also Benhabib 2002). Mahmood claims that feminist scholarship produces a particular notion of human agency in which locating the subjects' – here women involved in patriarchal Islamic religious traditions - political and moral autonomy is central (2001: 203). Mahmood's position would critique analyses like Susan Moller Okin's critique of women within "ethnic and cultural groups" because of the dominance of liberal thought in these conceptualizations of agency.<sup>34</sup> As Mahmood parochializes liberal theories of freedom, she reconceptualizes

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<sup>34</sup> Of course, all women are part of these groups, but Okin has certain women in mind (1999).

dominant understandings of women's agency which tend to disembodify liberal subjects and remove them from their contexts. From this position, in order to be considered "free," a woman's actions must stem back to her own "will" and not to custom or tradition (2005: 11). Unlike Abu-Lughod's focus on resistance, Mahmood defines agency as "a capacity for action that historically specific relations of subordination enable and create" (2001: 203). She thus problematizes the desire to be free or for freedom as an underpinning of liberal thought (2005: 14, 34, 157).

Mahmood's characterization of the scholarship on agency, Islam and sex segregation may be overdrawn, however. In her ethnographic analysis of *al-haya* (virtues of shyness and modesty), Mahmood claims she departs from two dominant perspectives in contemporary feminist theory (2001: 207-208) and falls in the middle ground. The first she says sees patriarchy as a tool used to objectify women's bodies, distorting their experiences and subjecting them to masculinist representations. While this may be an early feminist response to patriarchal forms of power, the ethnographers I examined on sexual segregation in Muslim societies certainly do not characterize power so plainly. Secondly, Mahmood claims there is another position which regards the recuperation of women's experiences to be an impossible task (2005: 159). This body of work presents a negative conception of liberty and depicts the subjugation and the submission of women without apology. These poles are characterized too harshly to allow Mahmood a sound middle ground for her own analysis. Lastly, she notes studies in which women are depicted as being independent of men's influence and possible coercive presence, like

those of historians and anthropologists who demonstrate how women create their own discourses through poetry, basket weaving, and cult possession.<sup>35</sup>

Most insightful and theoretically erudite is Mahmood's argument that the women's mosque movement in Egypt is not organized around issues like identity rights, as in the case of the Islamist movement with its emphasis on identity and cultural heritage. Instead, the women's mosque movement is oriented toward retraining ethical sensibilities and creating a new social and moral order by transforming the self. Mahmood suggests that though the female participants in the movement differ, they all share concern about the rise of secularism in Egypt, and seek "to urge fellow Muslims to greater piety, and to teach one another correct Islamic conduct" (2005: 57). There is pleasure and social capital to be gained, therefore, in cultivating practices of virtue and self-discipline, essential to fostering piety. Veils and certain kinds of outward religiosity become clear public markers of this piety. Similarly, there are restrictions placed upon what women can do with regards to *da'wa*. For instance, they must not participate in rituals alongside men because of the notion that a women's voice can nullify worship by inciting sexual responses in the men present. Mahmood proposes that Egyptian women are attracted to the movement not for ideological or instrumental reasons but because they take pleasure in the practices of virtue and self-discipline essential to piety. This move creates an alternative mode of agency: self-transformation. Women in the piety movement gain a sense of identity through self-discipline and by creating themselves as

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<sup>35</sup> Mahmood presumably points here to the scholarship of Abu-Lughod (1986), Messick (1987) and Boddy (1989) with these examples.

pious Muslim subjects.<sup>36</sup> Analytically Mahmood seeks to explore how and why the movements of ethical reform, or in her work, the piety movement, unsettle key assumptions of the secular liberal imaginary in regards to Islam as an inherently patriarchal ideological system.

Mahmood critiques Abu-Lughod's work, claiming that her analysis of resistance effectively labels it as women's agency, naturalizing 'freedom' as a universal social ideal (2005: 10) and reflecting a deeper tension Mahmood sees in feminist scholarship: "its dual character as both an *analytical* and a *politically prescriptive* project" (2005:10). Mahmood points to how "freedom" is a normative concept within feminist analyses, distinguishing between what many liberal theorists have termed positive and negative freedom (2005: 11). Mahmood stresses that it is crucial to detach the notion of agency from the goals of progressive politics (2005: 14, 34, 157), so that what may seem to be deplorable passivity may actually be read as a form of agency. Significantly, I would contend that this argument is not unlike what Abu-Lughod says about resistance in sex segregated groups (1986).

In *The Politics of Piety* (2005), Mahmood concludes that for "a scholar of Islam, [situated within the Western academy] none of these questions can be adequately answered without encountering the essential tropes through which knowledge about the Muslim world has been organized, key among them the trope of patriarchal violence and Islam's (mis)treatment of women" (2005: 195). To attempt to escape these

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<sup>36</sup> The women of the movement thus pay great homage to the preacher/religious teacher or *da'iya* who undertook a *da'wa* that in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century was associated with proselytization. One *da'iya* in particular – Zaynab al-Ghazali (b. 1917) was integral to the acceptance of this movement. Mahmood devotes a large section to al-Ghazali's biography and legacy in her longer analysis of the movement (2005: 67-73).

categorizations in her own work, Mahmood offers a post-structuralist strategy based on the work of Judith Butler who, following Michel Foucault, highlights a paradox she calls *subjectivation* to characterize the processes and conditions which secure a subject's subordination which in turn creates a self-conscious identity and agent (2001: 210), somewhat akin to what Pierre Bourdieu suggests in "Masculine Domination" (2002). Mahmood ultimately challenges Butler's notion of agency, noting that its ability to effect change must be both historically and culturally more specific. Of course, this critique goes without saying when one seeks to apply an overtly philosophical approach "on the ground."

While Mahmood's postmodernist suggestion to break away from characteristic depictions of Muslim women is welcome, as is her problematization of Western liberal values of "freedom," her work on agency in the women's mosque movement in Egypt remains extremely theoretical and complicated in its application, and therefore perhaps not well-suited to broader ethnographically-based analyses. Mahmood's model is particularly useful in depicting the Egyptian case. The situation of Muslim women in France, however, differs from that of Egypt's burgeoning feminine educated middle and upper classes, interested in and able to attend weekly public meetings in mosques to learn about Islamic doctrine.

Ruba Salih's work responds to this lacuna in its focus on the experiences of Muslims living as minorities in a Western European context. She examines how the veil juxtaposes modernity and secularism in a small Italian city (2002: 149), while demonstrating how the experiences of Moroccan Muslim women in Italy necessarily



complicate easy tradition/modernity binaries. Salih charts how this complication is evident within situations of migration, where the need to resist majority assimilationist tendencies while being stereotyped by the majority comes to the fore. Following al-Azmeh (1993), in her ethnographic analysis Salih distinguishes between “Islamicists,” who are more organized and practicing, and “Muslims.” Oftentimes Islamicists claim that only by wearing the headscarf can one be properly modern, and that study, so long as it is Islamic, is synonymous with women’s liberation (2002: 158; 2003: 101). Modernity, for these women, is therefore stripped of its Western connotations (2002: 164).

On this point, with reference to my own fieldwork with Muslim women in a Parisian suburb, I return to Donna Haraway’s notion of “situated knowledge” (1988). As the term suggests, situated knowledge seeks to position political interests in knowledge production. I suggest that this concept serves well to capture the epistemological space between “tradition” and “modernity” which, for a Muslim woman of North-African origins in a Parisian suburb, might entail the difference between wearing the headscarf (a so-called traditionally-religious obligation or choice) and becoming visibly, even forcibly, secular in the public sphere (and therefore, in Western European terms, modern). This intermediate space is certainly ignored in most examinations of Muslim women’s agency in the French context. Examining these spaces is central to locating Islam “in the West.”

Theorizations about Muslim women in the West must therefore be carefully situated. Clothing choices and demeanour for all people are guided by several factors, including religious belief. In analyzing the French mandate to remove headscarves from the public sphere (in public schools and government offices) to allow the so-called

liberation of women and the de-politicization of Islam, one must question whether these women are interested in such an “un-veiling.” As I discuss in Chapter Six, concerns with immodesty and respectability may preclude this desire. “Liberation” may be unwanted.

### **Conclusions: Can/Should Muslim Women be “Saved”?**

This chapter examining the politics of representing Islam and Muslim women is shaped by the period in which it is written. As the Muslim population grows as a minority tradition in the West, there is growing interest in how to “integrate” Muslim values within the larger Western liberal tradition. The scholars I have examined take differing positions on how this integration might look and how best to examine the agency afforded to Muslim women in differing contexts, particularly within sexually segregated groups. One of my interests in examining the French case is to illuminate how groups with differing political agendas battle to determine what is best for the “Muslim woman.” As el-Zein notes, Islam itself is a term open to interpretation. Certainly within the West, as I depict in Chapter Three, how Islam is culturally understood in relation to Christianity is especially important. With the 2003 Stasi Commission Report and its subsequent law banning conspicuous religious signs in September 2004, the French government, under the guise of public secularism, chose to “protect” Muslim girls by enforcing Republican secular mores in public schools and government offices. Downtrodden, veil-wearing Muslim young women would therefore be visibly eradicated within the public education system, the central space for the creation and maintenance of Republican citizens. Similarly, as I depict in Chapter Six, French feminist groups also engage with Muslim women, arriving in Petit Nanterre to talk about International Women’s Day and share information about

human rights and family law with immigrant women who might otherwise not be aware of their legal privileges in France. “It’s not like ‘back-home’ here in France,” one of the social workers began one speech at the Centre Social Valérie Méot in Petit Nanterre. “You have rights here and you shouldn’t be afraid to claim them” (Fieldnotes March 2005).

While I certainly met women in Petit Nanterre who were in perilous domestic situations and needed assistance or advice about divorce, childcare or French-language skills, many of the first-generation Muslim women would smile respectfully when their French teachers brought in “feminist” speakers, unannounced to the class beforehand. Indeed, it was sometimes the policy of the Nadha Association French-language and culture class teachers to refrain from notifying women in advance about such workshops, knowing that, owing to lack of interest, participants would likely not attend. These information-sessions are well-intentioned, even if sometimes not especially culturally sensitive. For instance, International Women’s Day in Petit Nanterre in March of 2005 included several events. At the Centre Social Valérie Méot on the Pâquerettes side of the neighbourhood, women were invited to an afternoon of music and information about their legal rights in France, prepared by two non-Muslim social workers at the centre. Neither of these women lives in Petit Nanterre. One of the social workers, a French-born Caucasian woman who had previously been a professional dancer, had prepared a speech which summarized the contributions of important women in France, focusing on Marie Curie and Simone Veil. This speech went on for quite a while and used rather complicated French wording as though she were citing encyclopaedia passages. The

largely Arabophone audience of women and children quickly lost interest, as did I. Although the audience was respectful and listened quietly, in the courtyard after the festivities some of the women expressed their disapproval of the celebration of the legalization of abortion achieved by Simone Veil in 1975. Most of these women are pro-life.

In women-only events like this one, there is a noteworthy cleavage between what some of these first-generation largely Maghrebian women were interested in knowing about (for instance, how to apply for extra welfare benefits following the birth of a child) and what was deemed to be important for them. As I describe in the next chapter, many women from Petit Nanterre wore veils, but in my interviews with them, they did not express concern that their daughters might not wear the *hijab*. They were not especially interested in the “Headscarf Affair” and were far more engaged by the issue of protecting their children from non-*halal* meat at the local public school. As I describe in Chapter Five, it was generally important for these women that their daughters be “good Muslims,” which involves abiding by rules for proper moral conduct.

How does one thus engage in a “feminist” agenda while undertaking anthropological analysis? Of course, as Marilyn Strathern explains, an interest in women’s experiences or male-female relations does not necessarily entail a feminist theoretical stance. This assumption is “a myth of containment” and reduces these investigations and interest in gender to a particular theoretical position (Strathern 1988: 36). Yet, Strathern also worries that feminist anthropology was tolerated in the discipline early on because it was absorbed without challenging the whole (1987: 280). Indeed, as

Elizabeth Enslin notes, feminist scholarship has shown just how political writing, or not writing, about women is (Enslin 1994: 544). These issues encourage us to look not only at the power dynamics intrinsic within communities themselves and the ethnographer's relationship of power in regards to the community she studies, but also at the dynamics of feminist discourse in the larger academic community.

To conclude on these issues of power and resistance which have influenced so many of these treatments of the "Other," and with Saba Mahmood's critique of liberal Western feminism in mind, I return to Michel Foucault's understanding of power, particularly how it is necessarily linked to resistance, each involved in the production and reproduction of one another. Without this interconnectedness, without the possibility of resistance, there can be no power, only domination. As feminist theorist Margaret McLaren explains, "it is through power and its constitution of the subject that resistance is possible" (1997: 116). This line of reasoning can become confusing, for we might ask what to do with power when we recognize that it too is a cultural construct? However this approach is useful in thinking about agency and discourse on Islam and Muslim women in ethnography. If we come to appreciate that agency itself is a construction, or as Mahmood suggests, that it stems from a Western liberal tradition, we might re-examine how Western academia, Western feminism, Western liberalism, and practicing Muslims in a variety of socio-cultural contexts might construct their own forms of agency, and

might be negotiating these continuously. One cannot assume that resistance is always the same thing in diverse contexts or, obviously, always looks the same.<sup>37</sup>

I conclude therefore by examining possible perspectives in evaluating the agency of Muslim women. Following Cynthia Nelson (1974) and Marilyn Strathern's (1987, 1988), more recently, Saba Mahmood has offered a noteworthy critique of the privileging of Western notions of agency implicit in Lila Abu-Lughod's influential characterization of feminine resistance among nomadic Bedouin women in Egypt (1985, 1986, 1990a). I propose that methodologically, one cannot retreat from interpreting the social location of Muslim women in France, particularly when they are depicted as devoid of agency. Like Mahmood, I am not interested in analyzing the reductionism of these associations of Islam with anti-liberation or in excavating redeemable qualities or "latent liberatory potentials" within Islam (2001: 203). In my view, Haraway's "situated knowledge" (1988) allows an unveiling of the implications of our questions and the development of a more multi-sited, multi-vocal characterization of Islam. Most importantly, this situated knowledge acknowledges the politics of characterizing practices or clothing as "religious" or not in a postcolonial space, and the politics of our characterizations of the agency of subjects in ethnography.

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<sup>37</sup> Here Foucault whimsically offers advice that within situations of power may help illuminate one's "agency", and certainly shows how agency may appear in unexpected spaces: "As in judo, the best answer to an adversary manoeuvre is not to retreat, but to go along with it, turning it to one's own advantage, as a resting point for the next phase" (in Baudrillard 1987: 65).

### **Theoretical Conceptualizations of Secularism**

This third chapter examines the linkages between *laïcité*, Christianity and Islam. I begin with a brief history of *laïcité* in France to contextualize my examination of the intersections of these notions in the public sphere in Petit Nanterre. I then turn briefly to Christian and Islamic theological texts in the second section to consider their differing early conceptions of religion and politics. The third segment points to more recent philosophical and anthropological discussions on secularism to see how the “secular” is treated by contemporary French, European and North American theorists. I argue in this concluding section that while the term “secular” is used in Western academia to define both a sense of neutrality toward religious institutions and the separation of church and state, the term is, in fact, not impartial and is imbued with Judeo-Christian references.<sup>1</sup> In a more general sense, this chapter aims to demonstrate what I perceive as a misplaced and misrepresented dichotomy which places *laïcité* and Islam in contrarian positions in France.

#### **From 1789 to 2005: A Brief History of Conceptions of Religion in France**

Despite its official status as a legally secular nation, the French Republic’s conception of *laïcité* (French secularism) has caused controversy since its inception. Here I outline what I see as five key “historically secular” moments French history in 1789, 1905, 1946, 1989 and 2004. The French Revolution of 1789 and the rise of modern

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<sup>1</sup> It is useful in this instance to return to several influential early Christian and Islamic theological texts to undertake, methodologically, something like an archeological dig: a search for what lies within the texts, while attempting to set aside preconceived categories of the theologically “religious” and politically “secular.” This approach also avoids the assumption of a straightforward narrative of progress from the religious to the secular.

French nationalism were fundamental to the development of secularism. Theorists have charted how through a series of violent uprisings, French religious identities were gradually replaced by new forms of social attachment connected to the emergence of the nation-state (Poulat 1987; Ravitch 1990). The Catholic Church's close identification with the *ancien régime* led to the confiscation of church assets; priests were eventually required to swear allegiance to the new French Republic rather than to the Pope (Hashemi 2005: 342). The subsequent Concordat of 1801 between Napoleon Bonaparte and the Pope was replaced by a codified law under the Third Republic which formally separated church and state in France. Furthermore, the French Revolution and laws instituted by Napoléon Bonaparte largely ensured that the societal influence of Catholicism, particularly its management of civil institutions, was controlled. The state became officially religiously pluralistic (Baubérot 1998: 179).<sup>2</sup> The advent of the Revolution did not eliminate all formal moral training from schools, however. Revolutionaries instituted the teaching of civic or "Republican" mores to replace religious morality considered a regressive political force based on authoritarian principles (Stock-Morton 1988: 3, 86).

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<sup>2</sup> French historian Jean Baubérot (1990) notes two periods of laicization. The first period begins under the influence of Napoléon Bonaparte and the French Revolution of 1789. Religion, in this first threshold, becomes institutionally fragmented: Roman Catholicism becomes less intimately tied to the state, particularly in early secular changes in public schools. Still, according to Baubérot, religion maintains social and political legitimacy as a moral referent. This period also signals the beginning of notions of religious pluralism in France. While Roman Catholicism may not have the same institutional affiliation, it remained valued in notions of law and of morality. The second period, beginning with the official legal separation of church and state in 1905, signaled the complete dissociation of religion from French institutions (exemplified by the addition of the concept of *laïcité* to the French Constitution in 1946), the loss of religious legitimacy in the public sphere, and the beginnings of notions of religious tolerance and freedom of religion. In contrast to Marcel Gauchet, Baubérot acknowledges and engages the "question" of Islam in France.



Phyllis Stock-Morton notes, almost 100 years later in 1879, that the secularization of primary schools was the most important issue of the day. Jules Ferry was appointed this same year as Minister of Education. Ferry held the position over five cabinets and espoused a “neutral school” position. Rather than using the language of more radical secularizers, Ferry preferred “areligious” schools (1988: 97). Many point to how the French Republic itself took on an ethical, educational and even spiritual role for many French people, for some replacing strong Christian religious affiliations (Stock-Morton 1988; Baubérot 1990). Of note, and as I will demonstrate in the contemporary context, these central moments of legal change largely centred upon the way in which religious identities are manifested within public schools. As Trica Danielle Keaton exemplifies in her contemporary ethnographic study of second-generation women of African-origin in public high schools in the *Cité des Courtilières*, north of Paris, the French education system seeks to impart a “common culture” to young people. These public schools serve as extensions of the French state and create proper publicly-secular citizens (2006: 31; see also Brulard 1997: 175; Gauchet 1998: 52).<sup>3</sup> This concern is reflected in the 2003 Stasi Commission report, which I will turn to momentarily. Section 4.2.2.1 of the report which gives a summary of the history of *laïcité*, states: “The question of state secularism reappeared in 1989 where it was born in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century: in the school” (2003: 23).

The separation of church and state was further articulated at the turn of the twentieth century. Still, while the mandated legal separation of church and state of 9 December 1905 did not officially promote an antireligious stance, but rather an areligious

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<sup>3</sup> Following Pierre Bourdieu, Keaton goes so far as to suggest that throughout its history, this curriculum has amounted to a Franco-conformity and an unrecognized symbolic violence (2006: 91, 102).

one, a legacy of suspicion of “public” religion ensued. The implications of this 1905 law were widespread: the Republic no longer officially funded any religious education (there are exceptions), and public institutions were to remain independent of religious interests and should, as sociologist Adrian Favell notes, “practice a strict neutrality among the various transcendental claims made by religions about the true foundations of a good society” (1998: 75). By 1946, likely in an effort to reassert French identity following the German Occupation of WWII (Baubérot 1998: 186), the principle of *laïcité* made legal in 1905 was enshrined in the French constitution, becoming one of the major characteristics of the Republican state. The Constitution states that “France is an indivisible, secular, democratic and social Republic” (Article 2 of the Constitution cited in Brulard 1997: 177).

As I describe in Chapter One, this postwar period also marked the arrival of a tremendous influx of North African migrants seeking employment in industry in urban centres.<sup>4</sup> With the shift in immigration policy under then-President Valéry Giscard d’Estaing in 1974, many more Maghrebien women began joining their husbands; their children entered the public school system. The question of Muslim immigration had thus begun to percolate in France, eventually culminating in October 1989 with what is now known as the “headscarf affair.” In a public junior high school in Creil, a suburb of Paris, a head teacher informed three young women they would be expelled if they continued wearing their *hijabs* at all times on school property. The girls refused to remove the *hijab*

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<sup>4</sup> I hesitate to characterize Islam in France as a tradition of immigrants (see Guénif-Soulimas 2000; Roy 2005), but I hold that concurrent developments in French immigration law and policy are central to understanding the context which gave rise to the Stasi Commission. Blurring categorizations, “Islam” in France is more than a religious identifier; it also characterizes ethnic and cultural identities.

for physical education classes. By wearing *ostensible* (conspicuous) religious signs in a public Republican space, they were, according to the school's administration, explicitly rejecting French principles of *laïcité*. The French Muslim community argued that it was customary for Muslim women to veil themselves in the presence of men and that doing so was an affirmation of their religious identities and should be respected in a democratic, pluralistic state. These young women were thus entitled to wear the *hijab* and should not remove them publicly. Conversely, school spokespersons maintained that the symbolic nature of the headscarf was in breach of the secular principle of neutrality. The case was eventually brought to the French Supreme Court, which ruled that religious symbols were permissible so long as they were not “conspicuous” or “militant.” The court left the interpretation of these terms to individual schools; religious signs which might disturb classes or serve as instruments of proselytization were to be particularly monitored (Brulard 1997: 179). The debate continued.

### **The Stasi Commission Report and Recommendations**

The boundaries of *laïcité* in the French legal system continue to be drawn. In a context that is in many respects comparable to that of the early years of the twentieth century when secular arguments focused on the social visibility of Roman Catholicism, then the dominant religion in France, the religio-political context of the beginning of the twenty-first century, oversimplified, can be characterized as centering upon philosophical tensions between Islam and the French notion of *laïcité*, or the social visibility of Islam. The four-chaptered Stasi Commission Report, or the *Commission de réflexion sur*

*l'application du principe de laïcité dans la République*, was released on 11 December 2003. The Stasi Commission Report carefully reiterates the importance of *laïcité* as a fundamental and immutable pillar of the French republic. Throughout the 68 page document, *laïcité* is referred to as “the guarantee of individual freedom,” a “founding value of the Republican pact” and, notably, a “cornerstone of national unity.” The report makes numerous recommendations on ways to renew and to reinforce French secularism and its ties to public education, healthcare, the prison system, cemeteries and other state institutions.

While the writers of the report maintain their support of *laïcité* and religious tolerance, in my reading, it is difficult to deny their targeting of the Muslim head scarf and associated Islamic cultural tenets treating the status and actions of women. The Stasi Commission Report’s most controversial proposition is its concluding proposal for a law banning symbols and forms of dress that obviously denote the religious identity of students, notably the Islamic veil, the Jewish *kippa* and large Christian crosses, in public elementary and high schools beginning in the 2004-2005 academic year. This suggestion hinges on what is considered a “conspicuous” religious symbol. The Report deems more discrete signs acceptable, like medallions, small crosses, Stars of David, hands of Fatimah or little Qur’ans (Stasi Report 2003 : 23). Lawmakers voted on this bill (Law 2004-228) on 10 February 2004. It passed, almost unanimously (276 for; 20 against) a month later on 15 March 2004 (Assemblée Nationale 2004: Online).

Led by Bernard Stasi and a group of twenty-three notable scholars, government officials and other experts, the Commission made numerous recommendations on ways to

renew and to reinforce French secularism. The document became an important reflection of contemporary secular debates and feminism. *Femmes Solidaires*, the French feminist group I discuss in Chapter Six, uses the Commission's document as the basis for its own position against the headscarf. More specifically, I suggest that this perspective, while not surprising – most contemporary Western feminists do not espouse religiously orthodox positions – has implicit implications relating to public and French political interpretations of: first, the significance of the Islamic headscarf as out rightly politically motivated, and second, the creation of a feared “Oppressed French Muslim Women.” These positions ultimately construct “the Muslim women” as oppressed, and “Islam” as a political, areligious directive promoting non-Western, misogynistic attitudes. I argue that the Commission's recommendations ultimately serve to construct “the Muslim women” as oppressed, and “Islam” as a political, areligious ideology promoting non-Western, anti-woman attitudes.<sup>5</sup> Indeed, the veil in particular has become a symbol of Islamic insurgency in the French public space. In my reading of the Stasi Commission Report, veiled girls - not grown women - are depicted as devoid of agency. In section 3.2.1.2 proposing recommendations for hospitals, the report states that recently in hospitals, requests by husbands and fathers to have their wives and daughters see female doctors have risen substantially, causing many problems.<sup>6</sup> In such examples of threats against secularism, integration and equality, there is the implied notion that behind the

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<sup>5</sup> I use the term “areligious” because motivations behind wearing the headscarf are read as political and not as religious.

<sup>6</sup> The report reads that “more recently, the number of refusals has multiplied, by husbands or fathers, for religious reasons, to allow their wives or daughters be cared for or give birth under the assistance of a male doctor” (2003: 21).

headscarved Muslim women lurks the insurgent Islamist “bearded man” (Silverman 2004: 4).

Anthropologist John Bowen’s ethnographic work on the Stasi Commission hearings themselves and the “French French” perspective skilfully demonstrates how a complex array of publicity, philosophical treatises and political interests combined to create this law banning Muslim headscarves. Bowen points to the way in which Islamic radicalism was portrayed as posing a threat to *laïcité*, women’s rights, and leading to *communautarianism* in the country’s socio-economically disenfranchised suburbs (2007: 1).<sup>7</sup> Bowen establishes how the headscarf became one of the most “treatable” aspects of these malaises, so that unemployment, poor housing and social and racial inequalities were then swept under the rug. Bowen critiques the anecdotal evidence provided to the Commission about the oppression of Muslim headscarf-wearing girls. The voices of those who wear the veil, he claims, were ignored:

It was useless to ask them to speak, because they would simply parrot the words of their puppeteers. But women who refused (not: “refused”) to wear the voile had the right to speak, because *they* had found their agency and could testify to the oppression that they once had felt and that their “sisters” continued to feel (2007: 245).

Bowen claims that within the Stasi Commission hearings, only secular (i.e. non-veiled) Muslim women earned the right to speak in public forums and were taken seriously.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> The notion of ‘communautarisme’ refers to the social segregation of a group which then closes in upon itself and no longer maintains an ongoing relationship with the larger surrounding society. French thinkers often posit that the promotion of multiculturalism can have this effect, which counters the Republican notion of citizenship. Sociologist Dominique Schnapper notes that “this starts to create a problem when, beyond these rapproachments, a particular consciousness takes control of the collective consciousness . . . That is incontestably the result of a weakening of Republican values, these communal values that permit a population to live together » (Pénicault 2003: 4). Schnapper adds that the State facilitates this segregation when it participates in positive discrimination or affirmative action programs.

<sup>8</sup> In his analysis of a television documentary about Muslims in the suburb of Trappe, Bowen similarly critiques this program for portraying a “hardcore” notion of Islam and enforcing the stereotype of

Indeed, according to the Report, had they gone unchecked, communitarian socio-religious groups would have begun to exploit the malaise of French Muslims to mobilize fundamentalist movements and terrorism. Together, the Report suggests that these supposed instances of radical religiosity and the domination of women sap confidence in the Republic and prevent Muslims from identifying with the nation (2003: 22). Despite the expression of other concerns, at the centre of these questions is the Stasi Commission document's most controversial proposition: its concluding proposal to adopt a law which bans symbols and dress that visibly denote the religious identity of students.<sup>9</sup>

This particular law as well as the feminist interpretation of Muslim women by *Femmes Solidaires* requires, in my estimation, a more careful and subtle positioning of the category of "Islam." Depicted as a homogeneous religious category outside the parameters of legitimacy within the French public sphere, Muslims may never gain social legitimacy. "Islam" is depicted ahistorically, suggesting similarities to the essentialized

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a "misogynist community" (2007: 180-181). Bowen claims the program exaggerates the social and gender problems in the Parisian suburbs and ultimately serves to propagate negative stereotypes about French Muslims. Bowen accurately depicts France as divided into urban and suburban spheres (2007: 223); his analysis is far better when focused on the urban. It is also surprising that Bowen does not refer to Talal Asad's work on the headscarf controversy in France, particularly Asad's useful problematizing of "private" and "public" in France (2003, 2005) (see Selby Forthcoming).

<sup>9</sup> The remaining proposals within the Stasi Commission have been debated to a lesser extent. Nevertheless, political and definitional issues *not* addressed in the document are notable. Firstly, its recommendations call for a blanket secular treatment for all of France. There has been no special consideration for the eastern Alsace-Moselle region which at the time of the 1905 law on secularism was part of Germany – likely why there is particular resistance against the secular law in Strasbourg – and the Indian Ocean islands of Réunion and Mayotte, both with large local Muslim populations, receive no special consideration. The French press has yet to mention the reception of the law on these islands. Also absent is the fate of France's five thousand turban-wearing Sikhs. Their public presence confounds the distinctions between the religious and the cultural. That is, are head coverings necessarily purely ideologically and practically "religious," are they a threat to *laïcité*?

These issues notwithstanding, perhaps most problematic is defining and negotiating public space. If French public spaces – public schools and government offices – should be kept free of religious symbols, should not only students but also parents entering school grounds and clients entering post offices be required to remove all visibly conspicuous symbols?

"Islamic militancy" category in the scholarship of Samuel Huntington (1994)'s "Clash of Civilization" paradigm and in Bernard Lewis (1990)'s scholarship. As I describe in Chapter Two, this rhetoric ensures a clash. Although the French have a legitimate historical claim to *laïcité*, issues of xenophobia and Orientalism are especially prevalent in the portrayal of young French Muslim women in the Stasi Commission document.

### **Secularism in the Local Context: Headscarves and School Snacks**

I now turn to how residents of Petit Nanterre reacted to the implementation of the Stasi Commission law on the banning of conspicuous religious symbols in public schools and government offices.<sup>10</sup> As I mentioned in Chapter One, when I began fieldwork in this Parisian *banlieue* in September 2004 when the law was implemented, I was very attentive to possible reactions, acceptance, refusals, tensions, and accommodations to this ban. With few Christians and no known Jews living in Petit Nanterre, I anticipated most public discussion to centre on the Islamic headscarf. While actually affecting few young school-age Muslim girls, I felt certain that the headscarf ban's symbolic weight would outweigh its application, and, at the very least, that people would be talking about it.

People in Petit Nanterre were not incensed about the ban on conspicuous religious symbols. While there is common discourse about the veil in popular media in France and, among the women and those working in community organizations, about the positives and negatives of adopting the *hijab*, with few exceptions local women were not particularly concerned with the Stasi Commission law. Certainly, in the course of

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<sup>10</sup> I describe the central link between the maintenance of *laïcité* and French feminism in Chapter Six.



discussions and in response to my pointed questions in formal interviews, women expressed reasons about why they wore the headscarf or did not, whether they later intended to do so or not, and what they thought about those who did or did not wear the headscarf. To clarify: my fieldwork revealed that local Maghrebian women in Petit Nanterre had opinions about the headscarf, but were not particularly interested in the implications of the ban on conspicuous religious symbols affecting young people and government workers. What did become a divisive debate about secularism and Islam in the public sphere during the course of my fieldwork occurred in the local primary school. The kindergarten teacher allegedly served her three year-old students non-*halal* meats at École La Fontaine, against the wishes of their parents. In considering this controversy, I seek to demonstrate why debates on *laïcité* in France invariably take place in public schools and how, despite strict laws guiding secularism in public schools, an unspoken middle-ground exists between religion and public space.

### **Headscarves in Petit Nanterre**

Of course, as I describe in Chapter One, the political moment surrounding the implementation of the Stasi Commission was unexpected and, with public rallies in Paris seeking to protect the lives of two kidnapped French journalists and their Syrian driver, quite muted. Again, I assumed that following their release and safe return to France from Iraq at the end of December 2004, that attitudes toward the law might shift, that held-over resentments might surface. Again, among the first and second generation women of Petit Nanterre I interviewed, this was simply not the case. Petit Nanterre is, however, a visibly

Muslim landscape, certainly when compared to the nearby 8<sup>th</sup> *arrondissement* and its touristy Champs Élysées. Islamic practices permeate both public and private spaces in the neighbourhood. There are as many Arabic and Berber conversations as French ones, *Rai*, a popular Arabic hip hop music can be overheard outside HLM apartment entrances, there are two *halal* butchers, two mosques (one unofficial) and many men and women wear traditional Muslim-style dress. Only two or three women wear full *burquas*, two of whom are French women who converted following marriage.<sup>11</sup> In my experience far more first-generation women wear the scarf than their daughters. Of note, and as I describe in greater detail in Chapter Four, longtime residents of the *quartier* stressed that more and more women are wearing headscarves than in previous years. Typically young women wearing it are themselves first-generation migrants, even if their husbands are third generation migrants.

One forty-two year-old Algerian-born mother of two working as a French language instructor for new immigrants in a nearby neighbourhood explained that while she no longer wore the headscarf in France, she put it on as soon as she crossed the border into Algeria for holidays every summer. For this woman and many like her, especially women employed in France, wearing the headscarf and other more obvious religious expressions were curtailed in French space and expressed more freely in their countries of origin, particularly in the Maghreb. As this woman explained to me, “If I walked in my village without my headscarf, I just wouldn’t feel right” (Interview 8 April 2005).

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<sup>11</sup> Unfortunately I was only able to have brief conversations with two of these women, one a convert who would drop her children off in the mornings at École La Fontaine. One of these women did not generally speak to anyone, save her daughter’s teacher, who once told me that this covered woman complained that she did not want her daughter participating in mixed gender events. Again, I was not able to confirm this request.

Other responses seem more contradictory. Su'ad, a veiled first-generation 35 year-old married Moroccan woman without children explained that she agrees with the Commission's recommendation to ban religious symbols in public schools and government offices. Su'ad speaks French relatively well and hopes to receive permission to operate a daycare in her home, as she has been unable to have children of her own. As we sat together on a park bench in the Pâquerettes on a warm, spring afternoon, she explained, in somewhat broken French,

Normally we must follow like the country. There are people who want to live here. If they are against things (like the headscarf ban), they should probably stay where they're from (Interview 18 March 2005).

In short, Su'ad espoused a "shape up or ship out" mentality, claiming that immigrants should adapt to the French *laïque* model if they immigrate. Earlier in our conversation, however, she was adamant about how important wearing the scarf was to her, particularly after her late marriage in her early thirties to her religiously conservative husband. Her husband was born in France and had been married to a French woman. They had had four children together, divorced, and then he married Su'ad in an arranged marriage:

After our marriage . . . especially when we went to get my papers here my husband told me to take off the headscarf, which I did, out of respect for him . . . But, not wearing it made me scared, so for three years when I arrived in France I barely left the apartment. My husband would go out, but me, I was scared. But, with the headscarf I feel better. My husband is also more at ease. He says, 'Wear the headscarf, that way you're more relaxed and I'm more relaxed.' But that's not how the headscarf should be worn. I wear it out of respect and that's all. There are other women [in Petit Nanterre] who wear the headscarf but they don't have any honour. This makes me feel badly. For me, when I see some women wearing the headscarf and I see what they do, I don't have any confidence [anymore] (Interview 18 March 2005).

For Su'ad, wearing the veil gives her confidence that she is safe from the gaze of others, men especially, when she leaves her apartment alone. She warns, however, that some

women who wear the veil do so improperly. I heard this concern expressed on several occasions: that to have proper intentions is far more important than to uphold the public symbol of honour.<sup>12</sup> Still, many women I interviewed said they believed the law was fine, and did not elaborate further. Often my politically-motivated questions provoked this type of one or two word response: “Ah oui, ça me derange pas” (“it doesn’t bother me”). Admittedly, despite my assurances of confidentiality, some women without papers may not have wanted to appear as political renegades or draw attention to their political positions. More often than not, however, first-generation Maghrebian women did not know what I was referring to and, even if they had school-age daughters, were unaware of the law.

Outsiders working in the Petit Nanterre community centres also supported the law. One French-born after-school coordinator of Moroccan-descent who grew up in the neighbourhood and is a practicing Muslim explained,

I agree with the law because, effectively, religion has nothing to do with the school. There you are. After [its introduction into the schools] it was interpreted as an anti-Muslim law because it mostly affected the headscarf. It doesn’t affect Christians and Jews who have their own private schools and, for the most part, do not live in the suburbs (Interview 24 February 2006).

Another educated 41 year-old Algerian former-dentist, Habiba, has four French-born children and immigrated to France following marriage to her French-born third cousin in her early thirties. Habiba posits that while she agrees with the Stasi Commission law and

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<sup>12</sup> I heard another motivation why this dress was becoming increasingly popular in Petit Nanterre. My host Aïcha often pointed to the veil and the *djellaba* (a loose garment which covers the entire body) as *des caches malheurs* (misfortune concealers), explaining that women in difficult financial situations could wear the same thing everyday without feeling pressure to purchase clothes they could not afford. In the Petit Nanterre neighbourhood where some already felt a desire to dress modestly, to wear the veil and *djellaba*, this financial consideration was an extra incentive.

is grateful that her children have access to the French education system, she herself has suffered discrimination due to the veil:

At the market, because I wear my headscarf, no one's ever spoken to me in French. I have the impression that they think that we [headscarf-wearing Muslim women] don't know how to read or write. And when we [educated Muslim headscarf-wearing women] start speaking, when we start saying, "This, this and this," the other person says, "Ah, yes" [as though surprised].

She adds that this kind of "branding" affects the social relationships she can develop, even among women-only groups in the neighbourhood, especially when dropping off and picking up children at the École des Pâquerettes:

What I don't like is when we put ourselves in corners. Because women who wear the veil, they only associate themselves with other women who wear it. That I don't like. For me when I see a lady with a cigarette in her mouth, I will still go and speak to her . . . [Even if] in my home, if someone smokes, it's serious! (Interview 10 May 2005).

As we sat sipping mint tea in her tiny living room with exposed concrete walls, in one of the few small free-standing houses in Petit Nanterre, beside the local mosque, Habiba noted that wearing the headscarf has become increasingly important to her. This newfound interest has evolved, Habiba explains, as she gets older and has begun to pray with more regularity, and now that she lives in Petit Nanterre and is away from a Muslim social context like Algeria. She remarks that "Now that I'm here [in France] I feel more attached [to Islamic practices]. I want to do things so that I don't lose the customs completely . . . so that there's some continuity [for my children]" (Interview 10 May 2005). Although her oldest daughter is 6 years old, Habiba says she will leave the choice of wearing the headscarf to her daughter, stating that she can do so if she wishes when she is an adult. Habiba feels that the headscarf is not something to be worn by girls and so has

no problem that her daughter may not be afforded the choice until she has graduated from high school.

There are few exceptions to this general compliance with the Stasi Commission ban. One veiled, married Algerian woman in her late thirties with three children, Nadia, disagrees. Nadia completed a university degree in Philosophy and was running in a local Nanterrian election in order to gain better access and develop municipal politics and public policy on Islam. Nadia is adamantly against the Stasi Commission law, regarding it as an infringement on her personal liberties. In our three-hour conversation in a café near the Opéra metro station in the 9<sup>th</sup> *arrondissement* in Paris, Nadia explained, citing an incident in one of her university lectures at Nanterre University, that an evolution in attitudes toward the veil is imperative. Nadia described one morning in her last year of university when she returned to a lecture hall after having stepped outside for a moment and the professor on stage mistook her for a member of the cleaning personnel, telling her politely that the garbage can at the back was overflowing. Nadia felt outraged, not only because she was mistaken for someone who could not be a member of the group of students but because her veil made her anonymous and so the professor might not have recognized her.

### **Controversial Snacks in the Local Primary School**

While debates relating to the headscarf were thus for the most part muted, many local women in Petit Nanterre became active in discussions and a protest organized at École La Fontaine, in the Cité des Canibouts. Opened in 1963, this elementary school has

260 students. School principal, M. Deschamps, has worked there for twelve years, starting as a teacher. In our interview and subsequent conversations, he noted a number of challenges for this small elementary school. First, perhaps most pressingly, because of the CASH facilities across the Rue de la République in the *Hôpital Max Fourestier*, there are numerous homeless people, mostly men, waiting in the school's periphery until they can be readmitted to the shelter at 6:30pm. Many of them are inebriated and sleep and relieve themselves on school property. For fear of drug exchange, there are no public washrooms available. Deschamps explained that two men have died during the winter on school property, and that some of the children saw the bodies when they arrived in the morning. To curb these SDF's (*Sans Domicile Fixe* or "Without Fixed Address") who attempt to get into the school to find food or a warmer spot to sleep, the school has put stringent security measures into place, fencing in the entranceway and adding cameras. These men do not necessarily pose a physical danger to the children, but their presence around the school "n'évoque pas la réussite, c'est plutôt un esprit de résignation" (does not evoke success, but rather a spirit of resignation). Second, considered as a ZEP, or the equivalent of what in Canada we would call an "inner city" school, there is a high attrition rate among staff members. The school attracts young teachers looking for their first position before moving to more "desirable" schools closer to Paris and in the southern suburban zone. This turnover means that few teachers become engaged in helping to resolve the social and economic challenges which affect their students. Third, locals typically depict the school quite negatively; many feel their children receive worse instruction and services because they live in the suburbs. As one middle-class Algerian woman, Zhouria,

who lives with her computer-engineer husband and two children in one of six private homes on the other side of the housing projects adjacent to the hospital, explains without hesitation when describing the school, “Over there [at École La Fontaine] it’s 90% Arabs and 10% *des cas sociaux* (or, people on social assistance). It’s sad because that mix does not create a good learning ambiance” (Interview 14 June 2005). Zhouria has removed her eight year old daughter from the school, and she and her husband now pay to send her to a private Catholic school in Nanterre Ville. Zhouria says that she and her husband, who initially migrated to France together hoping he could do a medical degree in Paris, hold many Muslim traditions close to their hearts, but she does not wear a veil and they do not practice Ramadan. She felt that her daughter was teased and ostracized by other children at École La Fontaine because she was not “Muslim” enough and ate pork products in the school cafeteria. Although they are not Catholic, Zhouria believes that a proper moral education, even if Christian, will help her daughter succeed, particularly in France. Her unbaptized daughter attends weekly mass with her classmates, and has an obligatory Christian catechism class every Thursday afternoon. During our conversation in her well-furnished living room, as her live-in Algerian nanny took her son outside, Zhouria added that she has felt far more welcomed by the Catholic school’s community than she did in Petit Nanterre. The previous winter, for instance, the family attended Christmas mass so that her daughter could share the service with the families of her friends. Like Zhouria, two other Muslim women, one divorced woman of Moroccan-origins who pejoratively calls Petit Nanterre “a jungle,” also send their children to this private Catholic school to



avoid what they feel is a social pressure to conform to Muslim beliefs at the primary school in the Cité des Canibouts.

The school principal, however, claims that the school upholds all laws pertaining to *laïcité*. At the beginning of the 2004 school year when controversies about the headscarf could have erupted (but, of course, did not) he preemptively distributed pamphlets which reiterated the school's position in relation to religion. This pamphlet highlighted two positions in particular: that unless they had medical documentation, students must attend gym classes and that, in accordance with the law L.141-5-1 on education, conspicuous religious symbols are not permitted on school grounds. Another rule gained far more attention, however. The document claimed that "Except for medical reasons, the meal served in the school cafeteria is imperative." It is on this point that questions about Islam and *laïcité* exploded among parents at the school and the administration, particularly when one parent hired legal representation.

Deschamps notes that there is a substantial immigrant population within the school, but that the attitudes of the staff and the mandate of the school are such that no concessions or differences are highlighted. Even those students without legal immigration papers are admitted.<sup>13</sup> 140-150 students eat at the cafeteria, about 2/3 of the student population; students pay on a pro-rated system, so that many parents pay about the equivalent of \$1 CAD for each meal. On the question of the *incident de porc*, M. Deschamps sums up the situation by saying that there was a lot of *maladresses et*

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<sup>13</sup> The staff of the school is not aware of who is legal and who is not, as all registrations are made through the mayor's office to ensure that the student lives in the neighbourhood. This acceptance reflects French law which allows all children in the territory to attend school regardless of their legal status.

*malentendus* (“misunderstandings”). In March 2005, the kindergarten teacher apparently “forced” her three-year old charges to eat the pork products in their cafeteria mid-morning snack. She denied these allegations. The primary issue which emerged for parents involved a question of agency. Three year-old students are not capable of choosing for themselves what they will or will not eat based on their religious beliefs. Other issues in this instance included, who decides who is observing *halal*? Are these choices based on the ethnicity of the children? Do staff members in the cafeteria, or in the case of very young students, the teachers, know which parents are Muslim and then monitor their children’s meal selections? Should alternative menu choices be created if children will not eat what is provided? According to the primary school principal, sometimes older primary students want to eat their entire meal but Muslim lunchroom supervisors (there are one or two among four staff) discourage the children from eating pork products.

Parents became organized in June 2005 through the Parent School Council and organized two protests outside the school (see photo in Appendix B). M. Deschamps clarifies that this primary school has historically had a lot of problems generating parental interest; the parent council is typically short about 10 of the 12 necessary representatives. He adds, smiling, “Ils aiment bien râler, mais ils ne sont pas du tout organisés” (“They like to complain, but they’re not at all organized”). Of course, this lack of parental support is also because many of the women who are at home with their children never attended school themselves and may have poor French language skills, making

involvement in school-related activities and issues more challenging. The head of the school's parent association who paid for the lawyer, claimed in reference to the school:

Where is the equality? Where is the fraternity? For me, it's a question of respect. Everyone knows Muslims don't eat pork, that it's prohibited. Even Jacques Chirac knows . . . Everyone knows. Because she [the kindergarten teacher] has problems with Muslims, she has to deal with it like this. And I say, I'll deal with it in a legal way (Interview 16 June 2005).

In response to parental pressure and to ward off the lawsuit instigated by one of the parents, the school responded by advertising meal menus in advance and making them available to parents. Also, the staff now makes clear to the children before they eat what kind of meat is being served; there are no more "mystery meats." When I asked him whether the school would be interested in serving *halal* meat as part of its menu, Deschamps claimed this alternative was not an option, because as a *laïc* school, they could not start catering to the needs of particular groups, whether they be Hindu (against beef) or vegetarians. For Deschamps, what is perhaps most unfortunate in this debate is that parents became quite fixated on this issue rather than on the general education of their children. Moreover, many parents who are on social assistance send their children to the cafeteria to avoid having to prepare meals for their children or because they do not have the means to feed them. M. Deschamps is an eager and earnest educator who has dedicated his professional career to this school and to helping children succeed in this neighbourhood. In my estimation, he is far from prejudiced against local unemployed parents. Rather, he is frustrated by the abuse and mistrust of a system designed to feed children so they can learn effectively while at school. The kindergarten teacher in question quit her position before the end of the school year.

### Central Islamo-Christian Theological Distinctions

In this section, I turn from ethnographic examples of the separation between Islam and secularism to consider its theological origins. As I will demonstrate within key works of Christian and Muslim political philosophy, beginning in the sixth century, a distinct socio-theological pattern emerges with regards to religion and society. Both classical Christian and Muslim traditions posit a distinct relationship between earthly political power and divine authority. The traditions differ, however, in their conceptions of the relationship between religion and politics. The Gospel of Matthew's "Render therefore unto Caesar all which is Caesar's, and unto God all that is God's" (Matthew 22:21) makes a succinct distinction between the realms of religion and politics. According to this passage, Christians have two social positions: as citizens under Caesar or the political ruler, and as believers, who follow the mandates of God and the Church. This distinction is not as clear in the Qur'an, which neither describes nor prescribes a distinct political agenda.

More striking, I suggest, is how the formative Christian texts I examine focus on the importance of the *individual's* temporal and spiritual needs for the greater goal of salvation, while the Islamic texts emphasize the *community* and its significance in theological issues. Christian theologians Augustine (d. 430) and Aquinas (d. 1274) depict a greater focus upon the importance of individual salvation with the larger faith community acting as a helpful milieu, while the Islamic theological texts by 'Ali (d. 661), al-Shafi'i (d. 820), al-Farabi (d.980) and Ibn Khaldun (d.1406) centre upon the community as integral to the achievement of individual salvation. This reading is not

completely uniform – it is truer of Aquinas than of Augustine, for instance – but in relation to the central theological and monotheistic concern with salvation, these thinkers posit remarkably different Christian and Islamic programs. I consider that these theological differences may speak to a broader divergence with regards to general perceptions of the relationships between religion and society by examining, to begin, selections from books fourteen and nineteen of Augustine’s *City of God*, Thomas Aquinas’ *On Kingship: To the King of Cyprus*, *surahs* one, nine, twenty-one, seventy-six and eighty-two of the Qur’an, and selections from ‘Ali’s “Letter to Malik,” al-Shafi’i’s *al-Risala*, al-Farabi’s “The Political Regime,” as well as chapter three of Ibn Khaldun’s *Muqaddimah*. Within these works a distinct socio-theological pattern with regards to salvation emerges. The two Christian texts by Augustine (d. 430) and Aquinas (d. 1274) emphasize the importance of individual salvation (with the larger community providing support), while the Islamic theological texts by ‘Ali (d. 661), al-Shafi’i (d. 820), al-Farabi (d. 980) and Ibn Khaldun (d. 1406) centre upon the community as integral to the achievement of individual salvation. Although, as *surah* 9 of the Qur’an demonstrates, the individual himself is judged on his own merit on the Day of Judgment, the Qur’an similarly, according to Fazlur Rahman (1980), promotes proper community.<sup>14</sup>

While Augustine’s *City of God* does not explicitly address the importance of either the individual or the community, in Books 14 and 19, Augustine presents a cogent notion of the separation of church and state as exemplified by two cities. One of these is

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<sup>14</sup> In *God’s Caliph: Religious Authority in the First Centuries of Islam* (1986: 21), Patricia Crone and Martin Hinds argue that in the classical Sunni model, to achieve individual salvation, a Muslim must find himself within a proper *ummah* (community) as a condition of salvation, and must follow its leader on earth as he would in heaven .

the “City of God” and the other, usually unnamed, is called the “Earthly City” later in Book 19. These two cities are portrayed in complete contrast to one another: the City of God is created out of light with angels, while the Earthly City stems from Satan’s first sin; one is good, the other evil (Book 19, Ch.1, pg.262). The text clearly positions residing in the heavenly city as more desirable than residing in the earthly one: “they who do not belong to this city of God shall inherit eternal misery, which is also called the second death, because the soul shall then be separated from God, its life, and therefore cannot be said to live, and the body shall be subjected to eternal pains” (Book 19, Ch. 28, pg. 420). This distinction between the two cities corresponds to a dissimilarity between the sacred and the profane. Other evidence also points to this sense of separation between the sacred and the political realms. R. A. Markus notes that for Augustine, all of history (both its sacred and secular versions) maintains an overarching sense of its origins in God’s creation of the world (1970: 9). Sacred history is the story of God’s saving work, whereas secular history would include everything which falls outside of this single strand of “sacred.” Humans in *The City of God* are portrayed as incapable of ordering their own government to achieve proper governance or state politics. They need the authority and guidance of God. For Augustine, the government is a superstructure imposed upon the internal rebellion that sin has instigated within everyone, pagan and Christian alike (Pagels 1985: 389). In short, highly influential in the early Christian church, Augustine offers a clear distinction between the sacred and the profane, as related to a concept of the city, the *polis* or social organization.

Likely written in a somewhat chaotic sociopolitical context following the death of the Prophet Muhammad in 632 C.E., ‘Ali’s letter to Malik (or “‘Alī’s instructions to Mālīk ibn al-Hārith al-Nakha’ī”) states a clear need for proper government so that individuals can expect a politically appropriate and safe situation, in which to properly attend to their religious needs.<sup>15</sup> This text is a central Shi’ite *hadith* and attributed to ‘Ali (d. 661), the son-in-law and cousin of the Prophet Muhammad, considered as the successor to Muhammad in the Shi’ite tradition and as the fourth Rightly Guided Caliph among Sunnis.<sup>16</sup> Put simply, the ‘Letter to Malik’ is far more practical in focus than the more theological considerations of *The City of God*. It offers helpful “on the ground” advice to Malik, the then new governor of Egypt. This particular text is believed to be an Imamate text, for the speaker is ‘Ali, who refers on occasion to discussions he has had with the Prophet Muhammad. This attribution has likely contributed to the importance and longevity of the text, as ‘Ali’s stamp assures Shi’ite religious legitimization.

The “Letter to Malik” suggests that all people, regardless of religious affiliation are, within a political system, to be treated similarly. The common people are heralded as supremely important; their salvation is necessary and, pragmatically, their favour is

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<sup>15</sup> The text is politically noteworthy as there are few translations of Shi’ite *hadith*; it differs from the Sunni Traditions as the Shi’ite *hadith* include passages attributed to both the Prophet and to the Imams, or the Shi’ite religious leaders.

<sup>16</sup> For a longer discussion of the central schism or *fitnah* between Sunnis and Shi’ites over the issue of determining the proper successor to the Prophet Muhammad, see Waines (1995), Armstrong (2002), and Crone (2004). Sunnis classically believe that before his death, Muhammad did not designate a successor. Their notion of succession is based on election, and they hold that the best qualified Sunni man should be selected or elected as leader (also known as caliph). Shi’ites, however, believe that succession is based on designation. They traditionally hold that the first three Rightly Guided Caliphs were usurpers, that the Prophet himself had designated his son-in-law ‘Ali as his successor, and that thereafter the true line of the succession from the Prophet can be traced through the descendants of ‘Ali. The Shi’ite call to prayer reflects the importance of ‘Ali in adding, after the phrase that Muhammad is the last Prophet, that ‘Ali was his *wali*, or trusted friend. Sufism is another Islamic theological perspective which, in its mystical focus, is seen as not being concerned with things political (Crone 2004).

needed in times of war. To assure their respect, ‘Ali suggests the ruler should never have favorites, and should place a strong emphasis on upholding the social welfare of the state. These notions stem from the Qur’an (from *surah* nine, for instance) which emphasizes the practice of *zakat* (almsgiving) as a means of improving the welfare of the larger society. This text is not irreligious, however. ‘Ali cautions repeatedly against hubris in leadership. God is always the real leader above all others: “you have no power against His vengeance, nor are you able to dispense with His pardon and His mercy” (1981: 69). Perhaps because of the upheaval and great expansion of Islam during the period to which this *hadith* is attributed, there is a tremendous emphasis on fair and proper leadership and assuring the welfare of all peoples.

Al-Shafi’i’s (d.204/820) *al-Risala: Treatise on the Foundations of Islamic Jurisprudence* is an epistle requested for a discussion of proper understanding of *shari’ah* and also portrays the importance of proper cohesive social functioning in politics and religious law. Al-Shafi’i was a central figure in early Sunni theology, writing more than 100 works, and insisting that *shar’iah* could be derived from the Qur’an and contended that the concept of *sunnah* should be narrowed; his interpretations are known as being “pro-analogy.” Unlike the “Letter to Malik,” *al-Risala* is a Sunni legal text, and considered the most complete and well-respected of its time, when the four legal schools in Sunni Islam were beginning to interpret how the Qur’an should be juristically interpreted.<sup>17</sup> Wael B. Hallaw claims that modern scholarship has increasingly come to

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<sup>17</sup> Generally, legal matters in Islam focused on the Qur’an itself (typically deemed the most important legal text), then the *hadith*, or *Sunnah* of the Prophet (“the path” of the Prophet, using Muhammad as an ideal model, as he is depicted in these passages), followed by *Qiyas* (or the use of analogies from the Qur’an to arrive at decision) and then *Ijma*, the consensus among the *ulama* (religious



recognize him as having played a central role in the early development of Islamic jurisprudence (1993: 587), particularly because he was the first Muslim jurist to articulate his legal theory in writing. With the death of Shafi'i and for a long period thereafter, his middle-of-the-road thesis had relatively few supporters (1993: 598); positions and related schools are popular and centred in Indonesia and Malaysia (Waines 1995).

Al-Shafi'i's legal position can be readily critiqued because in this text and others like it, he treats all *hadith*, which are numerous and widely disparate, as though they come together in a homogenous message about the *sunnah* of the Prophet, and what the Prophet believed was proper law. To deal with contradictory elements within some of these *hadith*, al-Shafi'i claims that some were not proper transmissions.<sup>18</sup> Al-Shafi'i's work is an example of the tremendous focus on codifying law during this early period, and reflects the importance of this task in structuring social mandates for the functioning of a proper society in the first centuries following the death of Muhammad. Here religious law and society are interwoven.

Al-Farabi's (d. 980) later medieval perspective places greater importance upon the community within the city to achieve salvation and again likely speaks to the intellectual milieu in which he wrote. Anthony Black claims that al-Farabi's notion of the 'Virtuous City' presented in the "Political Regime" was an attempt to bring together notions of Islamic jurisprudence with Platonic notions of the *polis* (2001). Al-Farabi's political

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scholars). In contrast to other schools of Sunni law – Hanafi's focus analogy, Hanbali's literalist interpretation of the Qur'an, and Maliki's broad use of the *hadith* – al-Shafi'i emphasizes the political and religious leadership of the Prophet's example in arriving at instances of *fiqh*, or Islamic jurisprudence for the community, or in establishing proper society (Waines 1995).

<sup>18</sup> This issue of establishing the legitimacy of texts is a larger science within the *hadith* literature that aims to determine which texts can authoritatively be linked back to the Prophet, and which of them had either what were deemed appropriate or inappropriate witnesses.

perspective aims to achieve what he considers true happiness, only possible in the proper city with a proper leader under God (1963: 35). Unlike Augustine's classic dualistic notion of good and evil cities, al-Farabi's presents the virtuous city quickly and with few specifics – except for its perfection – allowing for greater focus in delineating the others, the 'immutable' cities, which do not reach the perfection of the ideal or virtuous city. One can only gain salvation in a virtuous city, under proper leadership. The city's governor's task is to bring people together so that they can cooperate and eliminate evils, and in so doing, acquire goodness. Al-Farabi was a commentator on Aristotle, who is known for having Islamized Greek thinking, and he notes that humans are guided by free will and choice; true happiness is attainable only in the ideal state. Only in this political paradigm do men help each other in promoting good rather than evil.<sup>19</sup>

Thomas Aquinas is also considered a medievalist. In comparison to al-Farabi's philosophical position, Aquinas' *On Kingship* proposes a radical emphasis on the individual's responsibility for salvation in the polity. He highlights the importance of monarchy in political leadership because he deems it is the most "natural" form of government: one can find similar hierarchical examples in nature and, more critically, monarchy models itself on God's kingship. Of all these Christian and Islamic thinkers, Aquinas takes up the question of the individual as opposed to society with respect to

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<sup>19</sup> Historian Patricia Crone (2004) notes that al-Farabi's notion of politics in the 8<sup>th</sup> century is somewhat archaic and idealizes the synthesized religious and political leader. She claims that in practice, by the 8<sup>th</sup> and 9<sup>th</sup> centuries, Islam had two models of political leadership: that of Caliph, which al-Farabi draws upon, which unites the political and religious leader in one figure (like Muhammad, who was a religious thinker and a military leader); and that of the Sultanate, who separated religious and political leadership into two distinct roles. Whether al-Farabi was historically accurate or not is difficult to access. His focus on returning to the proper polity as a community to garner religious favour continues in the contemporary practice of the *hajj*, or pilgrimage to Mecca.

salvation most specifically. He draws the analogy between the political leader and a house-builder. Although correct construction and leadership of the community, the leader builds a house (the city) which offers comfort and protection for the individual, whose primary goal is to maintain a correct ethical position so to reach salvation. In short, the community becomes a means toward the individual's moral perfection. Aquinas does not offer an extended treatment on the separation of Church and State but states more generally that the Supreme Pontiff is the representative of Christ on earth and that the king should submit to the spiritual guidance of the priesthood. This perspective is exemplified in *On Kingship* and in another text, *Scripta super libros sententiarum*, where Aquinas concludes that:

Spiritual and secular power are both derived from the Divine power, and so secular power is subject to spiritual power insofar as this is ordered by God; that is, in those things which pertain to the salvation of the soul. In such matters, then, the spiritual power is to be obeyed before the secular. But in those things which pertain to the civil good, the secular power should be obeyed before the spiritual, according to Matthew 22:21: 'Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's.' Unless perhaps the spiritual and secular powers are conjoined, as in the pope, who holds the summit of both powers (cited in Dyson 2002: xxviii).

While he never disagrees with Augustine's theological paradigm overtly, Aquinas proposes that there is nothing wrong with the rational, human and ordered world. Aquinas continues noting that because it is a government of one, kingship is the most "natural" form of earthly government; its archetype is the Christian notion of God as supreme leader: "The greatness of kingly virtue also appears in this, that he bears a special likeness to God, since he does in his kingdom what God does in the world" (1949: 41). The purpose of secular government therefore is not suppression and punishment, but the achievement of earthly wellbeing.

Although Ibn Khaldun's (d. 1406) focus in the third chapter of the *Muqaddimah* is on historical cycles of dynasties, his piece can be read in opposition to Aquinas' position.<sup>20</sup> For Khaldun, it is *asabiyah* ("group feeling") that is central to becoming a complete human and achieving perfection: "Group feeling is necessary to the Muslim community. Its existence enables (the community) to fulfill what God expects of it" (1967: 414). The health and viability of *asabiyah* ensures the achievement of proper law. Again, like the other Islamic texts of 'Ali, al-Shafi'i and al-Farabi, Khaldun professes that, while communal efforts are key to achieving the proper society, monotheism is essential to this model. Khaldun turns to the Qur'an 21:22 to make this argument: "If there were therein gods beside Allah, then verily both (the heavens and the earth) had been disordered." Khaldun's largest contribution in this piece to the discussion of religion and politics, however, is his focus on the *asabiyah*, and its relation to the rise and fall of dynasties, over a period of 120 years. Khaldun claims that a dynasty experiences three periods of approximately 40 years, a number he arrives at in looking to the lifespan of the Prophet Muhammad, according to the *hadith*.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Ibn Khaldun has become increasingly known to Western scholars as his works have begun to be translated. Anthony Black calls him the world's first historiographer (2001); Patricia Crone deems him the father of sociology (2004).

<sup>21</sup> The first period, which he qualifies as the most glorious, is nomadic. This period is characterized by hunters and fighters who have a tremendous group feeling, who fight for true happiness and who work together to overthrow corrupt governments. During the second period society becomes crystallized; it becomes sedentary, and begins to accumulate wealth and power; group feelings begin to wane, though there is some memory of the collective action of the previous generation. Eventually the leaders begin to enjoy their luxurious surroundings, and start to forget the plight of the larger community like they had done in the first cycle instead of focusing on its welfare. The third and last period is one of social chaos and corruption. Leaders are reluctant to help those outside their circles of power. They lose sight of the glory and the *asabiyah* of the first generation completely, leading to the downfall of their dynasty.

## Interpretations

What are the implications for modern-day understandings of secular-Islamic relations? This is a substantial question to answer based on extended passages from a handful of Christian and Islamic theological thinkers. Yet, certainly in the case of the Islamic texts, the focus on proper *shari'ah* in order to win God's favour is suggestive of the communal focus to ensure the laws are carried out effectively.<sup>22</sup> Greatly debated in all of these texts is the character and tenure of the law, as depicted in the Shi'ite *hadith* and in al-Shafi'i's emerging Sunni legal school.<sup>23</sup> Al-Farabi and Ibn Khaldun similarly emphasize the community in their writings on proper polity. In contrast, Augustine's *City of God* places less emphasis on legal mandates *per se*, placing greater weight on modeling the "sacred" city in the earthly realm by emphasizing the spirit over the flesh. Aquinas is more adamant about the necessity of a monarchical political structure (with the King representing God) to lead individuals, not a community of believers, to proper salvation. This focus on individualism parallels that of the later Western Enlightenment authors.

In the four Islamic texts, the distinction between the secular and the religious is less explicit than in the Christian sources. In fact, the distinction is not considered significant. Early Islamic thinkers do not write as political theologians (Al-Azmeh 1993, 1997; see also Brown 2004). Far more central is that the banner of monotheism be protected and proclaimed. Few of these classical Islamicists refer to the Qur'an because they do not focus on questions of the political as they are understood from a Western

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<sup>22</sup> *Shari'ah* is not a single codified written text or set of texts from which one can refer to readily or draw judgment from. It gradually came into existence over two centuries after the death of Muhammad in 620 C.E., and its different versions, occasioned by various emerging sects and schools (see Waines 1995).

<sup>23</sup> I would like to thank Dr. Richard McGregor for his guidance in selecting appropriate and representative early Islamic texts.

Christian perspective. There is one exception. Both al-Shafi'i (d. 820) and Ibn Khaldun (d.1406) refer to the *surah* 21:22 to reiterate the importance of the hierarchy of the Caliph beneath the position of God. Indeed, *Khalifa Allah* is first mentioned in the Qur'an (2:30) when God creates Adam to manage His affairs on earth. The remainder of the Qur'an portrays messengers and prophets who are sent by God with important messages for the people. Politically, the caliphate therefore acts as viceroys or human representatives of God, in line with the Muhammadian model of the exemplary religious and political leader. While there may not be a strong bifurcated sense of religious and political leadership in these Islamic texts, it was precisely the political question of *who* was to become the successor to the Prophet Muhammad after his death in 632 C.E. which lead to the tradition's greatest *fatwa* (cf footnote 17).

In *Islams and Modernities* Aziz Al-Azmeh adds that "there is no 'political theory' as such in Islamic political thought" (1993: 89). Again in *Muslim Kingship* (1997), Al-Azmeh reiterates that it is theologically anachronistic to presume that the Rightly-Guided caliphate, the lineage of four Sunni Muslim leaders who succeeded Muhammad following his death, delineates proper leadership for today. One can look to the figure of the monotheistic God to understand proper leadership; this notion is reinforced by the Qur'anic passage, which proclaims that all cosmic matters would disaggregate were there more than one god (Qur'an 21:22; Al-Azmeh 1997: 73). The king is the condition of the possibility of right order (see Al-Azmeh 1997: 183). Most early Islamic texts, like Muhammad b. Indris al-Shafi'i's *al-Risāla: Treatise on the Foundations of Islamic Jurisprudence*, therefore discuss authoritative sources of *shari'ia* (Islamic law) rather

than delineating the link between religion and politics. Codifying the law became central as Islam spread in the centuries following the death of the Prophet. Perhaps more central, and a notion still referred to by locals in Petit Nanterre, is the example of Muhammad, the first religious and political Islamic leader. The Prophet's Medinan community has provided a continuous political model of community for centuries, often referred to as the "Golden Age."<sup>24</sup> These conceptualizations are quite different from the classic Christian and secular model of the separation of church and state.

### **Interpreting Secularism alongside Islam**

One of the central implications in these Christian and Islamic interpretations of church and state is how, should "secularism" as it is understood in France be a byproduct of Christian thinking, Islam is necessarily placed outside the possibility of secularization. These questions and examinations also take place within a post-colonial context where there is a certain desire in popular and academic discourses to separate the West from "the rest." According to several theorists, "Islam," particularly in France, supposedly problematizes and is in theological and political disaccord with Western secularism. For instance, in a now famous public lecture at Princeton University in 1990, social anthropologist Ernest Gellner announced that Islam was unique in the world's religious traditions in being completely "impervious" to secularism.<sup>25</sup> Why is Islam seen as

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<sup>24</sup> It is variously understood: as a moral model; as a political one; eschatologically, as associated with the future reign of the *Mahdi* (in Shi'ism); or in an activist sense, often associated with Wahhabist beliefs, which juxtapose the pristine Medinan model against the period of *jahiliyya* (the period of 'ignorance' before the arrival of the Prophet) (al-Azmeh 1993: 89-101).

<sup>25</sup> This talk was later formulated into an article which compared Islam and Marxism in *International Affairs* in 1991 (Gellner 1991).

completely dissonant with notions of secularism? One possible reason, as I have sought to illustrate in this second section, is that Islam has a historically-held theological perception of church and state that differs from Christian understandings of this relationship. Beginning with the religio-political leadership of the Prophet Muhammad in Medina following the *hijra* (or migration) in 622 C.E., theologically, classical Islam did not separate religious matters from political ones. Of course, with the exception of this period of the Prophet, the Muslim world has not produced an officially theocratic state (see Roy 2005: 88-94; Roy excludes Iran from this discussion, however). Thus, problematic in Gellner and others' formulation of the Islam/secular bifurcation is their use of "Islam" as a static, ahistorical and apolitical category. That is, "Islam" at the time of the Prophet and during the "Golden Age" of the Four Rightly Guided Caliphs (632-661 C.E.) differs significantly from the monarchical and dynastic political models which have appeared since the death of the Muhammad and the great *fitna*, and within present-day nation-states.<sup>26</sup> Furthermore, if we understand that, in its essentialized form, Islam, as practiced by Muslims, is centered around the maintenance and promulgation of the *shari'ah* (Islamic (religious) law), theologically secular positions would be completely outside of this social and religious paradigm, and would present the greatest *ijtihad* or innovation of the faith's history. A "privatized" Islam is therefore likely ill-fitted to the

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<sup>26</sup> Other scholars point to historical conflicts. Asad claims that because Muslims were not historically part of the Roman Empire they are unable to relate to the concept of secularity. Moreover, he claims that Muslims did not experience an age of rationalization nor an Enlightenment (a point which can be refuted – see Crone 2004), nor have they lived through industrialization, all points which make their adaptation into secular Europe nearly impossible. In addition, Bernard Lewis notes other key historical clashes between Christians and Muslims in the Crusades, the defeat of the Ottomans by the Habsburgs in Vienna in 1683, and the conquering and partitioning of the Ottoman Empire by the Western Allies following the First World War in 1919. He claims that this history of opposition precludes common ideological understandings, secularism among them (1993).



continuation of its founding principles of law, so that Islam (as monolith) cannot exist in a secular separation of church in state, should secularism be defined along these lines.<sup>27</sup>

While these static and ahistorical “islams” may appear to be dogmatically or theologically at variance with the separations of the religious and political apparent in conceptions of Christianity, more contextualized examinations present different conclusions.<sup>28</sup> The portrait of Islam presented in Gellner’s lecture fails to highlight the tremendous adaptation of Muslims “on the ground.” As a religious tradition Islam has shifted from tribal to monarchical and dynastic governments; in some instances from Caliphate to Sultanate, or the reverse (Crone 2004); and from ancient city state to modern nation state. Proponents of “Islamic secularity” also point to Turkey’s radical Kemalist social and political reforms toward Western secularism, beginning in 1923 (Cinar 2005). Indeed, these hypotheses ignore the politics behind these questions.<sup>29</sup> Many of these

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<sup>27</sup> Some scholars cite linguistic evidence, noting that classical Arabic, Farsi and Turkish do not have words which are synonymous with “secular,” “secularity” or “secularism.” Seyyed Hossein Nasr writes that “there is the word *‘urfi* which refers essentially to law, *dunyawi*, which means this-worldly in contrast to other-worldly, and *zamani* which means temporal as opposed to eternal, but none of these has exactly the same meaning as secular” (Nasr 1981: 14 in Hashemi 2005: 362).

<sup>28</sup> Another more roundabout way to argue for the “modernity” of Islam is to approach the issue inductively: If secularism ensures the modern nation state, what if we were to examine how “Islamism” also ensures nationalism? On this point, Christiane Timmerman (2000) and Ernest Gellner (1997) both offer some analysis of how, in lieu of the secular, “Islamism,” or the instrumentalization of Islam for explicitly political aims, works to enforce nationalism. Timmerman claims that Islamism can be seen as an instrument enabling common people to express their alienation, oftentimes from Westernized elites with political power (2000: 20). This admittedly vague ideology proposes that a more cohesive social structure can be achieved with the purification of Islam of all of its “non-Islamic” elements; this position typically promotes patriarchal principles (2000: 21). Since the basic principles of Islam do not coincide with contemporary notions of ethno-nationalism, Islamism may therefore be regarded as an alternative nationalist ideology. Based on her ethnographic fieldwork in Turkey and in a Turkish community in Belgium, Timmerman concludes that for many Muslims, Islamism fulfils the role of an “authentic” nationalism that speaks to the demands of modern society. Gellner similarly addresses the unique space of contemporary Islam in the framework of nationalism. Gellner questions why the victory of standardized culture in mobile societies takes the form of nationalism in Europe and fundamentalism in Islamic milieus (1997: 84).

<sup>29</sup> The title of Bernard Lewis’s *Islam and the West* (1993) is an apt instance of what Edward Said’s *Orientalism* (1978), characterized as the separation of “us” (European) and “them” (Muslim). Perhaps a better title for Lewis’ book might be “Islam in the Middle East and the Western Privileged European.”

formulations characterize secularism in Western European nations as a *fait accompli* and as a positive step toward modernization. As Nikki Keddie claims:

Instead of a separation of church and state, secularism has sometimes been used to justify and enforce aggressive political control over religion and its institutions. This has been true in modern Turkey, Pahlavi Iran, Bouguiba's Tunisia, and the Soviet Union and communist Eastern Europe, whose governments have mostly seen such control as a necessity for their states' rapid social and economic modernization (2003: 16).

Within the context of unequal power relationships between these countries and the “West”, as well as the association of secularism with Westernism, a trend against such secularizing politics in the Muslim world is not necessarily a “failure,” but may be a choice. Keddie adds, “when people want to be free of Western control, they don’t generally envision the path to their salvation in the secularist ideas sovereign in the West” (2003: 25). In his unpublished dissertation “Rethinking the Relationship between Religion, Secularism and Liberal Democracy: Toward a Democratic Theory for Muslim Societies,” political theorist Nader Hashemi argues that in the political context of the Middle East secularism has been neither neutral nor power-free, in relation to colonialism and the postcolonial state (2005: 366). Thus, in contrast to Western nations where secularism ideally “ensures” political and religious pluralism, secularism’s legacy in Muslim societies, according to Hashemi, has had almost the exact opposite effect.<sup>30</sup> In short, secularism is deeply suspect in modern Muslim societies because first, the early translation of the term constructed a dichotomy whereby secularism was interpreted as atheism; second, it was understood as a Western political concept introduced by colonial

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<sup>30</sup> Hashemi cites a long telling passage from the writings of Ayatullah Khomeini who wrote that: “This slogan of the separation of religion and politics and the demand that Islamic scholars not intervene in social and political affairs has been formulated and propagated by imperialists; it is only the irreligious who repeat them” (1981: 38 in Hashemi 2005: 371).

powers and thereby tied to the failures of the postcolonial state; and third, domestic and foreign policies of Western nations promoted a distinct Muslim identity in reaction to and rejection of the secular West. John Bowen similarly seeks to challenge these facile Islam/secular conflicting dualisms in his analysis and demonstration of how French Muslims have adapted their tradition as an “Islam *de* France” instead of an “Islam *en* France” (2004). Bowen’s analysis does not highlight the complexities or the theological implications of this shift, however (see Roy 2005: 52; Chatterjee 1998).

### **Contemporary Secular Theory**

In more modern times, there have been clear and interesting shifts in the conceptualization of the categories of “the secular,” “secularism,” and what is deemed “public” and “private.” Many of the seminal thinkers of the nineteenth century – Durkheim, Weber, Freud, and Marx – proposed that religion was gradually fading in its social importance as time passed, and that ultimately, with the advancements of the industrial age, the relevance of religion would cease altogether.<sup>31</sup> Enlightenment thought generally posited that religious traditions and their rites, rituals and sacred texts were antithetical to the modern age (see Byrne 1997). More recent scholarship, however, has countered these claims of a widespread triumph of secularism, most famously in sociologist Peter Berger’s dismissal of his own earlier claims for the rise of secularism. Berger later conceded that that the world “is as furiously religious as it ever was, and in

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<sup>31</sup> Perceptions of secularism are further complicated for they differ greatly depending on their historical and contemporary context. France, for one, has a highly centralized state; its people are most often considered “secular.” In Britain, the state has links to an established church; its people are largely deemed by many sociologists as “irreligious.” And, in America, whose constitution and government is built upon secularity, its people tend to be extremely religious (see discussion in Asad 2003: 5; Roy 2005: 30).

some places, more so than ever. This means that a whole body of literature by historians and social scientists loosely labelled ‘secularization theory’ is essentially mistaken” (1990: 2). While the secularization thesis is now being questioned, it remains problematic to determine the degree of religious commitment held by particular groups. Some theorists, pointing to the French case, continue to argue that virtually all advanced industrialized societies are increasingly secularized (Baubérot 1990, 1998, 2003; Gauchet 1998). Other social scientists point to evidence suggesting that religious views and participation remain significant for a growing proportion of the population in the remainder of the world (Casanova 1994; Norris & Inglehart 2004). In this last section, I examine the parameters of this debate and look at some of its primary “players”, from the more classical theorizations of Rousseau and Carl Schmitt to the more contemporary, notably Charles Taylor (1998), Marcel Gauchet (1998), Jean Baubérot (1990, 1998, 2003), Jose Casanova (1994), and Talal Asad (2003, 2006).

“Secularism” is a term often used to indicate the separation and removal of what is deemed the religious from domains considered public or political. I differentiate between six ways it is used in the literature I examine. First, “secularism” can imply a separation of what is considered the “private” space of morality and belief from a “public” national space. Second, secularism can refer to an official state political position of neutrality vis-à-vis religious beliefs and practices. In this model, religion is not necessarily separate from the public sphere, while at the same time no single religious tradition is privileged above others. This placement is somewhat akin to a third alternative representation of the secular as an “exit from religion,” keeping religion as referent but situating it outside of

the bounds of public legitimacy (Gauchet 1985, 1998). Fourth, the term is used to frame and coincide with other concepts, like modernization, democratization (especially in Greenfield 1996; Taylor 1998 and Baubérot 1998) and nationhood (Rousseau 1762; Bellah 1967; Anderson 1991). Secularism in these linkages becomes a mechanism which assures public and shared tolerance and equality within the state no matter how diverse its citizens' engagements. If democracies are to exist and thrive, different religious groups, no matter what their numerical strength, must renounce the notion that they might create a society congruent with their particular moral values and interests. Instead, a shared national identity is trumpeted as "modernity's fundamental identity" (Greenfield 1996: 10-11) and linked directly to a Western secular project. In this way, secularism becomes a "sign of the times," and is depicted as a development paralleling modern nationalism, urbanization, rationalization, and other structural processes of Western socio-economic development (see, for instance, Casanova 2006: 17). These links between notions of modernity and secularism can become tautological. In the fifth instance, beyond these pleas for a certain modern areligious ecumenism, theorists deem secularism as irreligious or as a direct replacement for religious credos (see Keddie 2003). This position has gained more force in recent scholarship which considers secularism in the Muslim World in light of post-colonialism. Lastly, and along these lines, the secular has also been deemed completely irrelevant. That is, there has been a larger debate in the field questioning whether the term "secular" accurately describes *any* social phenomena, and whether Weber's initial "secularization thesis" is or ever has been tenable (Casanova

1994, 2006; Berger 1999; Asad 2006). Whatever the case, Talal Asad highlights how concepts of the secular are inevitably linked to perceptions of religion:

[Religion and secularism do not merely] interpenetrate, but . . . (a) both are historically constituted, (b) this happens through accidental processes bringing together a variety of concepts, practices, and sensibilities, and (c) in modern society the law is crucially involved in defining and defending the distinctiveness of social spaces – especially the legitimate space for religion (Asad 2006: 209).

It is with this point that I begin this analysis of the “secular” focusing on Carl Schmitt.

In *Political Theology* (1988 [1922]), controversial German political thinker Carl Schmitt (d. 1985) famously proposes that “all significant notions in the theory of the modern state are secularized theological concepts” (1988: 36). Concerned with what he saw as the rise of liberal constitutional democracy during the German Weimar period (1919-1933) – particularly in the legislation of article 48 which suggested that the president of the Reich could declare a state of emergency only under the council and encouragement of other legislative members – Schmitt directs this piece to the importance of a theological understanding of the sovereign and his power. In contrast to Hegel’s proposal that the state is the highest form of existence and of other rationalist and natural law perspectives, Schmitt promotes a model whereby the state holds a lesser status and acts as guarantor of personal freedoms. Schmitt claims that most important within the state is the role of the sovereign, for he decides upon “the exception.” This statement on exceptionality claims that the best and only manner to determine the boundaries and political authority of a leader is through consideration of the political and legal exception. While we know that the exception is the opposite of the rule, and that it often falls outside the strictures of the law, Schmitt claims that a crisis confirms not only the rule, but also

its existence. For Schmitt, while the sovereign authority is bound to a legal order, “he who must decide whether the constitution needs to be suspended in its entirety” (1988: 7). Thus, although he is part of the legalized power system, the sovereign ultimately is able to transcend it.

Schmitt focuses on structural similarities in politics and theology, adding that “the exception in jurisprudence is analogous to the miracle in theology” (1988: 36). That is, just as the sovereign is the ultimate lawgiver and absolute authoritarian during the moment of exception, so too is God the ultimate lawgiver and creator of miracles in the greater universe. Like the protection/obedience relationship of sovereign/subject proposed in the classical Islamic texts by ‘Ali and al-Farabi, so long as the sovereign is in the position to protect the subject, the latter is equally bound to obey the sovereign. Schmitt assumes this hierarchical model is implicitly Christian in determining relations of authority. Schmitt asks *who* is supposed to have unlimited power, and whether God alone can be sovereign, particularly in a political system where an omnipotent God is equated with the omnipotent lawgiver, not only linguistically but polemically as well. To exemplify this point, he utilizes references to a monarchical leader (like those proposed by Aquinas) and to other politico-legal-theological analogies, like Rousseau’s (which I will come to momentarily) or Tocqueville’s allusion of the American people hovering above the political life of the state, like God above the world (1988: 38-39, 49).<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> These religious analogies, however, became much more immanent by the nineteenth century, marking the beginning of a secular understanding of the state and political legitimacy through a democratic model.

What is at stake for Schmitt is his presentation of secularism as tied to sovereignty? Schmitt claims that the influence of the logic and science-based European Enlightenment has meant that the correlation of the political authority of the sovereign to the theological has been hidden or obscured; regrettably from his perspective, the post-Enlightenment period valued rationalism too greatly. Furthermore, in his political context in Germany, the political authority of the sovereign was under threat with the necessity of the assembly's approval for article 48.<sup>33</sup> The real danger of not understanding the theological underpinnings of the modern secular state is *to ignore* the nature of power and the possibility of complete chaos without the proper leadership of the sovereign during a state of exception. This political paradigm suggests that modern secularity (which Schmitt implies is a product of the Enlightenment) dangerously obscures the nature of power, which is explicitly related theologically to God and His ability to enact miracles.<sup>34</sup>

Schmitt mentions Jean-Jacques Rousseau's much earlier *Social Contract* (1762) briefly in *Political Theology* and captures where Rousseau's thinking differs from his own. While for Schmitt, the sovereign "is he who decides on the exception," or the *one* authoritarian legislative leader whose political power mirrors that of God, for Rousseau, the sovereign is the people. Schmitt might say that Rousseau simply does not understand

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<sup>33</sup> Carl Schmitt is a controversial political theorist because of his known support and participation in the Nazi party, particularly his desire to develop an authoritarian theory of the state. As George Schwab notes in his introduction to *Political Theology*, "Had he not participated in the Nazi rule between 1933 and 1936, or at least not sunk to the depth to which he did on the Jewish question, for example, his voluminous and gifted intellectual output of the Weimar period would certainly have been assessed differently. As things now stand, many scholars continue to view his Weimar output from the perspective of the Third Reich, as undermining the republic and preparing the way for Hitler's Germany" (1988: xiii-xiv).

<sup>34</sup> Talal Asad includes a brief but noteworthy critique of Schmitt claiming that it is not convincing to simply point to structural analogies between "premodern theological concepts and those deployed in secular constitutional discourse . . . because the practices these concepts facilitate and organize differ according to the historical formations in which they occur" (2003: 191). In other words, Schmitt's model lacks a contextualized approach and may be anachronistic.



authority because, instead of examining the exception, he focuses on the norm of democratic shared beliefs. For Rousseau in *The Social Contract* (1762), society is based on a contract or a binding agreement, moving away from the monarchical model to that of the democratic state. Rousseau's political paradigm is two-fold: first, he calls for the creation of a unified social entity (consisting of equal social members) and second, together they must accept the authority set over them in the social contract. Political authority lies thus not with the government or a sovereign, but with the people. Religious authority falls under what Rousseau calls a "partial" will. Christianity can therefore be dangerous because it claims a differing and divisive form of authority. Rousseau proposes a "theologized political concept" in his notion of civil religion. Rousseau upholds the necessity of religion in state formations: "no state was ever founded without being based on religion (1994: 162), but at the same time argues that, "Christian law is at bottom more harmful than useful in strengthening the constitution of the state" (1994: 162).

According to Rousseau, the best intermingling of religion and state is not "the religion of man" which introduces competing allegiances and is quite similar to a Christian model, nor "the religion of the priest" which results in an "unsociable" mixture akin to Roman Catholicism, nor the "religion of the citizen," which blurs church and state, creating intolerant citizens. The ideal is a new model Rousseau defines as "civil religion." This notion combines divine worship with a love for the law, and teaches citizens to serve the state and its guardian deity. Indeed, recognizing the dilemmas associated with instituting a system of laws in a new society, Rousseau places most of the burden on the legislator (see discussion in Trachtenberg 1993). The legislator thereby

defines the common good. “Religion” in this theorization becomes the means of motivating people to subject themselves willingly to the law. Not only will they have fear of civil sanctions, but also of heavenly retribution. Unlike the “religion of the citizen” model, however, civil religion does not turn the state itself into the object of affection, but rather the law. The dogmas of civil religion, says Rousseau, must be simple and few, with little explanation or commentary (1994: 165). Members who claim that there is no salvation outside the Church challenge the social contract, and must be expelled from the state.<sup>35</sup>

Another central theorist on contemporary secularism who includes Rousseau’s *Social Contract* in his schema on secularism is contemporary French political theorist, Marcel Gauchet. While Gauchet questions the notion of the “collective will” necessitated by the social contract, he finds the notion of “civil religion,” plausible and possible because it does not challenge the collective will.<sup>36</sup> Gauchet presents the notion, not of *laïcité* (he does not like the Christian undertones of the term), but of a *sortie de la religion* or an “exit from religion,” which expresses the idea that while religious traditions

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<sup>35</sup> This notion of civil religion was later further developed by American sociologist Robert Bellah (1970 [1967]), who, inspired by the inaugural speech of John F. Kennedy in 1961, notes how Kennedy was careful to refer to a concept of God, one which would be acceptable and desirable for most Americans and would hold multitudinous meanings. In this later conception which draws from Rousseau, civil religion is a unifying nationalist discourse that uses religious means and words to promote national values and patriotism [contrary to Benedict Anderson’s equation of secularism to nationhood (1991)]. Bellah clarifies, however, that “though much is selectively derived from Christianity, this religion is clearly not itself Christianity” (1970: 175; for further discussion on civil religion and the American case, see Selby 2006).

<sup>36</sup> Gauchet engages the linkage between *laïcité* and democracy. He claims, here countering Rousseau’s “individual within the social contract” focus, that proper French Republican democracy envisages a united body of citizens. The interests and benefits of the larger French state are lost from his point of view in the shift from the homogenous to the autonomous. Thus, for Gauchet, the problem with *laïcité*, here defined as tolerant or neutral to “other” religious perspectives, is that it creates political paralysis by validating individual claims to citizenship as legitimate without considering the larger cohesive whole.

continue to have importance in the social sphere, they are no longer part of a determining political order (1998: 11). His position is not vying for the privatization of religion; rather, he points to the end of a world where religion dictates political and economic matters. As he claims in the opening passage of *Religion dans la Démocratie: Parcours de la Laïcité* (1998), he seeks to present a philosophical political history of religion. In a larger sense, as John Bowen summarizes, Gauchet's project records three important changes: "religion ceased to suffuse the public world, God retreated to a position of absent power, and the individual assumed the right to choose to believe or not believe" (2007: 185). Gauchet prefers the concept of "exiting" from religion instead of talking about secularism. *Laïcité*, he claims, is not a useful term, not only because it is always defined in relation to the Roman Catholic Church, but also because "parallel to the marginalization of the Church, *laïcité* has become a concept without principles" (1998: 30). The term has lost all precision in its modern usage. For Gauchet, this "exit from religion" is not only a movement toward the privatization of religion and its exclusion from the public sphere or a desire to remove religion from all things political. It is also indicative of a distinctive shift in the "structural participation" of religion, in this case, in France.

To paint wider brushstrokes, Gauchet states that the demise of religion as we have known it will not be ascertained by statistics which demonstrate declining belief, but through an examination of the extent of restructuring within the human-social universe: "We have broken away from religion only in finding substitutes at every level" (1998: 6). The fundamental problem with *laïcité* for Gauchet is that it makes democrats out of

believers, while at the same time uses the argument against belief associated with political heteronomy. This paradoxical model becomes unintelligible and fails to deal with the category of religion. Gauchet therefore claims that there is coexistence between the *sortie de la religion* and the reinvention of religion: “They walk in the same way” (1998: 20). In relation to Schmitt’s focus on the divine nature of the law, Gauchet might agree that as soon as humans were able to have access to the law, they lost interest and became disenchanted with the divine and the world.<sup>37</sup> Yet, while Schmitt sees the relation of God as lawgiver to the sovereign as continuous and obscured by secularity, Gauchet reads the beginning of Christianity as marking the end of the period of God as lawgiver.

Like the larger social ethos of the French *citoyen* depicted in the Stasi Commission Report, Gauchet argues for a de-emphasis on the individual and promotes a return to the strength of a French culturally homogeneous collective. He claims that the classic Republican model of French democracy, instituted by the Revolution, was characterized by the privileging of the welfare of the collectivity over the private and

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<sup>37</sup> In *Marcel Gauchet: La genèse de la démocratie* (1996: 15), Marc-Olivier Padis notes the main theme in Gauchet’s work is the tension between autonomy (“se donner à soi-même sa propre loi” or an individual sense of morality) and heteronomy (“recevoir sa loi de l’extérieur”, presumably from a God-like figure). Useful in understanding the background of how this exit from religion occurred in France is briefly noting a key shift Gauchet perceives in the relationship between religion and the law in *The Disenchantment of the World* (1985/1997). Gauchet claims that the central focus of the world’s religions is determining and deciphering the law. He therefore questions how humans shifted from a reliance on laws revealed on tablets (with reference to Moses) to socially-constructed legal positions (the present-day secular legal system). In the French instance, there were two key periods presented without dates. The first, which he terms “primitive religions” was when humans were completely reliant on God in a homogenous society. This omnipresent God was related to all things, the law was unquestionable, the role of humans was functional (not related to the psyche or to the individual), and there was a great sense of group unity. This period, says Gauchet, was *enchanté* or enchanted. A socio-historical approach to this period, however, particularly given the divisiveness within factions and communities in French history, might reveal that Gauchet’s idea of enchantment is naïve and improbable. Nevertheless, for Gauchet, this enchantment was lost with the advent of Christianity, which he classifies as an “autonomous religion,” which allows for far greater individual autonomy from the divine than is presented in primitive religions. In the French case, humanity usurped the power of God as sovereign, taking over all juridical privileges, eventually creating their own laws, and allowing the philosophical position of *laïcité* to take hold.

local interests of particular citizens or groups. The French *citoyens*, according to Gauchet, became most authentically themselves when they participated in civic life. Key to this task is leaving aside multiple or competing identities to enter into the discourse of a higher public domain (see Badone 2002: 121). For Gauchet, the French state's commitment to the task of legitimating diverse *identités* (identity groups) that compose its contemporary pluralistic society is problematic. The state can no longer formulate public policy for the benefit of society as a whole. While perhaps philosophically sound, these positions are difficult to apply on the ground.<sup>38</sup>

While Gauchet makes a strong argument against engaging the category of “secularism,” it seems unrealistic to reject the term and the concept completely because of its continued usage and acceptance, in both historical and contemporary contexts. As I have sought to argue, several theorists have considered the extent to which the language of secularism is distinctively Christian. Canadian philosopher Charles Taylor concurs with this perspective and summarizes contemporary secularism under two headings, as “Independent Ethic” and as “Common Ground” (1998). Secularization can describe a moment of distancing or separation of religious precepts from politics, which Taylor calls the “Independent Ethic” model. In this model, people can do whatever they please in the private sphere so long as they respect publicly-established forms and ceremonies, even if superficially. Pushed to the extreme, religion is thereby removed from the public domain. This model has become, according to Taylor, the most common Western understanding of

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<sup>38</sup> Gauchet limits his analysis to France and, unfortunately, does little to define “religion,” or the concept from which he advocates exit. In his work, this category invariably refers to French Roman Catholicism; unfortunately, Gauchet makes no mention of Islam, surprisingly considering the date of his publications (1997, 1998).

the secular (1988: 35). Secondly, he presents a neutral stance toward religious practices, which supports the “Common Ground” paradigm, whose goal is not to make religion irrelevant to public life and policy, but to prevent the state from supporting one tradition over another, therefore creating an equidistance rather than a removal of the religious. The danger, says Taylor, is that the “common” can become the dominant or a “pale” ecumenical perspective: “As long as everyone is Christian, the definition of an ethic as independent, while alarming some theologians, doesn’t necessarily appear as a threat” (1998: 36). This model becomes something akin to what French historian Jean Baubérot calls *catholaïcité*, or Catholically-tinged secularism.<sup>39</sup> Taylor proposes a third model which he terms, borrowing from Rawls, “Overlapping Consensus.” This paradigm lifts the requirement of a commonly-held societal foundation, like Rousseau’s *Social Contract*. Taylor sees these posited commonalities as idealized and impossible, and more likely tyrannical impositions of one party’s philosophies upon others. A central advantage of the overlapping consensus model is its aim to respect diverse understandings, including those that are not foundationally Christian; it can therefore be applicable outside and within the post-Christian West. “Overlapping consensus” does not prescribe any underlying justification for a common social vision. It is impossible to apply a single background justification to the separation of church and state (1998: 52).

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<sup>39</sup> This word is his own creation and refers to his reading of French secularism as necessarily embedded within Roman Catholic social symbols and rituals. Baubérot was the only member who abstained from the otherwise unanimously accepted recommendations of the Stasi Commission. In particular, he felt that the recommendation to ban conspicuous religious symbols was too strong. He also publicly commented in academic seminars with the GSRL (*Groupe Sociologique de la Religion et la Laïcité* or the Sociological Group of Religion and Secularism) that members were pressured to vote unanimously so that the commission would be taken seriously by the Chirac government.

Throughout his analysis, Taylor underscores two last points pertinent to this analysis. First, he highlights how common understandings of secularism are irrevocably attached to notions of the democratic state, or to what Benedict Anderson deemed nations as “imagined communities” (1991). States as “translocal entities” are no longer perceived as being part of some higher cosmological pattern, but are part of secular time. Benedict Anderson claims that nationalism rose in importance alongside important changes within religious communities, and has a “strong affinity with religious imaginings” (1991: 10), particularly because, despite the arbitrary socially and culturally constructed character of nationalist ideology, nationalism continues to “command . . . profound emotional legitimacy” (1991: 14). Also interesting in Taylor’s writings on secularism and pertinent to my argument to uncover the links between the secular and the religious is his historical tracing of the Latin *saeculum* (“age” or “period”), employed to signify the era of profane human activity on earth between the Fall and *Parousia*. Secular time in this context differed from moments directly sanctioned by God. This separation was most important for the vocation of the Church, which held stakes in interpreting ultimate salvation.<sup>40</sup> Taylor adds that the disastrous “wars of religion” further motivated Western European societies to separate religious motivations, which at the time were assumed to be irrational and violent, from political movements. The separation became important as a basis for societal agreements. Thousands of years later, Taylor concludes that despite its

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<sup>40</sup> Bernard Lewis (1993) similarly stresses that Christian notions of secularity emerged with the arrival of Jesus Christ (Gauchet (1998) also makes this reference briefly), and points to the oft-cited Matthew 22:21 as an indication of the separation of the political from religious affairs. Lewis also points, albeit with few details or supporting data, to historical moments in which the ramifications of Christian religiously motivated violence encouraged an eventual separation, particularly by the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.

origins in Christianity, secularism should still be a necessary component of all democratic states, including non-Western and post-Christian nations.

Anthropologist Talal Asad summarizes and critiques Taylor's claim that secularism emerged in response to the politically warring problems facing Western Christian societies in early modernity (2003: 2). Asad is especially interested in Taylor's claim that "A free society has to substitute for despotic enforcement a certain degree of self-enforcement" (1998: 43). Countering this position, Asad proposes that modern liberal governance is distinctive not because of these notions of force and consent but due to its "uses [of] "self-discipline" and "participation," "law" and "economy" as elements of political strategy [. . .] the problems and resources of modern society are utterly different from those of a Greek polis" (2003: 3). Rather than a society based upon self-discipline, more important cohesive possibilities stem from policing and the economy. For Asad, therefore, Taylor's reading of Anderson's direct-access society based on "overlapping consensus" is flawed (2003: 178). Shared values arrived at through persuasion and negotiation may be an idealized and undesirable goal.

Most useful in his analysis and shifting dichotomies further, Asad effectively blurs the clear separation between "public" and "private" social spheres that is integral to the conception of a shared secular public society. For instance, a citizen's position on abortion may incorporate so-called religious *and* secular motivations. The experience of religion in the "private" space of the home is therefore crucial to the formation of subjects who will eventually inhabit a shared "public" culture (2003: 185). Asad claims that within secular societies, secular people differ in their evaluation of the political significance of



"religious" symbols in public spaces. It is precisely in a secular state that it is essential for *state* law to continuously define what *genuine religion* is, and its boundaries. In other words, the state is not so separate. Paradoxically, modern politics cannot be separated from religion as the vulgar version of secularism argues it should be. Religion enters into the realm of modern politics as a hybrid, or what Asad calls "the principle of structural differentiation" (2003: 182). The boundary between the secular and the state is therefore not discrete, nor is the public sphere ever devoid of all religious sensibilities. Asad also unveils a common assumption shared by theorists of secularism: that there is always an *unconscious* motive in religious acts (2003: 11; see also Bhargava 1998: 1).<sup>41</sup> For Asad, secularism should not necessarily be celebrated as the culmination of European thought and relatedly, Western democracy.

Finally it is important to consider Asad's critique of the logic behind José Casanova's argument in *Public Religions in the Modern World* (1994). Asad claims that Casanova's model, which treats Western conceptions of the secular by critiquing and reformulating the Weberian Western secularization model, is flawed. For his part,

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<sup>41</sup> Despite a brief digression in his chapter on the Anthropology of Islam (2003: 30-32) and a far greater emphasis in his critique of Clifford Geertz's approach to religion in *Genealogies of Religion* (1993), here it would have been useful had Asad turned to similar theoretical questioning by Religious Studies scholars, who have sought similarly to deconstruct the sacred/profane binary as well create a methodological distinction between Religious Studies and Theology (see for instance, especially Smith 1982, 1987; Paden 1992; McCutcheon 1997, 2001; Anttonen 2000). In *Genealogies of Religion* (1993), similar to his critique and analysis of the "secular" in *Formations of the Secular* (2003), Asad seeks to demonstrate that the universal definition of religion proposed by Clifford Geertz in his seminal essay "Religion as a Cultural System" (1973) is embedded within early Christian notions and is therefore of limited value in analyzing other religious traditions: "What appears to anthropologists today to be self-evident, namely that religion today is essentially a matter of symbolic meanings linked to ideas of general order (expressed through either or both rite and doctrine), that is has generic functions/features, and that it must not be confused with any of its particular historical or cultural forms, is in fact a view that has a specific Christian history" (1993: 42). The critique of these scholars of the common *sui generis* understanding of religion parallels Asad's line of questioning.

Casanova insists the term secularism continues to be relevant, but is most useful in its usual definition as the separation of secular notions from direct religious control, maintaining that modern religion is both “repoliticized” and “deprivatized” (1994: 5). Casanova disaggregates “what usually passes for a single theory of secularization into three separate positions” which he claims must be separated in order to properly code and understand the phenomenon (2006: 12). Casanova claims that the propositions which equate secularization with religious decline and privatization are among the least convincing among the scholarly writings on the topic (1994: 7).

Both Casanova and American historian Nikki Keddie present tripartite principles in their synopses of the scholarly literature on secularism. Casanova and Keddie agree that with the advent of modernity, religion has become structurally differentiated, that is, it is no longer part of larger societal structures (such as government or education). Keddie terms this “a lessening of religious control or influence over major spheres of life” (2003: 16). Secondly, the literature which examines secularism suggests that religion has become privatized. Keddie notes what she sees as “an increase in the number of people with secular beliefs and practices” (2003: 16). On this point, Casanova, contrary to Keddie, critiques assumptions about the separation of private and public spaces, claiming that religion has NOT become private at all. Lastly, Casanova claims that as the literature on secularism suggests, especially Peter Berger’s now famous retraction (1999) of his earlier position (1967) which heralded the supremacy of secularity, there has been a waning in the public influence of religion in the modern world. Keddie calls this “a growth in state separation from religion and in secular regulation of formerly religious institutions and

customs” (2003: 16). Looking at numerous historical instances, however – the Iranian Revolution, the Solidarity movement in Poland, the influence of Catholicism in Latin American, and the importance of Protestant Fundamentalism in the United States – Casanova concludes that much of the previous theorization about secularism, particularly the assumption that religious beliefs no longer matter in the modern world, is untenable.

Asad argues that when examined more closely, Casanova’s presentation is not

an entirely coherent one. For if the legitimate role for deprivatized religion is carried out effectively, what happens to the allegedly viable part of the secularization thesis as stated by Casanova? Elements (1) [an increasing differentiation between religion and politics/economy/science, etc.] and (3) [the decline of social significance of religion] are, I suggest, both undermined (Asad 2003: 182).

Unsurprisingly, Asad critiques Casanova by questioning the binaries of religion/secular that his presentation assumes. Although not cited, Asad’s response appears to borrow from Homi Bhabha’s notion of ‘hybridity,’ or the “inter”national dimension *within* the margins of nation-space and *in between* “nations” and “peoples” (Bhabha 1994: 4). Asad presents a “hybrid” model to move away from dualisms. Asad claims that unlike Casanova’s discrete categories of religion (as private) and state (as public), the state itself is never particularly separate from the private lives of its members (2003: 182).

In a later collection of essays Casanova has a rare opportunity to respond to these critiques, and concurs with Asad’s comments, that

In principle I have no objection to the creation of modern “hybrids” that may result from the entry of religion into these debates. My conception of modern differentiation or of the boundaries between the differentiated spheres is neither as rigid nor as fixed as Asad seems to imply” (2006: 14).

Casanova suggests that their projects may be similar. In his response to Casanova’s response (Asad’s second response), Asad is not persuaded that their projects bear a

likeness (2006: 207). Casanova, however, insists that perhaps their differences are methodological: while Asad follows a Foucaultian genealogical approach, he prefers a “traditionally comparative historical sociological analysis” (2006: 15).<sup>42</sup> Ultimately, though Asad’s tone is more pessimistic, Casanova claims that to dismiss the secular entirely is implausible, not only because of its interconnectedness with other concepts, but because it would be irresponsible given the extraordinariness of the almost complete collapse of European Christianity (2006: 18-20). Still, this sociologist suggests that new models *are* in order as the classic Weberian thesis assures secular European scholars that the collapse of Christianity was “natural, teleological, and quasi-providential” (2006: 18).

### **On Secularism in the Modern World**

In relation to modern theories of secularism, I have sought to highlight three main points. First, while it may be an obvious statement, it is worth noting that the “secular” is inevitably linked to perceptions of religion (Asad 2006: 209). More to the point, I have argued that while the term “secular” is used in Western academia to define both a sense of neutrality toward religious institutions and the separation of church and state, it is, in fact, not impartial and, in scholarship responding to the Western context, the category of “secular” is imbued with Judeo-Christian references (Schmitt 1988, Rousseau 1994, Taylor 1998). Indeed, the two concepts – secularism and Christianity - are necessarily intertwined; one determines and mirrors the other in Western European and North

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<sup>42</sup> Noteworthy in the academic repartee between Casanova and Asad is the former’s critique of the latter’s genealogical approach. While Asad easily attacks dualistic arguments and categories of power and successfully dismantles preconceptions and categories concerning Western secularism, according to Casanova, he fails to address the question “which of the possible alternative genealogies of the secular is one going to privilege?” (2006: 20).

American locations. In the French instance, this linkage clearly privileges a veiled Christian secularism, or what French historian Jean Baubérot terms “catholaïcité” (2003) and may ensure, from a theological perspective, that the more public manifestations of Islam are not so easily compartmentalized into private religiosity. Importantly, political theorist Rajeev Bhargava demonstrates in his analysis of the contemporary Indian situation that secularism is not necessarily a Judeo-Christian by-product. Understanding secularism only with reference to struggles between church and state does not account for other geopolitical locations, for instance in struggles to make the Indian state independent from warring religious groups. Bhargava demonstrates that political secularism is neither purely Christian nor peculiarly Western: “It grows wherever there is a persistent clash of ultimate ideals perceived to be incompatible” (1998: 498).

My second point is that secularism, in its conceptual linkages to other Western notions like democracy and multiculturalism, has become tantamount to a tautological argument. For instance, a shared national identity is trumpeted by some scholars as “modernity’s fundamental identity” (Greenfield 1996: 10-11) and linked directly to a Western secular project. In this way, secularism becomes a “sign of the times,” and is depicted as a parallel development with not only modern nationalism, but urbanization, rationalization, and other structural processes of Western socio-economic development (see, for instance, Anderson 1991, Casanova 2006: 17). The concept thereby loses its own definitional properties.

Lastly, deeming one person/space as “secular” and another as “religious” are often not neutral assignments. In *Formations of the Secular* anthropologist Talal Asad points to

a common and unacknowledged assumption of theorists of secularism: that there is always an *unconscious* motive in religious acts (2003: 11). Similarly, in his reading of Western European language dictionaries, José Casanova notes that secularism comes to mean “making worldly” or containing “civilizing” properties (2006: 16). From a postcolonial perspective, or from the context of unequal power relationships between Muslim countries and the “West”, a trend against such secularizing politics in the Muslim world may not necessarily be a “failure,” but may rather represent a choice. Middle Eastern historian Nikki Keddie, for one, demonstrates that secularism is deeply suspect in many modern Muslim societies because early translation of the term constructed a dichotomy whereby secularism was interpreted as atheism; second, because it was understood as a Western political concept introduced by colonial powers and thereby tied to the failures of the postcolonial state; and third, that domestic and foreign policies of Western nations promoted a distinct Muslim identity in reaction to and rejection of the secular West (see Hashemi 2005).

### **The Secular Continuum in France**

To conclude this third chapter, I argue that in practice an unspoken middle-ground exists between the religious and secular spheres, akin to the blurring or hybridity which Bhabha conceptualizes (1990b, 1994) and to which Asad refers (2003). Despite the strict laws requiring secularism in public schools, this hybridity is apparent in the outcome of the “Pork Affair” at the École La Fontaine in Petit Nanterre. Still, the secular/religious separation remains complicated as the school’s allowance for religious holidays maintains a private/public separation. So long as certain limits are respected, there is conformity in

the public domain. As demonstrated through the historical review of French secularism in this chapter's first section, these secular/religion debates typically manifest themselves within public schools. A central concern within a collective French national identity is the cultivation of the *citoyen* (citizen). Accordingly, public schools in France have been depicted as the locus of creating the French citizen since the 18<sup>th</sup> century. A pupil may be privately religious, but should be publicly secular.

I argue that the “Pork Affair” unveils an important cleavage in how secularism and religion are treated in the public sphere of Petit Nanterre. This meat controversy depicts how an “unspoken continuum” between the supposedly separate categories of religion and secularism work at the local primary school. It also highlights the importance of boundary maintenance in the separation of “public” schools and “private” moral beliefs, a task which is methodologically difficult given, as I have noted, the malleability and inter-penetration of these spaces (Asad 2003). While Muslim parents in Petit Nanterre have largely accepted without protest the legal mandate that their children cannot wear conspicuous religious symbols at school, they do not accept that their children might inadvertently or advertently consume non-religiously regulated food products. In the “Pork Affair,” the children and their parents felt they were stripped of active choice.

These issues must also be examined from a sociopolitical perspective. Some parents in Petit Nanterre feel that despite the school's best efforts, the high number of Muslim students attending the school makes it unfairly biased. Social issues reinforce the precariousness of the school and discourage teachers from investing themselves. Few

parents have the means to send their children to other private schools in Nanterre.<sup>43</sup> Moreover, staff members in the school cafeteria may be policing the children. These claims may be exaggerated; one of the Muslim women I interviewed who worked in the cafeteria vehemently denied she withdrew food from any child, but did tell them whether the meat was *halal* or not if they asked. I often noted social pressures to conform to Muslim religious practices among the children themselves.

Despite this controversy, local residents are generally pleased that the school allows children to stay home from school during religious holidays. For parents, this gesture allows for the continuation of religious practices in the home, despite the secularity of the school. They then practice their beliefs privately. The *halal* incident is thus evidence for the privatization of religion. Much like the French *laïque* model, so long as certain limits are maintained – not serving pork to Muslim students – there will be conformity in the public domain. In practice at the local level, religious/secular compromises are made and few residents feel overt discrimination based on their religious affiliation.

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<sup>43</sup> As of 2007, there exists one private Muslim school in France, the *Lycée Averroès*, in Lille, an industrial city in northern France.



**Marriage and Migration to Petit Nanterre:  
Family reunification and conceptions of womanhood**

Nora slowly opens the large door to the basement entrance of the local community children's centre at the far end of Rue de la République. It is a cold and gusty grey day in February 2005; she is relieved to have found the classroom. From the exterior, the one-story old brown-brick building shows no signs of life, so she is surprised to find a flurry of activity below-ground. About 25 women, most wearing their winter coats to stay warm, sit behind long tables in a half-circle facing a window with a chalk-board beneath it. Yvette, the teacher, speaks animatedly in front of the group, at times writing words enthusiastically on the chalk board, at times laughing raucously, at times sighing in frustration. She is in her mid-fifties and married with two adult children, her son in London and her daughter in southern France. Yvette was born in Algeria but is a francophone, having grown up in a socio-economically privileged environment and attended private schools. Her father was an Algerian journalist and her mother a French artist. She also attended teacher's college in Algeria. Yvette first came to live in France on what she deems a "semi-permanent" basis when she moved to Toulouse to help her then 21-year-old daughter who was experiencing difficulty in Medical School and in adapting to life in France. While there Yvette unsuccessfully looked for full-time work, eventually coming to Nanterre, since her sister Nejma, founder and director of Association Nadha, offered her full-time work teaching and working at the drop-in centre. Yvette is a strong and outspoken woman who while respectful, is unabashedly critical of what she deems social conservatism among women in her class. She is blunt in her

manner of speaking and dress, speaking frankly and wearing her hair cut quite short. In both respects, she is unlike the women she teaches.

Yvette told me privately that she thought the social customs and comportment of women in Petit Nanterre seemed to come from another era, one she could not recognize even from Algeria. This impression motivates her to discuss issues she deems important within an all-woman space. Over the course of my two-year engagement with this group, Yvette brought up, on occasion, controversial topics like birth control and abortion, claiming she wanted to expose her students to options afforded to them in France. For instance, following a discussion about where to find a local gynaecologist for a newly arrived woman experiencing bleeding (the young women worried it was related to problems conceiving), Yvette explained that while abortion was unacceptable according to the Qur'an, the use of birth control was not. She also openly critiqued the local doctor, a Muslim of Algerian origins, questioning the validity of his diagnoses and his ability to prescribe medication since he does not do gynaecological exams. Furthermore, Yvette often nicely but pointedly encouraged her students to wear make-up, to leave their apartments, to take time at home for themselves, and to develop their own hobbies and activities. All of these counsels reveal a very "Western" conception of the self as an individual who cultivates self-development and the presentation of an appropriate gendered public "face," made more appropriate in the wearing of cosmetics. Yvette once noted that they should stay away from "kohl" or heavy black eye-liner, a more common North African style of make-up.

Until the 1960s the small building which houses these French language and culture classes had been Petit Nanterre's bathhouse; it opened in 1954. Now, four afternoons a week, the basement space serves as Association Nadha's classroom for women's instruction in French language and culture. Close to the end of my second year in Petit Nanterre, the association allocated additional funds to separate the group into two levels; the smaller advanced group that focused on reading and writing began meeting in a smaller room on the first floor. I noted that attendance increased as time passed; the Association's records confirm this growth.<sup>1</sup> On the cool day in February when Nora first arrived in this classroom there were approximately 30 women present. Their ages ranged from late teens to senior citizens. Some were pregnant. Some had small children beside them in strollers. On occasion, a couple of women broke off from the lesson to answer mobile telephone calls, usually from their husbands. Most members of the class had emigrated from North Africa. Most self-identified as Muslim. About half wore various styles of headscarves in keeping with their Muslim faiths.

This chapter is largely ethnographic in tone and focus, and highlights two social phenomena I observed over the course of my fieldwork and their possible implications for both the religious and the gendered perceptions and self-identification of largely Muslim North-African migrants. In the first place, many of the women of the neighbourhood are first-generation immigrants even if their husbands or their families have lived in France for several generations. Early in my fieldwork I noticed that French-born husbands in Petit Nanterre openly prefer "traditional" North African wives to women born in France,

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<sup>1</sup> Attendance wanes noticeably starting in May when women begin returning to North Africa on holiday or to visit family.

even if local French-born women are Muslim or have North-African origins. This preference for selecting a wife from the *Bled*, *verlan* for *deble* (or ‘country’ in Arabic), was also apparent with two other local couples from Senegal and India. Within the postcolonial and diasporic context of North Africans living in a Parisian suburb, I consider this marriage-partner preference with reference to central theoretical linkages between gender and nationalism (Bhabha 1990, 1994; Kandiyoti 1991; Yuval-Davis and Anthias 1993; Yuval-Davis 1997; McClintock 1995; Nagel 1998; Rao 1999; Timmerman 2000). In the second place, and I suggest relatedly, I aim to unpack the claim made by several new immigrants and longer-term residents that, although women feel they are afforded greater liberties in work and schooling opportunities for themselves and their children in France, at the same time, many feel that there is greater scrutiny and social control of their dress and social comportment in Petit Nanterre than in their country of origin. Whether or not this perception is empirically accurate, women are aware of the politicization of their choices in a contested French public space, more than they had been in their pre-migratory lives. A number of “headscarf affairs” in France beginning in the late 1980s have positioned this piece of clothing, in particular, as a “semiotic sign” (Barthes 2006). To explore this notion of increased policing outside one’s country of origin, I expand upon what Nira Yuval-Davis briefly terms a “freezing of culture” within diasporic communities where men or the larger community feel threatened by outside influences and react accordingly (1997). To position this theory more concretely I offer several ‘marriage histories’ of local Maghrebian women (as well as one Senegalese

woman) which depict how marriage partners become socially accepted, overlooked or discounted.

### **Family Reunification Immigration Policy**

Immigration policies have changed in France since the post-World War One period when North Africans began migrating to France in greater numbers. Relatively spontaneous immigration in the years before 1914 was gradually replaced by more organized programs of immigration sponsored by government and industry (Ogden 1989: 44). The single most important policy change which dramatically shifted the social-political landscape and number of North African women into the country was the family reunification policy of 1974 under the centre-right presidency of Valéry Giscard d'Estaing (1974-1981). This policy replaced that of working immigration, which facilitated the arrival of women to join their husbands who have legal status in France. By 1974, however, immigration policies adopted by Giscard d'Estaing's government officially began shutting France's open door to immigration, offering lump sum payments to encourage workers to leave. In the late 1970s, Giscard d'Estaing sought, unsuccessfully, to repatriate 500,000 North Africans (Killian 2006: 17). The door was not entirely closed, however, as immigrant workers were given the option of having their families join them in France (Koven 1992: 26). Therefore, while the number of single male North African workers dropped, that of women and children grew exponentially. In turn, a greater number of female migrants in the French territory meant that children of North African origins were to be born, educated and socialized in France. This shift toward family reunification also marks the beginning of a more 'feminized' migratory

pattern to Europe, replacing the ‘masculine’ industrial immigration following the First and Second World Wars. The initial industrial working immigration had a far different focus and end goal than later family reunification. Male migrants until the 1970s were often young industrial workers with the initial intent of returning to their countries of origin. As Ahsène Zehraoui explains, the young often single men’s projects had two primary objectives: to send remittances to their families and enjoy greater social status in their country of origin (1994: 16).

Following moments of insurgency in Algeria in the 1960s and 1970s, in his first term from 1980-87, François Mitterrand proclaimed an immigration policy of “insertion.” Mitterrand strove to keep North African workers from returning home, to normalize their status, and supported their right to vote, at least in local elections (Brulard 1997: 109). Family reunification laws meant that with proof of funds and lodging, men were able to sponsor women to join them in France, initially with relative ease. Yet, at the same time, the far right began to flourish under the leadership of Jean-Marie Le Pen. Le Pen formed the *Front National* (National Front party) in the early 1980s, largely on an anti-immigration platform. Pierre Bréchon and Subrata Kumar Mitra note that as an extremist movement with a cultural and religious agenda, the FN was especially successful in its intransigent opposition to tolerant pluralism (1992: 63).<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Bréchon and Mitra note several factors which led to the FN's electoral success in 1984 for the European Parliament elections. Because the elections did not hold as much political importance for domestic politics, arguably, voters had greater freedom from the customary restraints of party affiliation, political partisanship and social class (1992: 64). Cities which had experienced rapid economic development later experienced inadequately integrated immigrant populations, unemployment, and delinquency (1992: 70). The Front National members effectively drew from these concerns in their political campaigns, with campaign signs claiming *On n'est plus chez nous* (“We are no longer at home”). The FN discourse proposed that forms of religious and cultural colonization threatened French culture with

American sociologist Alex Hargreaves chronicles that with the advent of robotization, industry suffered heavy job losses in the early 1980s. By the 1990s, the foreign workforce in France had been reduced by half (2007: 53). North African immigrants in particular have been hit by unemployment. Hargreaves explains that

Maghrebis have the double misfortune of occupying the lowest ranking in the ethnic hierarchy prevalent in France and of having emerged as by far the most visible component in the population of immigrant origin at precisely the time when the expansionary climate which had favored the recruitment of foreign workers in the early post-war decades was giving way to more difficult economic circumstances (2007: 146).

Arguably, women of immigrant origin are especially vulnerable, as they often find themselves in positions of economic and social dependence on men, who also oftentimes have greater control should their wives' immigration statuses be unclear. Because the immigration laws dealing with family reunification have tightened in recent years, the difficulties in getting into France with legal papers often mean that women and children arrive in France with three-month touristic visas they overstay illegally. As I will explain, women in these situations are left in a state of fear of discovery and deportation, and more importantly, have limited access to social and government aid and services.

### **Ethnographic Illustrations**

Nora's recent life history exemplifies these issues. In her early twenties, she enters the classroom wearing trendy jeans with a bright-coloured sports jacket and fluffy white scarf. Her long hair dyed bright blond is uncovered and pulled back in a tight pony-tail. She smiles broadly, her brown eyes sparkling and, as though asking a question says,

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extinction. Despite its public image of intolerance, Michel Wieviorka warns against attributing French racism and anti-immigrant sentiment to the FN; as a party it appeals to a more populist than a frankly racist electorate (1993: 55).

“Bonjour, je suis Nora?” Yvette, the primary French language and culture instructor, welcomes Nora and gestures for her to pull up a chair and join us. We introduce ourselves by our first names. Nora says little this first day, answering questions put to her by the other women. In fact most of the questions are posed by Yvette, to inspire a bit of dialogue: “How is old she?” “21.” “Is she married?” “Yes, three months ago.” “When did she arrive in France?” “About one month ago.” “Where does she live now?” “In Puteaux, beside Petit Nanterre near La Défense.” “Where is she from?” “Algiers.” Several women smile to affirm their interest and those with more confidence in their French skills offer encouraging remarks. One middle-aged woman, also from Algiers, asks Nora what part of the city she is from and where exactly she was married.

After about a week Nora gains confidence within the group and begins joking with the older women. They in turn offer her “women’s tips” on issues like how to integrate into her parents-in-law’s home (respect her mother-in-law profusely but stand her ground); and the best traditional Algerian recipes to prepare for her husband at festival times (*chorba* and *couscous* along with honey-glazed sweets). Nora laughs a great deal and is, in comparison to some of the other more timid women of her age in the group, quite boisterous. She is extremely motivated to improve her French as she would like to find work in a retail store at La Défense or apply to study in a diploma program of some kind in French. She does not envision staying at home during the day with her mother-in-law. Her husband so far has been quite supportive of her intellectual pursuits; they would like to postpone having children for a couple of years if possible. Nora came to Petit Nanterre from the neighbouring community because of Association Nadha’s



promise of almost-free language and cultural instruction. Women are asked to pay five Euros per semester for the classes if they can afford to do so. In addition, Nora came to Association Nadha because, unlike other funded French classes for new migrants, the Association does not require students to have legal immigrant documents for admission. Other local women who have the required papers appreciate the two teachers' flexibility with attendance and their willingness to allow small children to come to the classes.

Nora is currently living in France illegally. She initially arrived in Petit Nanterre with a one-month tourist visa in order to visit her husband following their marriage in Algiers. This visa expired, and because she had bought a one-way ticket and wanted to stay with her husband, she chose to stay on, eventually hoping to be sponsored by her husband to gain eventual legal status under the family reunification category of the immigration act. While her tourist visa was still valid, she applied for a *récépissé* (a receipt indicating that she had presented her papers at the prefecture for a review of her visa). Following a period of about eight months, she eventually received a *carte-de-séjour* (or a residency card) for 12 months, allowing her, a year after I first met her, to register in a formal training program to become a travel agent. Jumping ahead almost a year, or two years after I had met her for the first time in February 2005, Nora indicated to me in an email that she felt surer about her French status and new identity following the birth of her baby girl, a French citizen by birth. She expected that she would visit Algiers often, but because her husband did not feel at home in Algeria, she would settle permanently in France. She and her husband Krimu hope to move soon into their own apartment.

Nora's initial "irregular" residency status is not representative of the majority of North African first-generation female immigrants in Petit Nanterre. As migration laws and enforcement have become increasingly strict, many women claim that compared to twenty years ago, it is not wise to take risks with residency status, particularly if one has the opportunity to marry a man who is a citizen or who has "regular" status, allowing for official avenues of sponsorship. Still, there are a number of women in Petit Nanterre who do not have legal residency status and whose living situations can be precarious.<sup>3</sup> One young woman who sometimes came to Nadha's French classes, Naima, arrived in France from Algeria when she was 14 and lives with her elderly grandmother in the Cité des Castors (see Appendix 1). Naima is quite petite and fashion conscious. She takes great pride in her *coiffure* (hair style) and make-up and, while she describes herself as socially conservative and a Muslim "in her heart," she has never worn a head-scarf. Naima grew up in a small village in central Algeria and has never had formal schooling; she has four younger siblings. While she cannot read or write, her spoken French is quite strong, a skill she attributes to watching a great deal of French-language television. Her grandmother does not have the means to purchase a satellite dish which would provide Algerian or North African programming in Arabic, so Naima is very in-tune with spoken French as well as contemporary fashion and popular culture. Her grandmother also speaks to her in French, having lived in Petit Nanterre for more than 40 years.

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<sup>3</sup> Not having legal immigration papers is a sensitive topic. In some cases I was not able to ascertain women's visa statuses until late in my stay, or found out only when they sought assistance in the drop-in centre or through other women.

Naima first came to France to visit extended family, and stayed with her maternal grandmother in Petit Nanterre for a summer. Because her grandmother was ailing with diabetes and then in the early stages of Alzheimer's disease, Naima's family decided it would be best for her to stay in France to care for her grandmother in her apartment. The young woman agreed and was initially quite excited about the prospect of staying in this *banlieue*, enjoying the adventure and exoticism of such a different way of life. She says

I found France to be really great! I decided to stay for a little while, and afterwards I stayed for a long time. There you go. My grandmother, it's been 43 years since she's been here. I have a lot of [maternal] aunts here too. It's for work [that they immigrated] (Interview 30 May 2005).

Fourteen years since her arrival, Naima has grown accustomed to living in Petit Nanterre. She has made one good friend through the French class and has some contact with her extended family living nearby. Her living arrangement is difficult, however. She is usually alone at home with her grandmother, whose dementia has grown worse; sometimes her grandmother does not recognize her, or leaves the apartment without telling her. Naima explains she is extremely worried about leaving her grandmother alone while she attends class or runs errands. Owing to this anxiety, she attends class less and less frequently. Moreover, even years earlier when her grandmother was in better health and Naima had greater freedom, without proper papers she could not enrol in other educational or training classes for migrants, with the exception of the French classes with Association Nadha, or apply for legal work, let alone attain legal residency status.

Another woman living in Petit Nanterre in the Pâquerettes is Hakima, 34 and married with two young children. Hakima who works part-time at the Nadha Hair Salon in the centre of Petit Nanterre, and migrated illegally from Morocco with her parents and

three brothers at the age of 16. Although they knew they would have few rights, her parents chose to risk deportation, and drove to France from Morocco through Spain to seek medical attention for one of their sons who had mysteriously fallen ill. They felt the French medical system would be better equipped to diagnose and treat him than the Moroccan system. Hakima had started high school in Nanterre Préfecture and worked hard to improve her limited French. Although she found the situation “intolerable,” as her fellow classmates were younger than her and her family was living with relatives, Hakima completed high school. Hakima does not attend French language and culture classes; we met through the course of my participant observation at the Nadha Hair Salon. Indeed, as I mention in Chapter One with reference to École La Fontaine in Petit Nanterre, the municipal mayor’s office which regulates school admission admits all school-age children, even those without legal residence status in France. Moreover, the French government has created helpful programs to aid young immigrants in making the transition into the French public school system. Unlike Hakima who, despite great anxiety at the beginning, successfully completed high school (although not the High School Baccalaureate exams) and has French literacy skills, Naima feels completely unprepared to attend a French-language high school, having never been to school as a child.

The most distressing feature of this illegal situation for Naima is that she cannot return to Algeria to see her family for fear that she would encounter trouble crossing the border. When her father passed away 3 ½ years ago, therefore, she did not attend his funeral. Although she speaks to her mother regularly using the local “Taxi Phone” shop located on Petit Nanterre’s main street, Rue de la République, she has not seen her father

or her siblings since her departure from Algeria. Her mother has visited her and other relatives nearby once, returning to Algeria two weeks later. Naima concedes, “I regret a little bit now that I’m in France. I still don’t have my papers, and it’s been a long time now” (« Je regrette un peu maintenant être en France. J’ai pas encore mes papiers, et ça fait beaucoup maintenant »). But, when I ask her whether she feels French, she smiles and explains her sense of identity:

I don’t know. I feel good! I speak French well. I’m telling you, before I couldn’t even take the bus, I couldn’t even go to ED [the local grocery store]. Now I can go to La Défense alone. And one time I went to the countryside all alone to do some house-cleaning for a lady. Even my grandmother she said, ‘I don’t know, you’ll get lost,’ but I did it! Even the lady she couldn’t believe it [that I found my way] (Interview 30 May 2005).

In order to make some money of her own, for the past four years, Naima has worked part-time as a childcare provider for a local family, as well as doing occasional house cleaning for a woman in Colombes, just outside of Petit Nanterre. The couple for whom she baby-sits have two small children and pay her in cash, dropping the children in the morning at Naima’s grandmother’s apartment. Naima is worried about what will happen when the children are old enough to go to school full-time, and her services as babysitter are no longer needed. “Otherwise, it’s my grandmother who pays for everything” (“Sinon, c’est ma grandmère qui paye tout”). After a ten-year stay in France, illegal immigrants are eligible to apply for a residency card to regularize their status. In Naima’s mind, however, her best option is to meet and marry a man who has permanent residency or citizenship. This option is attractive not only because at 28 she is anxious to be married, but also because the paperwork to shift from illegal to legal status is overwhelming, particularly for someone unable to read or write in a country famous for

its bureaucracy. Naima would prefer to stay in France, but she worries that she may not find a suitable husband quickly, and should her grandmother pass away, she would not be able to stay in their government-subsidized one-bedroom apartment. Naima had one marriage offer three years ago, but decided against it: “There was a man who wanted to [get married], but I didn’t want to because he had been married and divorced and had a daughter. Plus, I didn’t love him at all. And I can’t marry a man I don’t love. I can’t” (“Il y a un homme qui voulait, mais moi je voulais pas parce qu’il était marié, divorcé et avait une fille. En plus, je l’aime pas du tout. Et je peux pas me marier avec quelqu’un que je n’aime pas. Je peux pas”). Moreover, this same man indicated that she should wear a headscarf once they were married. Although she is a practicing Muslim, Naima was not interested in adopting the headscarf. She has never dated.

Fatiha’s immigration narrative provides a third illustration of the challenges of living in France illegally. Fatiha is an Algerian married woman who arrived in Petit Nanterre five years ago with her husband Kamil and their three children, 14, 12 and 9. Nora is often referred to as *celui aux yeux verts* because of her striking (and rare) green eyes. She is 35 years old and was married at 21 in a traditional arranged marriage to an Algerian-born man seven years her senior. In an interview in their home, her husband explains his motivation to come to France:

I didn’t come to France because I needed money. I didn’t come to France because I was poor over there [in Kabylia, Algeria] or because I wasn’t happy. No. But, in many ways, I love France. I would have really liked to have pursued studies in France, but I wasn’t able to because of my responsibilities [as the only son in a family of 10], and after I had children [and then] I worked. So, I have focused on my children, so that they can benefit from opportunities here and especially postsecondary education (Interview 14 May 2005).

Fatiha and her husband have recently had a fourth child, five years after settling in Petit Nanterre. Despite the difficulties they have endured living in France illegally, both are committed to their lives in Petit Nanterre and show little regret about their departure from Algeria. Kamil, formerly a French-language schoolteacher now works *au noir* (under the table) installing flooring. He was unable to find work in Algeria to support his family because, as he explains, French language instruction became less important with the rise of Islamic fundamentalism in the government. Kamil was encouraged by Fatiha's brother to join him in France working for a flooring-installation company until he found better work and could regularize their status. They arrived with visitor visas for the summer and then remained in France.<sup>4</sup> As a result of their illegal status, they are not entitled to apply for social housing in Petit Nanterre, and because the high cost of privately-rented apartments near Paris, all six of members of the family have been living with Fatiha's 43 year-old divorced brother in his small one-bedroom apartment. When I visited them one Saturday to conduct interviews with the two men, I was amazed at how orderly and neatly Fatiha kept the apartment despite having so many people – three adults, two teenagers, a toddler and an infant – in such a small space. Kamil and Fatiha's brother have installed bright new hardwood flooring in the apartment, and the walls are decorated with framed quotations from the Qur'an. We sat on an L-shaped North African style sofa against the

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<sup>4</sup> Most of the illegal immigrants I met in Petit Nanterre had overstayed visitor's visas. One of my closest informants, Hakima B, a middle-aged Algerian-born French-language school teacher who lived in neighbouring Colombes with her husband, 12 year-old daughter and 9 year-old son, described trying to bring her younger brother to France as a nearly impossible task. She has permanent residency thanks to her husband who has dual French/Algerian citizenship. To sponsor her brother legally, she would have to demonstrate that she has a separate room for him in their apartment and that she has almost 75 Euros per day to cover his expenses. Despite not having these resources, she had helped him apply for several visitor's visas, each one of which was denied. Her younger sister also overstayed a visitor's visa eight years ago, and now works caring for an elderly woman in her home. Hakima B. worries that because her sister's visa is expired and yet she has remained in France. Their brother may never be able to enter the country.

two inside walls; it also served as a bed for Fatiha's brother in the evening. The younger children played quietly in one corner and took turns eating at lunch time. The older children were out doing their homework at the community centre. On nice days, the balcony is used as a play space and is filled with toys.

In our interview one spring afternoon in the classroom after French class, when we were alone except for her infant, Fatiha confided that she prays everyday to Allah that her family might gain legal residency status and be eligible for a larger apartment. Other issues like learning French or her children's adaptation to the school system seemed minor in comparison. On these points, Fatiha feels her family has made progress. Her husband and children have helped her with French. She has made a number of friends in the neighbourhood and in the warmer months often sits outside with them on park benches in the afternoons.<sup>5</sup> Her children also have friends and prefer speaking French to Algerian Arabic.

Women who arrive in France with their husbands have a far easier time, both socially and financially, than those who arrive as single women, particularly those in their late 20s. "Meeting someone" is difficult for 28 year-old Naima, for instance, largely because of her social isolation. She rarely leaves her grandmother's apartment and has little contact with other young people. She described how different she feels from the

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<sup>5</sup> The situation has since changed for Fatiha. Amazingly, following the birth of her fourth child, a French citizen by birth, the family was able to file a family-reunification application in the infant's name. Thus, about 18 months after my initial interview with her husband and brother in their one-bedroom apartment, Fatiha was ecstatic, hugging and kissing her female friends, and offering gold earrings to the social worker who had helped expedite her case by writing letters and explaining their precarious living situation. Before my departure from France in 2006, Fatiha told me that receiving the news about this move to a three-bedroom apartment on the desirable Pâquerettes side of Petit Nanterre was the best moment of her life.



young women she encounters of her age who are also from Algeria but have attended high school in France. Two other young women, 25 and 27 year-old sisters, who later joined the Nadha classes after migrating from Northern Algeria with their parents seemed well-suited for companionship since they had also not attended school, but their French skills were weak and they spoke Kabyle and not Arabic like Naima. Naima hopes she might meet her future husband through her extended family in France who know of her situation. She knows she would be a far more desirable candidate for an arranged match if she already had residency status; certainly it would open far more possibilities should a possible future husband be interested in moving to France from Algeria.

Based on my observations and what women told me about their marriage partners, most marriages originate in arranged meetings between a man living in France and a North African woman interested in the possibility of marriage and/or moving to France. I use the term “meeting” purposefully. Should the couple’s meeting(s) go well they may choose to wed quickly. Faïza, a 26 year-old woman with two young children who wears the headscarf was born in southern Algeria and got engaged to her 35 year-old French-born husband the same day they met. They were married three days later, and two weeks after that, he left for France to begin the paperwork to sponsor her. She laughingly remembers the incredulity of their meeting, and how quickly her life changed:

My husband, I didn’t know him. One summer his mom came to my parents’ house to see me and look at me. I gave her a photo of myself for her son and after, the day after, her son came back with his mom to see me and he said, ‘Alright. This is [a] good [match].’ He didn’t speak Arabic and I didn’t speak French! That night, the same day, he was my fiancé. The same day. That night he was my fiancé! (Interview 9 May 2005).

The couple has since made efforts to learn each other's language, with Faïza working particularly hard to learn French. She began to feel much more connected to her husband and to life in Petit Nanterre, she explained, following the birth of her first child a year and a half into their marriage.<sup>6</sup> Faïza, like Nora and Fatiha and most other women in the Association Nadha's French class, met her husband through an arrangement with his mother and her parents. Women also mention rejecting possible suitors, and while there is often some social stigma attached to this rejection, marriages are typically not forced for families recognize that such unions often end in divorce.

Nora explained how she had met her husband and chosen to immigrate to France. When she arrived at the French class that blustery cold day in February, she was 21 years old and had been living in France for one month, following a traditional arranged marriage in Algiers to her 27 year-old first-cousin, Abdel Karim, or "Krimu." The women use the term "traditional" to distinguish a marriage from Western or Christian-styled weddings, perhaps distinguishing more religious, open-invitation, and family affairs from what they perceive to be more Western Christian-based ceremonies. The term "traditional" may also have been highlighted when speaking to me, an outsider to the tradition. Typically, these nuptials in North Africa are large celebrations. The sequence of events may differ, but a religious ceremony is performed by an Imam, either in the bride's home or at a mosque, followed by a large celebration during which the couple are presented with lavish gifts as they sit in large separate chairs, and *couscous* is served.

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<sup>6</sup> Sadly, at the end of 2005, Faïza's husband passed away following a massive heart attack. Her first reaction was to return to Algeria with her children. Her parents-in-law have convinced her for the moment that staying in Petit Nanterre would be a far better option for her children.

Dancing follows. These parties may last several days and the bride will often make several dress changes, their frequency and the ornamentation of her clothes depending on the wealth of her family. In one of our meetings, Nora brought pictures of herself wearing three ornate gowns, as well as her white wedding gown.<sup>7</sup>

Nora's husband Krimu, like his two brothers and two sisters, was born in France. His father had emigrated from Algeria in the 1960s to find work and his mother followed after he had found a job and a small apartment. Following the birth of their five children, they moved to a large three bedroom subsidized apartment near La Défense and have lived there for more than 20 years. Krimu's mother (Nora's mother's sister) speaks very little French so the family generally speaks Arabic at home. Krimu is the only child to have completed his BAC (High School Baccalaureate) as well as a professional technical certificate. He works full-time near La Défense as a computer technician. Nora also recently completed her BAC in Algeria in Arabic, postponing their wedding date until she had received her diploma. Although there was French-language instruction in her high school, her French is rather limited. Over the course of the 16 months that I saw her regularly, her French improved tremendously. When they were first introduced in Algeria, she and Krimu spoke mostly Arabic. Now living in her parents-in-law's apartment with one remaining brother-in-law, they try to speak French so that Nora can practice. While many women in the neighbourhood admit to tensions with their mothers-

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<sup>7</sup> I was invited to the "traditional" Algerian wedding of my host-mother's cousin's daughter in a north-eastern *banlieue* of Paris in June 2006. When I wondered whether I should attend as I had never met the couple, Aïcha responded, "Don't worry! This isn't like one of those French weddings with special invitations and limited amounts of food! She [her cousin's daughter, the bride] will be honoured to have a Canadian guest. Everyone is invited and in my family we like to have as many guests as possible!" This wedding party lasted about 12 hours; the bride made two dress changes.

in-law, Nora claims that while she misses her own mother and sisters terribly, her adopted family has made tremendous efforts to welcome her to France and to their family, even taking her to Euro Disney. She feels fortunate that since her mother-in-law is also her aunt their relationship is especially close.<sup>8</sup>

Still, Nora later admits that, particularly in the first months, the transition to living in France with her parents-in-law and a husband whom she hardly knew was not easy. She felt far away from her family, particularly when her older sister had a baby, the first in their family. Although Nora is well-connected to Algeria with a mobile phone and internet-access at home, on days when she has extra time, she visits the same local “Taxiphone” as Naima uses to call her family more inexpensively and presumably, to have more privacy.<sup>9</sup> When Nora stepped out of the Orly airport in January 2005, it was also difficult to adapt to the cold and to living in a large housing project, with little natural light and greenery. The cold, small apartment lacking outside space initially felt confining, Nora explained, since she had grown up eating meals and spending much of her time with her family in their backyard in Algiers.

Nora explains how her relationship with Krimu progressed starting with their first meeting arranged by her mother-in-law when Krimu and his extended family had visited Algiers two summers previously:

We met through my aunt who told me that I had a cousin who wanted to get married in the Bled [Arabic for “country of origin”], like we say. Algeria is his country of origin. After [hearing this] I said, ‘Wait. I want to complete my studies.’ [When I had finished]

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<sup>8</sup> See more on the frequently difficult relationship with mothers-in-law in Chapter Five.

<sup>9</sup> Nora claims that she does not censor herself in phone calls. However, Nora’s relationship with her husband’s family is presumably both facilitated and challenged because they are close relatives. Her mother and mother-in-law are sisters, but they have a distant relationship and have not seen one another for many years.

and when he arrived, we simply got married and that was that, *alhamdulillah* [“Thanks be to God”]. It’s lasting. There wasn’t love before, it was . . . [she searches for a word. I ask, ‘Arranged?’] Yes, yes. And it’s been fine. Really, I tell you, it’s not so bad. It was far better that we met beforehand because it’s far less complicated. For me, I don’t know . . . But when we got married in this way, it was really really good, it’s a traditional marriage. Like in the *Bled*, traditional. And that’s it! He’s a good person (Interview 11 April 2005).

Nora and I also spoke about why she chose to marry this cousin whom she had never met beforehand and move to a country which she had visited only once (on a holiday in Lyon as a teenager with her parents). She explains:

It’s not that I said yes to France. Me, I really love Algeria. I love my family a lot. Why did I say yes? Because I wasn’t in a relationship. In Algeria there aren’t any relationships without marriage. It’s not like here. Not for just one or two hours. For us it’s complicated because you don’t see young people [in those situations], because where I’m from, we don’t sleep together before marriage. There has to be either a civil marriage or a religious marriage before. You know? For me, it had been two months since he had proposed. After I said, ‘Yes, alright’ but first I wanted to talk with him. When I spoke with him I felt more sure of my decision. I saw him, I talked to him, and we spoke . . . we had a good discussion and I realized that I had found the person of my dreams, you know? I found, how should I say, without even looking, I found what I was looking for. Someone with a good job, someone who respects women, who doesn’t do things like that [gestures, as though referring to physical abuse]. We have parents who tell us, ‘You must get married!’ But it’s not forced, it’s a freedom. If a girl doesn’t want to get married or if she gets divorced, it’s her parents’ problem. Because for us we can’t have, for example, a divorced woman living alone. It’s not possible. Our traditions don’t allow for this. Religion where I’m from, it’s not like that. Still, it’s not good to be in a forced marriage either because it will likely lead to divorce (Interview 11 April 2005).

After their first meeting at her parents’ home in Algiers, which had been set up for the sole purpose of gauging the possible interest of both parties for marriage, Nora began a brief phone and email correspondence with her future husband. Sensing that he was a good person, that he would provide for her, and that to marry him was her *mektoub* (or God-ordained destiny), Nora agreed to the match. In particular she appreciated his willingness to postpone the wedding to allow her to complete her high school baccalaureate.

As I mentioned, arranged marriages or meetings set up between Algerian-born women and French-born men by their extended families or acquaintances are quite common among couples in Petit Nanterre. The same phenomena occur among immigrants from sub-Saharan Africa or India.<sup>10</sup> Arranged meetings often lead to marriages between French-born men and North African women when the former are on holiday in North Africa over the summer.<sup>11</sup> These trans-Mediterranean unions characterized the marital

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<sup>10</sup> Although women in the neighbourhood knew that I was in a serious relationship and were very respectful of my unmarried yet attached status, on one occasion I was formally approached by a woman, Houria, who lived in the apartment complex near to mine one warm afternoon in the summer. I did not know Houria very well as she was a French-born woman who rarely left her apartment. However, I had met her through another woman and had recently interviewed her in her home. She was in a very difficult financial situation because her husband had recently left her with her five children, and so had been grateful for the companionship and for the food I had brought to the interview. I had also helped her draft a letter to a social worker explaining her precarious financial situation and requesting emergency funds.

That particular afternoon, Houria sat with another older woman on a bench outside her building. After exchanging greetings, I asked her whether she was still thinking of going back to Algeria to visit her family over the summer. She replied that she was unsure, and that if she did, owing to the high cost of plane tickets in the summer period, she would likely travel alone. She added that her travel plans depended on whether she could find someone to look after her children or whether they would go away to summer camp, as her youngest daughter was 11 years-old. This discussion of Algeria allowed Houria to mention an acquaintance of hers who lived in Algeria who was “on the market” for a wife. She produced a 4”x6” full-length photo of him from her purse. “He’s a friend of a friend,” she told me, “and I thought of you when I saw him.” She told me that he was a biologist, came from a good family and was fairly tall. “And look how handsome he is!” she added, offering me the picture; he was posing with a smile, leaning confidently against a lamp-post. I thanked her and reminded her about my personal situation. The picture was blurry but the young man did appear to be quite amiable. His name and address were printed on the back of the picture. Later that evening I asked Aïcha, my host mother, whether these introductions were common practice in Petit Nanterre. Although some women had spoken to me on occasion about single male relatives to gauge my interest, Houria’s introduction, complete with the photograph and detailed information about the young man had been the most formal. Aïcha said that, particularly for French-born children, arranged marriages were not common. She did not think that her own daughters would marry in this fashion. Aïcha added that should Houria succeed in securing a favourable match, she would likely receive some money in thanks from the young man’s family. She had heard of a similar situation in which the matchmaker had received about 200 Euros for her trouble.

<sup>11</sup> I was once warned by a Caucasian French woman on the 304 bus I took to Petit Nanterre from Nanterre University about the possibility of this occurring in France, as well. She approached me, sitting in the seat next to me after seeing a young man flirt briefly with me before exiting the bus. Without introducing herself, within a few minutes she told me that, now that it was the summertime, it was a “dangerous” period as young Algerian men who were visiting France on visitor visas were actively looking for women they could marry in order to acquire residency status in France. There was no indication, however, that the young man who had smiled and waved to me had a visitor’s visa from North Africa. This woman told me she had met her soon-to-be ex-husband in a similar scenario and said that she wished

situations of almost all the regular attendees of the French-language classes in Petit Nanterre (at both Association Nadha and the Centre Sociale des Canibouts). Significantly, these classes appeal in particular to women under 65 who benefit from French language and cultural skills as new migrants. The reverse phenomenon, that is French-born women marrying Algerian men, is less common but does occur. I personally knew of four French-born women in Petit Nanterre, including Houria, who had entered arranged marriages with Algerian men.

For most couples the primary motivation for these marriage arrangements is to have a “traditional” marriage and, for men, to find a “traditional” wife. Women conversely claim to have been interested in immigrating to France or that marrying these French-born men was their *mektoub*. Women explain that their husbands were not interested in marrying French-born women, even if they had North-African origins. It is believed that such women are too opinionated and that they do not respect family as much, and that they do not know how to cook traditional foods as well as North African born women. This phenomenon is known in social scientific literature as “cousin marriage,” “parallel cousin marriage,” or “Father’s Brother’s Daughter’s” (FBD) alliances. This marriage preference for endogamous patrilineal parallel cousin marriage partners has been charted in several Middle Eastern and North African Societies, and is often associated with Islamic practices (see Barth 1954; Murphy and Kasdan 1959; Ottenheimer 1986; Boddy 1989: 79-81; Kraus 2003; Altunek 2006). American anthropologist Burton Pasternak claims it is practiced in almost half of the world’s

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someone had warned her that his intentions might not have been genuine. Her brief marriage had been an unhappy one.

societies (Pasternak 1976: 68 in Ottenheimer 1986: 934). Beyond the facility of such engagements, there are several social advantages to these alliances. Turkish anthropologist N. Serpil Altuntek notes that from a structuralist-functionalist perspective, FBD marriages provide stability in family and kinship relations as well as maintaining property within a family (2006: 59). More specifically, within the Kurdish case, Fredrik Barth suggests that there are residual political gains as well; a father will receive political allegiance from his brother's son, for instance, in exchange for his daughter (1954: 168).

Historian Benjamin Stora briefly mentions this phenomenon in his historical analysis of Algerian migration to France. While problematic because of his lack of evidence, Stora claims that mothers in particular consider their sons as “lost” to both the family and the community if they marry French women (1992: 351). Aïcha explained to me that her husband Mounir had had a relationship before he met her with a French woman, and while they had not been married officially, they had a child together and lived with his parents in their two-bedroom apartment, where Aïcha still lives. She noted that her husband had hoped to find a “traditional” wife because his French girlfriend was lazy, did not know how to cook and drank alcohol frequently.<sup>12</sup> He arrived in Petit

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<sup>12</sup> Another 32 year-old woman, Farida, a French-born Maghrebian who had recently married an Algerian-born man she met while he was on vacation in Paris, told me on several occasions how much she enjoyed having lunch at Aïcha's apartment (even if she brought her own lunch) because Aïcha maintains Algerian and especially Kabylia traditions in her home. For Farida, these traditional foods, dances, smells and ideas made her nostalgic for her mother who was from the same region and had passed away. Sometimes Farida arrived with a couscous or other foods pre-prepared, anxious to have Aïcha comment on them for their authenticity before she prepared them for her husband.

Farida especially enjoys dancing and in her teenage years became involved with a hip-hop dance troupe. She insisted on several occasions that Aïcha, her daughters, and I should organize a special evening with her, and that the six of us could move the furniture in the living-room to create a large dance-space. Aïcha would smile obligingly, but this evening never took place. Aïcha later explained to me privately that as a widow in Petit Nanterre she could not hold loud parties in her apartment, even if it were women-only because it would give her neighbours the impression that she was not “traditional” or “respectful”.



Nanterre's *bidonville* (shantytown) with his parents and two siblings when he was 8 years old.

Aïcha and Mounir met when she was 30 and working as a primary school teacher in Tizi Ouzou, Kabylia. He was 12 years older. They met at a common cousin's wedding in northern Algeria and they got along well immediately. Aïcha believes that Mounir was attracted to her rather than to her younger sisters or cousins because she was more "natural," since she wore little make-up, had long hair to her waist and did not put on airs.<sup>13</sup> He immediately expressed serious interest in marrying her, but after his return to Petit Nanterre, their engagement seemed to stall. The couple would arrange times to speak to one another by phone at Aïcha's older sister's house, as her mother (widowed during the Algerian War of Independence) did not yet have a telephone line at home. Aïcha admits to "motivating" Mounir into commitment by fabricating a story about another suitor who hoped to marry her, so that Mounir would have to make an offer "maintenant ou jamais" (now or never). Her strategy worked. Four months later he returned and they were married in a traditional ceremony in Kabylia. With their marriage certificate, she then applied for a short-term visa to visit her husband two months after their wedding. She went to her in-law's apartment in the Cité des Canibouts for a three-month period. Mounir's previous French girlfriend and their daughter had moved out.

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<sup>13</sup> One cold day in February 2006 when Aïcha's two children were on school break we decided to get out of the apartment to go to McDonald's for lunch in nearby Colombes. Since it was about a 25 minute walk and it was snowing, I followed Aïcha's suggestion that I take my long scarf and wrap it around my head and ears, turban-style. With my long loose dark skirt and blouse, I had cultivated a style quite similar to her own. Soumaya, her then 12-year old daughter, was scandalized, telling me how "uncool" I looked and that I should watch out because I might not be served at the restaurant. She appeared to feel uncomfortable that I, as a non North African, had unconsciously trespassed onto "traditional" ways of dress and conduct.

Although she is careful not to complain when talking about it, this early period of their marriage was clearly difficult for Aïcha. She was happy with the match, but had left a job and relative independence in Algeria. Her new mother-in-law often pitted herself against Aïcha, forcing Mounir to choose whose cooking he preferred, and dictating to Aïcha how she should undertake domestic chores. Moreover, her initially close relationship with her step-daughter positioned Mounir's former French girlfriend against her.

Like that of many female immigrants of her generation who came to France through family reunification, Aïcha's integration was facilitated by her fluency in spoken and written French. Educated in a public boarding school in northern Algeria because there were no public schools in the neighbouring mountain villages and because her mother, a widow from the Algerian War had few resources, Aïcha has near-native French language skills. Her Algerian education high school diploma and working experience were not recognized when she looked for work in and around Petit Nanterre, however, and so following the births of her two daughters. Aïcha worked as a receptionist in an Algerian-based travel agency in Paris. Mounir worked evenings as a body guard for French musicians in Paris. When she was pregnant with her second child and the commute became too difficult, Aïcha began working as a volunteer in a local community association to gain work experience in a field in which she was interested. This volunteer experience eventually led to a full-time contractually-limited position as a social assistant with Association Nadha.

Like Nora, Aïcha considers herself fortunate in her match.<sup>14</sup> While her mother-in-law rarely left the apartment owing to a physical disability and her husband's desire to keep her at home, Aïcha's confidence and fluency in French allowed her to leave the apartment to take the bus or walk to the local market by herself. She also developed a good relationship with her late husband, which improved tremendously when her in-laws returned to Algeria following her father-in-law's retirement. Although recently she has been socially isolated since the premature death of her husband five years ago, Aïcha is not interested in returning to Kabylia. She appreciates the independence that she has as a widow in Petit Nanterre. She claims that had she been widowed in Algeria (he was buried there in 2000 in the height of terrorism) she would have been forced to move into her mother's house or with a sister and her family, as living as a single mother would not be an option either socially or financially.<sup>15</sup> Furthermore, Aïcha feels her French-born

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<sup>14</sup> Aïcha claims she had to prove her strength of character to Mounir so that he would respect her. When she first arrived in Petit Nanterre, she found it difficult that her husband would give *la bise* (a French greeting, typically to women, characterized by kissing each cheek) to all of his women friends. This sort of social salutation did not exist in Kabylia, and she found it initially both distasteful and disrespectful. Aïcha "got her revenge" by inviting a single Senegalese co-worker from the travel agency where she worked for dinner. Mounir became jealous of their friendship and Aïcha was able to show him how she had felt with his female friends. The two initially argued about his behaviour one afternoon when they had taken their daughters for a walk in the Buttes de Chaumont park in Paris. At one point Mounir left her behind in anger, driving his car back to Petit Nanterre. Aïcha admits that she was frightened as she had not brought her purse with her and had never taken public transportation in France before. She did not know the phone numbers of any acquaintances in Petit Nanterre either. Fortunately, she had noticed a local police office nearby and decided to enter, telling the officer that her purse had been stolen from her in the park. She filled in the appropriate forms and was given a stamped letter to present at the Metro station which would allow her to board for one trip to return home. Calmly, she mapped the journey and returned with her young daughters to their apartment. Mounir was not home at the time; he had returned to Paris to look for her. Aïcha claims that this incident demonstrated to Mounir that although she came from the *Bled*, he could not take advantage of her. She says that from that moment on, it was clear that she could take care of herself and her children and did not need him to get by.

<sup>15</sup> Mounir was buried in Algeria in 2000 at the height of Islamic terrorism and to Aïcha's great fear. Returning to North Africa for burial is extremely common, even for second-generation migrants. Yassine Chaïb describes how migrants are typically buried in their country of origin, largely owing to social pressure and tradition (2000: 14).

daughters will have more opportunities in Petit Nanterre than their female cousins in Kabylia.

### **More Difficult Circumstances**

Other women I interviewed described their forced marriages. Despite the attention that French media and French feminist groups like *Femmes Solidaires*'s focus on this phenomenon, it seems to be an increasingly rare occurrence.<sup>16</sup> Still, like women in most socio-cultural milieus, not all married women in Petit Nanterre describe their marital unions favourably.<sup>17</sup> In this section, I briefly sketch some of the experiences of women who told of feeling trapped in foreign countries with men they abhorred, claiming their marriages, even sometimes with their cousins, were more forced than arranged. I do so with trepidation, however, as these stories are those often repeated by French Feminist organizations like *SOS Femmes* and *Femmes Solidaires* to affirm the existence of an inherent patriarchy or misogyny within Muslim families in France. North African first-generation female immigrants do occasionally find themselves in such difficult situations. Characteristically, those women who are most outspoken about the imposition of marriage to a man they did not want to marry are those who have returned to France after marriages in the Maghreb or other parts of Africa, and are divorced with adult children. Here I describe four cases. The first involves the first marriage of Kadima, a French-born

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<sup>16</sup> Of course, determining what is "forced", like determining agency, is not straightforward. In attempting to be respectful to my interview subjects, I tried to broach the subject by asking, "How did you meet your husband?" The context of their meeting revealed a great deal about how active the woman had been in the selection of a partner and how well she might have known him before the marriage.

<sup>17</sup> Not all women are pleased to live in France, either, even if they describe their stay as *mektoub* or destined. For more on this sense of dislocation or what Abdel Sayed (1999) calls the "double absence" see Chapter One.

woman of Algerian origins who was forced to marry a friend of her family's while on summer vacation on the Algerian coast. The second case is that of Fatima who was forced to marry her husband, a cousin, in Algeria and then, because they had children, to move to France against her will. The third case involves Myrium, a woman in her late thirties who married a man almost 50 years her senior following a divorce from her first husband, whom she had married quite young and against her will. The last case is that of Maimouna, a 42-year-old Senegalese woman who fled a forced marriage in her early 20's and has since had an arranged marriage with a cousin which, she adds happily, allowed her to move to France.

Kadima is 39 years old and was born in Petit Nanterre to parents who had migrated from Algeria; her father had originally moved to France to find work in the 1950s. We had arranged an interview in her two-bedroom apartment on the opposite side of the Rue de la République in Petit Nanterre, in the Cité des Potagers one cool April morning in 2005. When she did not answer her door, I waited and then decided to phone her, worried that she might not be well. She answered her telephone sleepily, telling me to wait outside in the hallway. Kadima is known in the neighbourhood for being a *caractère* (having a strong personality). She is not described as promiscuous but as carefree and is said to enjoy going to *boite-de-nuits* (night clubs) in Paris. She finally opened the door, still in *djellaba*-style pyjamas, but wearing a great deal of gold jewellery and heavy make-up. She explained that an Algerian woman always feels good about herself when she wears her jewels. Presumably, these jewels are also markers of social class and status. Many

women in Petit Nanterre received most of their gold jewellery from their husbands when they are first married.

Kadima describes her parents as extremely traditional practicing Muslims. As a child, she spoke Arabic fluently and she and her parents and five siblings would return to Algeria from Petit Nanterre every summer. The summer she was sixteen, unbeknownst to her, her parents had arranged a wedding with an Algerian friend of the family, twenty years her senior. She explains that one morning her father woke her up to tell her she would be married that afternoon. Kadima adds that she cried and screamed in protest, but that her mother assured her that her husband was a good man who would treat her well, and that to protest publicly would bring shame on the family. Following the wedding, although Kadima had citizenship in France and had been attending high school in Nanterre, she stayed in Algeria with her husband, since he was not interested in migrating to France. Kadima became pregnant immediately after their marriage, eventually having six children. When describing this period of her life, her voice grows angry. She describes her marriage as “horrible.” Her relationship with her husband never developed and they remained indifferent to one another. She felt quite alone when they were married because her friends and family all lived in France and she no longer had contact with them. Although she had spent quite a bit of time in Algeria previously, she had to adapt to her then-husband and his family. Despondent, she began to plan her return to France. Although her family was initially unsupportive of her desire to separate from her husband, as they learned of her unhappiness and of her husband’s abuse, they agreed to pay for her plane ticket to return to Paris. Kadima’s departure was complicated as the city

where they lived did not have an airport, so she was forced to organize an elaborate trip including a taxi, a long bus ride, and then a plane journey from Algiers to Paris. She took her two youngest children with her, one in each arm, and was four months pregnant with her sixth child. She adds, apologetically, that if she had had the opportunity, she would have had an abortion prior to leaving. Kadima claims that sitting on the plane she vowed to do as much as possible to bring her other children to France.

Kadima's divorce proceedings took some time to organize from France, first because she felt traumatized by the years in Algeria and needed to become accustomed again to living with her parents in Petit Nanterre; then because she needed to renew her French passport; and finally because her then husband was contesting their separation, stalling the necessary paperwork for divorce. She also had three children, one an infant, to look after. Finally, in 2001, seven years after leaving Algeria, she was granted an official divorce. Kadima describes receiving this news as a gift from Allah. For the first time she felt free and extremely pleased to be living in France. Her divorce also meant she was able to move out of her parents' apartment. While she had relied on them tremendously when she returned to France, she also felt some hostility toward them because of the forced marriage tore her away from her life so radically and their initial reluctance to give her assistance. Kadima applied for public housing as a single parent and moved into the apartment where she lives now.

Kadima speaks frankly about the psychological and physical abuse she suffered in Algeria, but is still interested in pursuing a relationship with a man. In 2001 she began dating an Algerian she met on holiday. Kadima describes this relationship glowingly,

adding that as a young woman, after her forced marriage, she had believed she would never have a happy relationship. She adds that it is better to find a man from the *Bled* because they are much more faithful and trustworthy than French-born men, as well as being practicing Muslims. This boyfriend is younger than Kadima and she hopes they will soon marry so that he can receive his papers and find work in France.<sup>18</sup>

Kadima's greatest regret is that she has almost completely lost contact with her three oldest children whom she left behind in Algeria. She believes that they have been influenced by their father's perspective, and that her older children hold a "traditional Muslim" view of her as a sinful woman who deserted her family. Her 17 year-old daughter completely refuses to speak to her. Kadima's children in Petit Nanterre have experienced some difficulties, as well, particularly in school. Her oldest son was expelled from École la Fontaine. Since the beginning of the 2005 school year, all three have been attending an *internat* (an overnight boarding school); they leave for school Monday morning and return Friday evening. Kadima explains that it has created a much better atmosphere in their home. As a single mother, she has found it particularly difficult to discipline her two sons.

Kadima claims that the failure of her first marriage has made her stronger and more outspoken. Still, living in a small community like Petit Nanterre so geographically close to her siblings, parents and others who know her story, Kadima feels she is being continually judged. Perhaps this sense of being under constant scrutiny explains why she

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<sup>18</sup> I later learned through gossip in the neighbourhood that this new boyfriend is married and has four children of his own. I also heard a rumour that her first husband was a homosexual who had a live-in lover. Kadima gave no indication to me that she was aware of either of these rumours.



exaggerates her physical appearance with outlandish clothing and make-up and seems to embellish stories of her evenings out with friends in Paris. This theatricality, in some ways, offers Kadima some sense of control over her public identity. As a Muslim woman, she adds that her choices and moral status are a personal matter between herself and God and that it is not for others to critique her. She admits that if she had the means she would prefer to leave Petit Nanterre, but for the moment, at least until her boyfriend is able to join her in France, she will remain. She has had difficulty in finding full-time work.

Other women, like Fatima, 56, have been forced to marry in North Africa and then required to move to France. Fatima is a gregarious and fit woman who has had five children; one of her sons committed suicide following a drug problem five years ago, but her other children are faring well. Fatima keeps a tidy two-bedroom subsidized apartment. Her daughter has married and moved out of the apartment, as has another son, while Fatima's remaining two younger sons continue to live with her. They each have a bedroom and she sleeps in the living room. She has many plants on her balcony, and grows her own herbs and vegetables. Fatima was married at 17 to a cousin 11 years her senior who lived in a nearby village in Kabylia. She claims that she knew right away that he was not a good person, but had no other options. In many ways, she felt fortunate that she was able to wait to be married, since her older sister was married to another cousin (the son of her mother's sister) when she was 11 years old. Fatima has very good memories of her childhood in the mountains; she recalls that although her family was poor, there were many things to do and the air was fresh. She remembers, for instance, washing clothes in a mountain river near their house and going swimming afterwards.

Fatima did not attend school, and stayed at home to help her mother with household tasks. Moving ahead in time thirty years, after her husband left to return to Algeria, Fatima began taking French language courses in Nanterre Préfecture in 2004. Two years later, she continued to struggle to read, but can now write her first name and recognize some letters in French.

These newly acquired abilities make Fatima quite proud. She recalls that when she first came to France with her husband at 22, she felt a great deal of frustration because while they lived across the street from a community centre which offered nightly literacy classes, her husband would not allow her to attend. Fatima claims he isolated her in their apartment, so much so that even if she overheard a woman in the street who could speak Kabyle, he would not allow Fatima to approach her. Fatima believes he controlled her because he was afraid she would talk about him and what he did to French authorities, and that there would be problems for him in his job. Her lack of French language skills gave her great anxiety. Once, when she was pregnant with her third child and had two young sons, one 4 years old and the second an infant, the four year-old became extremely sick with a high fever and stomach problems. Fatima said that his symptoms persisted for several days but her husband refused to take her in his car to the hospital, leaving the three of them at home. Fatima became desperate with worry and, although there was a snowstorm, took her 4 year-old to the emergency room, running with a stroller, deciding to leave the baby at home because it was so cold outside. Once in the emergency room, using her extremely limited French she tried to explain to the nurse that she had to return home to get her infant, who was at home alone. The nurse apparently did not understand

where she had gone and thought Fatima had abandoned her screaming son in the waiting area. When she returned with her other child, Fatima explains how embarrassed she felt when the nurse condescendingly told her that in France, one could not abandon a child and threatened to call the police. “Police” says Fatima, was one word she definitely understood. She had legal papers but did not want any trouble, especially with her husband.

Fatima says that to his credit her husband was a good worker, working for his entire career at TOTAL, a French gas company. He had attended school in Algeria during the French occupation and so his French was quite good. With frustration, Fatima adds that her husband had a car and would buy himself things, but would never want to spend any money on the children or herself. Fortunately, her mother taught her to sew as a girl and so she was able to sew most of their clothes and anything else that was necessary. Following the suicide of their eldest son and her husband’s early retirement, he began going by himself to Algeria and, without Fatima’s knowledge, married a young Algerian girl in a religious ceremony who then became pregnant with his child.<sup>19</sup> Shortly thereafter he stopped all contact with her, staying in Algeria permanently and expanding his second family. As Fatima explains, “He left me for his new family in Algeria with all the kids and without any money.” Thus rupture occurred in 2001; since that time, none of their children have had any contact with their father either. He has not sent any financial support. With the help of one of her nieces, her brother lives in the south of Paris and

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<sup>19</sup> This course of action is not uncommon. Three other women I interviewed saw their husbands religiously marry young Algerian women when they visited. In two cases the women divorced; in a third case, the woman believed she was better off allowing her husband to have a second wife as he would at least continue to pay for the upkeep of their home in Petit Nanterre.

works at a grocery store, Fatima filed for divorce in 2001. Her lawyer, provided through Legal Aid, is working to ensure financial support for her youngest children. Fatima is pleased, as her lawyer feels this should not be a problem, given that her ex-husband's retirement pension, which is quite good, is from a French company.

Fatima received her French citizenship papers in November 2005 and now has her French *livret de famille* (a family record book similar to a passport with marriage and birth dates). Prior to this she held a legal residency card, but she feels much more secure having citizenship. Fatima has no interest in returning to live in Algeria and feels quite at home in France, even if she has not had much opportunity to make progress in French. I met Fatima in 2006 through her involvement with the French feminist organization *Femmes Solidaires*, and in 2004, I was a volunteer in the classes where she studied French in Nanterre Préfecture. Fatima began attending *Femmes Solidaires'* *cause cafés* (coffee break meetings) with the encouragement of her upstairs neighbour, Maria, who is also Algerian and divorced with four children. While Fatima is not interested in the social activism undertaken by the group, she became involved in a theatre project they later presented at the Theatre des Amandiers in Nanterre Ville in June 2006. The play involved a series of monologues narrating women's experiences. Fatima stole the show with her humorous rendition of her mother-in-law's cruelty to her when she first lived with her husband and parents-in-law following her marriage, before immigrating to France. This artistic involvement and experience gave Fatima tremendous confidence. Initially she did not want to become involved because she could not read the script the director had written based on her own stories, but with the help of Maria, she memorized her lines.

Her two youngest sons and I attended the performance, which took place in this professional theatre. Fatima was overcome with tears of joy at the end of the show and has since become extremely interested in all aspects of theatre. At one of our meetings in her apartment, she described how Maria had invited her to go to a theatre production in Paris at the Porte Maillot, having received some free tickets from a colleague. Fatima added that the tickets were worth 125 Euros each and that “on était entouré par que des Français” (We were surrounded only by French people), underlining how expensive and exclusive the tickets had been. Activities like this also signal her emancipation from her physically and emotionally abusive former husband which enables her to follow her own interests. Fatima is indifferent to embarking on any other relationships and is quite content to stay at home with her children, *tranquille* (at peace).

The next two marriage stories highlight how moving to Nanterre to marry men living in France can allow women a partial escape from the social stigma resulting from divorce in their countries of origin. To marry a man in France can act as a conduit to begin a “new” life. Myrium, for instance, is 38 years old and married a second time to an Algerian man living in France when she was 31. He was 72. She does not go into detail, but concedes in our interview that her first marriage occurred against her will when she was a teenager, around 16 years old. She was married for four years but had no children. Myrium remarks, “I had to get married, so I did”. She fled this marriage to return to her parents’ house. Ten years later she agreed to marry her now 79 year-old husband, a widow living in Petit Nanterre. While she was happy to live in France and to move out of her parents’ home, Myrium has encountered unexpected difficulties since arriving in

France. I met with her and two of her close friends outside on a park bench one afternoon as we shared some croissants and chatted. Myrium allowed me to record our conversation, but wanted the other women to help her with her French, even if her French is quite good. She claims that she gets along well with her husband, but has a lot of problems with his nine children. Three of them live at home, so she feels obliged to cook and clean up after them. His oldest children are older than her. Moreover, her husband has a house in Algeria but his kids have told her directly that they prefer her not to stay there because it was their mother's house. Myrium feels her lot would improve if she had her own child, but given her age and that of her husband, pregnancy seems unlikely and she has never been pregnant before.

Myrium has focused her energy on a renewed spiritual commitment to Islam since this second marriage which gives her a great sense of fulfilment. For the last three years she has gone on *hajj* (pilgrimage) with her husband to Mecca. Although she has worn a headscarf since she was a teenager in Algeria, Myrium has become more pious and offers tips to her female friends in Petit Nanterre about how to cultivate their religious development. Myrium claims that "The woman is better when she wears the headscarf" ("La femme, elle est mieux quand elle porte le foulard") (Interview 9 May 2005). She also encourages her neighbours in the Pâquerettes to accompany her when she attends the local mosque on Rue de la République. Following her most recent trip to Mecca, she brought two plastic 2L soda bottles full of water from Saudi Arabia to Association Nadha's French classes to share the water with the other women, who felt honoured that she had remembered them during her pilgrimage.

Another woman of Senegalese origin, Maimouna, 44, also married a widow ten years ago. She moved to France following her first unhappy marriage, but in many ways has fared better than Myrium in that she has little obligation to the children of his first marriage and her relationship with them is positive. Maimouna was first married when she was a teenager as the fourth wife to a man who was a friend of her grandfather. Maimouna is not certain how old her first husband was at the time, but says that he was definitely older than her father and was quite wealthy. He paid her family a great deal of money, and so, Maimouna claims, they were unwilling to listen to how unhappy she was living with him, his other wives and their children. According to Maimouna his third wife was especially jealous of her, making her miserable and performing *marabout* (witchcraft) on her so she would not have children and gain esteem and rank.

I couldn't stay with him to do terrible things. There wasn't any love. He told me, 'Stay. I will give you things.' And me, I said 'No.' Because I didn't love him, didn't love him. I wanted to go back home. But my mother, she didn't want to see me when I came back home. But I said, 'I'm not going back there. I'm not staying for the money,' If I would have loved him, I would have stayed, but I didn't love him at all (Interview 1 June 2005).

After a year and a half of marriage, Maimouna returned to her parents' home for 10 years. Then through word-of-mouth, the family learned of a cousin living in France who was looking for a Senegalese wife following his divorce to another cousin. Maimouna had never been to France, but had heard about it from her father, who came to Paris every summer to sell antiques in outdoor markets. Her prospective husband had four children from his first marriage and was 50 years old. Maimouna laughs and says that it was not at all love at first sight, but that they have great respect for one another. She complains on occasion in the French literacy classes at the Centre des Canibouts that her husband is too

lazy at home and that she had to really push him to buy a small washing machine. He was of the opinion that if they did not need one in Senegal, to own one in France would be superfluous. They have a five year old son who attends the École La Fontaine in the Canibouts. Maimouna would like to have more children, but worries it might be too late, now that she is in her mid-forties.

Perhaps most of all, Maimouna is pleased to live in Petit Nanterre, in the Canibouts with her husband and son, explaining that “Le Bon Dieu m’a apporté ici” (“The good Lord brought me here”). She feels this destiny was confirmed when she learned that her first husband passed away in Senegal the same day she married her second husband in Dakar. A practicing Muslim, she credits her faith in God for her opportunity to leave Senegal and her isolating situation there:

I didn’t have the right to leave the house [of my parents] before I married. Even if I had been 50 years old, I would have to stay. I had to stay at home. There you go. And then my husband arrived and I agreed to marry him (Interview 1 June 2005).

Maimouna hopes to return to Senegal every summer with her husband when he retires, but to continue to live in France for the sake of her son.

### **Theories About Marriage-Partner Selection**

Returning to one’s country of origin to marry, typically within one’s extended family to a spouse with whom one shares the same socio-economic, ethnic, religious and cultural background, characterizes the unions of many couples living in this Parisian *banlieue*, particularly for first-generation guest workers who arrived in France to work between the post-war period in the late 1940s through to Algeria’s independence in 1962.



Because of their short-term guest worker status in France, many male North African workers assumed when they arrived to work in various industrial jobs that, upon retirement, they would return to North Africa. This return has occurred in some cases, but many of their wives who later joined them concede that after 40 years, it becomes difficult to leave children and grandchildren behind in France. It is striking is that the sons of these first generation immigrants, born and educated in France, would also choose to marry North African women, even though they may not share a common language and their childhood experiences were extremely different.<sup>20</sup> Most of these second-generation sons also spend the first years of marriage, often before children are born, living with his parents. I suggest that this continuing transnational marriage strategy raises two interesting questions. First, what might the re-introduction of North African women into second-generation families mean for the children they bear? Are these children to be considered, on a pragmatic level, second or third generation immigrants? Second, what might this practice mean for the production of “traditional” North African women in this Parisian suburb? Does this practice contribute to the perpetuation of stereotypes about Muslim women as submissive, “traditional” and lacking fluency in the French language and culture? On this point I examine how the social comportment and status of these women have come to exemplify Muslim identity in the suburbs. Of course, gender is not

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<sup>20</sup> On rare occasions, positive “traditional” characteristics are attributed to French-born women. Describing a cousin’s wedding ceremony the family was to attend the following weekend in the south of Paris, Nora told me how much her family liked his French bride-to-be who is “French French”, but, “she knows how to speak Arabic and cooks Algerian food better than I do!” This couple had met following Nora’s cousin’s arrival in France; his fiancé had converted to Islam and had learned Arabic by spending summers in Algeria with his parents.

the only factor to affect people's sense of self and citizenship in France. Other factors like ethnicity, social class, sexuality, ability and cultural capital also affect these conceptions.

### **Transnational Cultural Collectivities**

The preference for marriage to “traditional” women reflects an effort by North African migrants to control the transmission of culture and mores within the nuclear family. Despite its transnational features, I argue that this strategy is part of a nation-building exercise, following Benedict Anderson's notion of “imagined communities” (1991). Ethnic identities are generally tied to notions of nationhood. That is, between two countries, an imagined space, sometimes bridging, sometimes breaking the two spaces, is produced. Marriage preference for North African brides, I suggest, works to solidify gender traits, again focused on religious affiliation and ethnic belonging, within the imagined community. Benedict suggests that while members of national communities will likely never know one another, they share an imagined notion of a deep, horizontal comradeship which offers profound emotional legitimacy (1991: 7). The desire to maintain “traditional” mores, which in this case generally means a cultivated North African “Muslimness” in the face of secular “French” culture, may motivate these marriage choices. Anderson's presentation of national identity and nationalism emphasizes their construction as cultural artefacts (1991: 4). Anthropologist Ernest Gellner similarly stresses that nations are ideological constructions which seek to link cultural groups with states. Because they represent broad social movements, these groups are far more abstract than the kinship-based communities which pre-dated them (1983).

For Gellner, nationalism is aligned with ethnicity: “In brief nationalism is a theory of political legitimacy, which requires that ethnic boundaries should not cut across political ones (1983:1), itself a contested category (see Brubaker and Cooper 2000).

Moving away from these “classical” anthropological notions of nationalism, Homi K. Bhabha’s work extends Anderson’s “constructivist” perspective, critiquing his essentialist reading of nationalism (see also Hobsbawn 1994). In *Nation and Narration* (1990a), Bhabha proposes the nation in the West as a “symbolic force” (1990a:1), following Hannah Arendt’s view that the modern nation is ‘that curiously hybrid realm where private interests assume public significance’ whereby the realms flow ‘like waves in the never-ending stream of the life-process itself’ (1990a). Bhabha’s nation is therefore a hybrid story continuously woven by people with varying amounts of power. Bhabha presents nationalism as “narration,” arguing that nations contain thresholds of meaning that must be crossed, erased, and translated in cultural practice (1990a: 4). That is, those who are marginalized with little power do participate in some capacity within the national narrative. Bhabha seeks to find an “inter”national dimension *within* the margins of nation-space and *in between* “nations” and “peoples.” In this way, the “other,” often excluded in the formation of the nation, is never outside or beyond the normative; it emerges forcefully, within cultural discourse, when nation is allowed to think *between* (1990a: 4). That is, rather than highlighting binaries like First and Third World nations, colonizer and colonized, men and women, black and white, straight and gay, or tradition and modernity, Bhabha suggests a more advantageous focus on the fault-lines themselves, on border situations and thresholds as the sites where identities are performed and contested. This

kind of thinking allows Bhabha to move into what he calls “hybridity,” referring to values that have been constituted by the dominant epistemology, but have over-run them. He elaborates this notion in *The Location of Culture*:

It is in the emergence of the interstices-the overlap and displacement of domains of difference-that the intersubjective and collective experiences of nationness, community interest, or cultural value are negotiated (1994: 2).

Although Bhabha’s highly theoretical space is with its deconstructive possibilities is useful in its implications for the study of transnational migrants, Bhabha’s work is largely apolitical insofar as he examines literature, itself, I would suggest a construction of a representation of events in the world. He contends that examining the narrative in literature and its “Janus-faced” ambivalent features draws particular attention to language and rhetoric and is thus a useful avenue. Yet, Bhabha’s unwillingness to utilize actual socio-historical examples to illustrate his ideas necessarily makes his post-structuralist analysis abstract and situated outside contemporary politics. In *The House of Difference*, alongside her own theorizations of nationalism in Canada, anthropologist Eva Mackey offers another critique (2002), claiming that Bhabha’s notion of hybridity should be used with caution because of its romanticized heterogeneity. The multicultural hybrid, Mackey asserts, can become essentialized, just like the homogenous nation (2002).

Most useful, which I will return to in the conclusion of this dissertation is Bhabha’s proposal of the nation-space as a process, where meanings are partial and history a work in progress (1990a). This notion that cultural authority may be ambivalent, in constant flux and in no way ‘natural’ points, albeit indirectly, to the way in which first-generation Maghrebian Muslim women in the *banlieue*, a major foci of political discourse

in France, are an essential and a performative part of the maintenance of the French nation-state, even should they characterize “un-Republican” or “un-secular” values. Indeed Bhabha points that the space of the people is often one of tension between the pedagogical and the performative (1994: 253), particularly as the postcolonial migrant who alienates the “holism of history”. As I will elaborate in my concluding comments, these women in my study sit in the “interrogatory, interstitial space” (Bhabha 1994: 3), the arena of contestation and rival performativities. Their particular cultural contestation therefore works to shift and affirm French nationalism, and relatedly gender politics and *laïcité*. While there is a long history to these two concepts in the Republic, they are also continually shifting.

### **Gender and Nationalism**

The tendency to view women as upholders of traditional values and morals can be located academically in Western literature on gender and nationalism. In her chapter “No Longer in a Future Heaven: Nationalism, Gender and Race,” American literary scholar Anne McClintock suggests that *all* conceptions of nationalism depend upon powerful constructions of gender. Examining these conceptions thus uncovers how nations are contested systems of cultural representation that limit and legitimize peoples’ access to power and resources (McClintock 1995: 354). In a broad sense these gender constructions are particularly focused upon women, McClintock adds, as a key locus for this contestation over power:

Women are represented as the atavistic and authentic body of national tradition (inert, backward-looking and natural), embodying nationalism’s conservative principle of continuity. Men, by contrast, represent the progressive agent of national modernity

(forward-thrusting, potent and historic), embodying nationalism's progressive, or revolutionary principle of discontinuity. Nationalism's anomalous relation to time is thus managed as a natural relation to gender (1995: 359).

Nira Yuval-Davis and Floya Anthias similarly identify how women have been implicated in nation production as biological reproducers of citizens, as reproducers of the boundaries of national groups, as participants in national struggles, as active transmitters and producers of the national culture and, perhaps most interesting, as symbolic signifiers of national difference (1993; see also Waetjen 2001: 121, Kandiyoti 1991, Mosse 1985).<sup>21</sup> These theorists point to the ways in which women become symbols of patterns of socialization and new ideas of proper behaviour in systems of cultural reproduction. Representations of women are thus arenas for the formation of group sexual identity and family politics (see Timmerman 2000, Nagel 1998). Likewise, Arjun Appadurai claims that women bear the brunt of frictions between family and community, and are pawns in "heritage politics" (1996: 44). For Appadurai, the social-sexual honour of women becomes the armature of the creation of stable systems of cultural production in moments of uncertainty.

Despite these theoretical forays, this focus on gender politics has been traditionally excluded in classical conceptions of nation-building. Shakuntala Rao examines Anderson's conception of "imagined communities" to include conceptions of gender in postcolonial India. Rao's criticism of Benedict's work could be extended to most of the academic literature on nationalism: "The absence of gender in Anderson's speculation of the rise and growth of the modern nation cannot simply be explained by

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<sup>21</sup> I develop the notion of how "the" Muslim woman becomes central in cultural debates in Chapter Two.

arguing that women “don’t fit” the descriptors of the imagined community” (1999: 319).<sup>22</sup> Joane Nagel also notes the exclusion of women in national narratives. State power, citizenship, nationalism, militarism, democracy, political violence, and so on are all best understood as “masculinist projects,” involving masculine institutions and activities (1998: 243). The project of establishing national identity and cultural boundaries tends to foster nationalist ethnocentrism so that, as a result, nation-building and chauvinism are positioned as complementary (1998: 248). Thus, while not in the “public” space of nationalist politics, women are likely to be relegated to minor, often symbolic roles, either as icons of nationhood (to be elevated and defended) or as spoils of war (to be denigrated and disgraced). Theorists have similarly charted the pressure felt by women nationalists to remain in supportive, symbolic and often suppressed and traditional roles (Nagel 1998: 253; Rao 1999; Chatterjee 1993).

These gender roles are heightened within the metaphor of the nation as family, instituting a paradigm of “feminine shame” and “masculine honour,” and “naturalizing” traditional gender roles. Nagel points particularly to the veil in Islamic nationalism (1998: 254). It becomes, she claims, depending on the politics of its wearer/enforcer, a shield against the sexual gaze of men, an anti-Western, anti-colonial, anti-imperial rebellion against Western-allied regimes, a barrier against assimilation, and a religious symbol (1998: 255). Women’s sexuality is thereby intimately linked with the nation because

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<sup>22</sup> Partha Chatterjee is also critical of Anderson’s abstract conception of nation. From a postcolonial perspective, Chatterjee wonders about the limitations of this “imagination,” particularly when the models are available from Europe and the Americas, thereby making anti-colonial resistance difficult: “Even our imaginations must remain forever colonized” (1993: 5). From both a feminist and a postcolonial perspective, one might ask, as Chatterjee does, “Whose imagined community?” Being “imagined” suggests a passive position to a subjective power. Women remain as symbolic representations of the nation.

women's role in nationalism is often as mother, or the symbol of the national hearth and home, and because women as wives and daughters are bearers of masculine honour (1998: 256). As George Mosse explains, these images of acceptable female sexuality are highlighted in contrast to female "decadents" (prostitutes and lesbians) who were seen as "unpatriotic, weakening the nation" (1985: 109).

The relation of gender and nation has been most apparent in contemporary academic works on India and Turkey, particularly those dealing with the ways in which the image of womanhood is explicitly used for nationalistic purposes (Nagel 1998; Rao 1999; Timmerman 2000). In France, owing to the interest in the French Revolution as a moment of nation-building, there has been some analysis of the feminine symbol of "La Patrie," the figure of a woman giving birth to a baby who came to symbolize the spirit of the collectivity (Yuval-Davis 1997: 45). However, in both India and Turkey, images of Hindu and Muslim "womanhood" are central to the construction of distinct and antagonistic identities. In relation to my own work, Christiane Timmerman's multi-sited fieldwork in both Turkey and a Turkish community in Belgium is particularly interesting. Timmerman concludes that women are at the centre of nationalistic discourses in Islamic societies, whether in Turkey or in Europe: "They are used to symbolize both progressive aspirations of the secular elite and cultural authenticity expressed in Islamic terms" (2000: 24). Timmerman substantiates this claim by examining the social significance of *shari'ah* (religious law) and its cornerstone status in establishing male privilege, particularly as it restricts the social space of women to the familial sphere. To a large extent, therefore, the



way women are symbolized and utilized in nationalist discourse places them within the patriarchal family.

Timmerman claims that in the Muslim world in particular, the family is often regarded as a microcosm of the ideal moral order, and consequently, have an important symbolic value to the nation. Like in India and Turkey (Nagel 1998, Rao 1999), women are depicted as “mothers of the nation,” and to honour the traditional domestic and familial role of women is equated with retaining one’s “authentic” ethnic identity (Timmerman 2000: 18). The burden of cultural symbolism is thus placed solely on women; men can change and yet retain their authenticity.<sup>23</sup> Women may symbolize the nation, but men represent it (Timmerman 2000: 18). In some cases the sexual “purity” of a woman becomes an issue of national importance, when the purity of the nation’s women is equated with the purity of the nation. The space assigned to publicly-visible Muslim women, particularly in secularized nation states, is therefore quite complex. Deniz Kandiyoti notes that women may be used both to symbolize the progressive aspirations of a secularist elite and to promote nationalist cultural authenticity expressed in Islamic terms (1991:3). In an observation that has special relevance to the socio-political situation in France, Deniz Kandiyoti notes how the historic antagonism between Islam and Christendom has created an area of cultural resistance around women and the family. These key components of the “private” sphere therefore come to represent the ultimate repository of Muslim identity (1991: 7).

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<sup>23</sup> This point, I would argue, is over-emphasized in Timmerman’s work. As I will suggest in this chapter’s conclusion, men in Petit Nanterre may also feel pressure to adopt symbols of cultural authenticity, such as wearing the *djellaba* or growing beards.

### **“Cultural Freezing” in the Diaspora**

One of the implications of the marriage preference I have described in Petit Nanterre is a “cultural freezing” of sorts. That is, certain facets of North African culture are deemed important, timeless and therefore are exaggerated in this space. Malika, a 26 year-old unmarried law student who works part-time in the *Centre Social des Canibouts* and Dawiyah, a 33 year-old married new immigrant explained this phenomenon in a conversation one warm afternoon in May 2005 in an office at the centre:

M: There are extremes also over there [in Algeria], that’s clear. But here, I think people reinforce their traditions a lot more because they’re in France. To show that they’re here, and that they’re special. In Algeria, they [Muslims] are the majority; here they have something to prove. We could say that 90% of people there are Muslims, so it’s not the same thing.

D: Exactly. Nobody over there has a beard [which is relatively common in Petit Nanterre]. It’s normal. But here, I think they do it more than over there to distinguish themselves. Although, it’s [also] because the Prophet has asked them to. Hmmm . . .

As Malika and Dawiyah note, the social comportment of men as well as women in Petit Nanterre emphasize markers of Muslim identity. Malika, who has lived in France for the past two years with her paternal grandmother, claims that in her experience social pressure on young women is stronger in these suburban housing projects than in her native Algeria:

M: There’s a big contradiction for us who arrive because we’re between Algerian society and French society. So at home maybe our mom or our brothers will say ‘That’s not the way to do things’ and then when we go out and mix with other French people, we see something completely different. It’s also hard for the young girls [that she sees in her academic support work in the Centre] because they’re told at school that they’re the same as boys but they have to obey many more rules at home and usually aren’t allowed to go out . . .

Plus, here it’s strange because I found that compared to Algeria here I’ve seen 10 year-old girls wearing the headscarf whereas girls over there wear them when they’re much older. Whereas here I’ve seen a little kid who must have been 4 or 5 years old. She’s a child, so it must be the parents who’ve told her to do so. At that age one doesn’t have the conscience to want to hide their body . . . It’s true that I grew up in the city, but here

we're right beside a huge city like Paris and we wouldn't know it [Interview 20 May 2005].

Relative to Algeria, in their view, men in Petit Nanterre grow beards and wear the traditional loose clothing prescribed within some Islamic texts. Despite their observations about the number of women and men who publicly observe religious practices, neither Malika nor Dawiyah wear a headscarf. Dawiyah claims that she would like to wear the headscarf since she did prior to migration from Algeria, but she believes she might have trouble renewing her work contract with the community centre because it is subsidized by the French government.<sup>24</sup> Most of the women I interviewed who do not wear headscarves observed that, over the last 20 years, and particularly in the last five, men and women in Petit Nanterre have increasingly adopted publicly-visible traditional Muslim dress and social comportment. While I suggest in this chapter that this strategy may be an effort to fortify collective identity in the North African diaspora, a factor that is often forgotten is demographic: until the 1980s, Petit Nanterre was far more ethnically diverse than it is at present. The closure of local industries that previously employed “French French” as well as immigrant workers, as well as increased family reunification has meant that this *banlieue* has acquired a far more dense population of Maghrebian origin over the past 25 years.

Moreover, I contend that in a social context where North African values and mores are threatened by social and geographical marginalization, by strong secular values in public spaces, and by increasingly strict immigration policies and altercations between

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<sup>24</sup> As I discuss in Chapter One, the Canibouts Community Centre welcomes many women with headscarves and has unofficially allowed the continuation of an ‘illegal’ mosque on the first floor.

the *banlieue* and the State (as evidenced in the November 2005 riots), women in particular have become the symbolic bearer's of the collectivity's identity and honour.<sup>25</sup>

As Nira Yuval Davis explains,

because of the central importance of social reproduction to culture, gender relations often come to be seen as constituting the 'essence' of cultures as ways of life to be passed from generation to generation (1997: 43).

I myself felt tremendous pressure to act and present myself in a certain way in Petit Nanterre. Moreover, as I demonstrate in Chapter Five, among women in the neighbourhood, the architecture which creates a Foucaultian Panopticon effect as well as gossip serve to enforce "traditional" mores. One *Française-de-Souche* (Native French woman) who works in a community association explains that because she grew up in a nearby neighbourhood and now works in Petit Nanterre, she has adopted North African cultural customs and values. Céline, 40 and unmarried, describes her affinities:

C: It's true that I am French but I've always wanted to be with immigrants. I arrived in Colombes [the *quartier* next to Petit Nanterre] when I was 8 years old, and I adored Arabo-Muslim culture. That's to say that I'm used to Arabs. Plus, I lived for ten years with an Algerian man in a common-law relationship. So there you go.

J: And why do you practice fasting during Ramadan if you are not yourself Muslim?

C: Well, it's just like that! They're traditions. And for me, I haven't converted to Islam, but I see myself as more Arab than French. I feel more tied to Muslim culture than to French culture.

J: Do you do any other practices you would consider "Franco-Muslim"?

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<sup>25</sup> Another theory, which I find less convincing, holds that this focus on collectivity reflects a very different cultural ethos than that of the French Rousseauian individual in society. The focus on community mores inscribed on women's bodies may also reveal that among Maghrebians individuality is less important than being embedded within a community. As Suad Joseph notes, "The Western construct of citizen – that of a contract-making individual – implies a degree of detachment and autonomy that is not universal" (Joseph 1993: 23). Civil society is based not on the family but on the individual. In contrast, Joseph argues with reference to contemporary Lebanon, that many Muslims perceive their rights not as citizens of the state, but as members of certain communities.

C: I eat *halal* foods, of course, [and have] since I was ten years old, so it's completely normal for me (Interview 18 June 2005).

Many “French French” residents note that they also begin eating *halal* (religiously observant foods) as both local butchers sell *halal* meats only and because all of the local take-away restaurants also offer only *halal* meat options. Not everyone is pleased with these restrictions. In the spring of 2006 walking through the main square of the *cité* I encountered a “Native French” man who had recently moved to Petit Nanterre because he had been allocated an HLM (a social housing apartment) and was having problems with his neighbours as a result of his dog. He told me angrily one evening when I met him standing outside the entrance to a building, “You need to be a North African Muslim to live here. I don't fit in. I don't understand how to do things and people are racist against me” (Fieldnotes 26 June 2006). He admitted to feeling much more anonymous when he lived in his previous building in the 20<sup>th</sup> arrondissement of Paris. Eventually this man relocated to another HLM outside of Petit Nanterre.

Clearly this emphasis on the maintenance of a “culture of heritage” seeks to preserve cultural traditions in the diaspora and to draw boundaries which both include and exclude. In relation to the gender and marriage preferences I have explored in this chapter, I offer two examples of the type of negative social pressures which may occur. The first concerns a local woman who feels she cannot marry her boyfriend because of her background. In the second example, in a broader sense I explore the quandary that these cultural ideals present for young second-generation woman in Petit Nanterre. I conclude by reflecting on how family history affects women's choices.

The focus on the “purity” or “tradition” of North African women places stress on women who were born in France and those who are not seen as being native-born Magrebian “traditional” women. Soraya, 32, was born in Morocco but immigrated to Paris with her parents and brother when she was 6. Soraya is divorced and lives alone with her two sons, 8 and 9, in an upper-floor two bedroom apartment in the Cité des Canibouts. She is known in the neighbourhood for her “class.” She is always extremely well-dressed in business attire, is young-looking and very well-spoken. Soraya originally married a Moroccan man in an arrangement organized by her parents:

We were married because he was an acquaintance of my parents, so I met him at the home of friends of my parents, and then the person [her former husband] made his request, and I finished by accepting it . . . But we never went through the stage of getting to know one another (Interview 19 December 2005).

Since her divorce five years ago, Soraya has met another man, also born in Morocco and living in another north-eastern *banlieue* of Paris. She has been in a relationship with him for more than three years and they would like to marry. He is currently living with her unofficially. Their marriage is impeded by his family’s rejection of her divorcee status, however. Her boyfriend is this family’s only son. Soraya explains quite calmly that they would prefer him to marry a Moroccan-born virgin without children and a woman who is more outwardly Muslim (i.e. headscarf-wearing). While her boyfriend has suggested that they elope, Soraya prefers not to marry until her parents-in-law are in agreement. She feels that to elope would mean that she and her sons would never be welcome at her husband’s family-related social events. So far, his parents have yet to make a gesture suggesting they might accept her.

Indeed, the preference for North African brides puts a great deal of social stress on marriageable young women currently living in Petit Nanterre. This tension was clearly apparent at a public forum about an amateur film made by members of GAO, a youth initiative at the Centre Social des Canibouts which sought to expose “unfair” gender differences in the treatment of Maghrebian teenagers.<sup>26</sup> Discussing how the *grand frères* (big brothers) monitor the public behaviour of young women in the neighbourhood, with the goal of maintaining the honour of their families, one outspoken fifteen-year-old girl responded to a young man who had admitted to worrying about the impact of his sister’s activities on his own reputation:

Alright, maybe we [girls] shouldn’t go outside, maybe we shouldn’t date guys [without being engaged ]. But, how are we supposed to meet our husbands then?? Especially these days when we don’t have forced marriages anymore? (Discussion 25 June 2005).

These second generation young women are clearly affected by the pressures brought to bear on young men in Petit Nanterre to find marriage partners outside of France.

Perhaps it is by initiating partnerships themselves that these young women will begin to shift the current paradigm and family pressures that favour North African brides. Examining marriage choices within a family over several generations highlights shifts in women’s marriage partners. Khadija is a 48 year-old woman who arrived in Petit Nanterre in 1961 as a toddler. She now works part-time in the local hair salon doing esthetic treatments; the remainder of her time she devotes to painting. Many of her Algerian-inspired landscapes hang in the salon, for sale. Her father initially found work in a local factory in the late 1950s and Khadija, her mother and three siblings joined him in

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<sup>26</sup> I describe the film and reactions to it in greater detail in Chapter Five.

the knowledge they would soon have access to a HLM (social housing) apartment which was being built. They lived in the shanty-town for two years, moving into a Cité de Transit (transitional housing) and eventually into the Cité des Canibouts in 1965. They lived in *Bâtiment K* (one of the larger apartment complexes) which still exists today. Khadija's siblings have since moved elsewhere, but her mother continues to live in Petit Nanterre, now in a smaller studio apartment. Khadija married a Moroccan-born man when she was 22. It was a "love" marriage and the couple had a daughter the following year. Her husband had difficulties with alcoholism, and so Khadija eventually left him with, as she describes, "only my baby and my purse," two years later. She worried at the time that her mother would be upset and that her divorce would cause waves in her immediate family. It did not. Around the same time, her mother also divorced her father, telling her children it was better to divorce than to live unhappily. Khadija remembers that her mother told her, "Don't worry. A husband is like a pair of shoes . . . if he becomes too restrictive or uncomfortable, it's better to change him and to live more comfortably" (Interview 2 December 2005). Her mother remarried, divorcing a second time at 72 years old. Khadija has also remarried and lives with her second husband in a nice apartment in the 18<sup>th</sup> arrondissement of Paris. Her 25 year-old daughter, Zohra, however, has recently pushed the boundaries of family mores as she has become engaged to a blond irreligious French young man she met at university. Khadija concedes that her own mother, who may appear to be carefree given her own two divorces, is extremely worried about her granddaughter. Khadija's mother believes the girl will go to hell by marrying a non-Muslim. This possibility concerns Khadija's mother a great deal. Khadija



adds that her mother is trying her best, asking Zohra when they met recently, “What do we say for them? Boyfriend? Your boyfriend?” She had never used the French terminology herself in relation to a family member, since this category of relationship had not previously been part of the family’s experience.

This last example leads me, by way of concluding this chapter, to return to Benedict Anderson’s notion of “imagined communities” and what Homi Bhabha might term a “third” location or a culturally ‘hybrid space’ created through transnational migration (1990a, 1990b, 1994). As I will discuss in my conclusion, this ‘hybrid space’ draws upon what I would term ‘radical imagined tradition’ in seeking to ground shifts in time and space. Bhabha explains that the transformations that are performed in cultural engagements are, of course, complex and on-going negotiations (1994). Still, why these issues centralize on women’s bodies and social comportment is noteworthy. These collective cultural mores in Petit Nanterre create boundaries which both powerfully protect and exclude women.

### **Transnational Transmission: Culture and Gender Mores in a Parisian Suburb**

This chapter explores the transmission and maintenance of religious and cultural ideas about femininity and sexuality between first-generation largely Muslim Maghrebian women and their second-generation daughters, born and educated in France.<sup>1</sup> My presupposition is that, given that kinship ties are essential to the creation of self identity, and ‘who one is’ depends largely on ‘from whom one comes from’ (Carsten 2004), migrants’ subjectivities and sense of belonging (Al-Ali & Koser 2002: 9) constitute one of the central issues in the ongoing process of creation and enactment of the ‘transnational’ family.<sup>2</sup> Moreover, within the contexts of transnationalism and globalization, ‘identity’ materializes in part as a strategic creation within the framework of an individual’s life experiences (see Hall 1996; Armbruster 2002:19). I suggest that while these first-generation women are often socially and economically marginal in larger French society, they play an essential role in constructing and maintaining the public image of Islam in France, particularly through the ways in which they conceive of and shape a “proper” upbringing for their French-born and educated daughters.

Within the confines of this chapter I limit definitions of identity to issues of gender and sexuality for women, which I argue are particularly contentious domains in

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<sup>1</sup> As I describe in Chapter One, although almost all of my informants were Maghrebian (of whom the majority were Algerian), I also interviewed six women from Western and Sub-Saharan African nations (who were also Muslim) as well as two women of Indian origin (one of whom was agnostic and the other Hindu).

<sup>2</sup> Here I follow Basch et al in their definition of transnationalism as “the process by which immigrants forge and sustain multi-stranded social relations that link together their societies of origin and settlement” (Basch *et al.* 1994:7). While they claim to be both a novel methodological approach and an only recently-discovered phenomenon, it is debateable, however, to what extent transnationalism is actually a new process (see Vertovec 2001; Winner and Glick Shiller 2003; Portes 2003).

the migrant diaspora experience. More specifically, I seek to examine which aspects of femininity and social roles are most debated between the mothers and daughters I interviewed in Petit Nanterre and how some first-generation Muslim North African women interpret being “French.” Following an introduction to the theory and methods which foreground this particular component of my research, I examine the centrality of marriage and motherhood within conceptions of femininity and social roles by asking women about their own transitions into marriage. Many women spoke about challenges with their mothers-in-law and how they sought to be “good” Muslims. I also analyze a short film made by young people in the GAO group in the Cité des Canibouts called *Mix-Cité*. These materials reveal a focus on Muslim women’s sexual propriety in the *banlieue*, which I frame within academic literature treating honour and shame (Peristiany 1966; Schneider 1971; Ortner 1978; Abu-Lughod 1986; Delaney 1987; Dubisch 1995, 1993). These values are enforced and maintained through local gossip (with reference to Gluckman 1963; Abrahams 1970; Delaney 1987; Besnier 1994; Tebbutt 1995; Guenzouzi 2001) and, following Foucault, the Panopticon-like architecture of the housing projects (1977). As I describe in Chapter One, Petit Nanterre is characterized by five and eleven storey high rise buildings built in the 1960’s facing one another with little public or green space.

### **Methodological Considerations**

The mothers that I encountered in Petit Nanterre have migrated from one socio-religious context to another; their daughters were born into contexts with pressures quite



different from those of their own youth. These factors clearly shape the relationship between mothers and daughters, particularly in relation to possibilities and tensions afforded through the education system. The women with whom I lived and conducted interviews, more often than not, sought to maintain certain practices and ideas about femininity and sexuality from their countries-of-origin, mostly in the Maghreb. At the same time, however, many of the women were motivated to migrate to France by the desire for, among other factors like following their husbands, a new adventure, greater social freedom and better healthcare. These women wanted their daughters to go to school and be afforded academic possibilities that had often been unavailable to themselves. Almost all of the women who arrived in France had already been married in their countries-of-origin and continued mothering full-time, some arriving with young children, others bearing children in France.

As I have mentioned, owing to French family reunification immigration policies, the migratory experiences of North African women differ from those of the first wave of male industrial workers. As I discussed in Chapter Four, women largely gain legal residency status as wives of either foreign or native-born men. Few of these women have worked outside the home. Their migratory experiences and trajectories thus differ from those of their husbands and should thus be accorded their own migratory paradigm. Unlike their husbands, for the most part, they do not have social networks apart from family relationships and those with their female neighbours or classmates, should they be taking French socialization or language courses with groups like Association Nadha.

With the exception of anthropologists Caroline B. Brettell and Rita James Simon's 1986 collection, examinations of gender and immigration are relatively recent in the sociological and anthropological literatures (see Morokvasic et al, 2003; Curran et al, 2006). Of course, "gendering" migration does not necessarily entail a women-centred examination of transnational movements. It entails an examination of the processes and discourses in migration involving men *and* women and how they relate to one another. Who will have privilege, property and/or political power in France and why? Who is more mobile? Recent important theoretical studies on gender and migration include those by Sylvia Chant and Sarah A. Radcliffe (1992), Saskia Sassen (2003) and Martin Manalansan (2006). Chant and Radcliffe aptly describe the study of gender-differentiated population movements "as a mirror for the way in which sexual divisions of labour are incorporated into spatially uneven processes of economic development . . . [this study] sets a template for subsequent social and economic evolution in developing societies" (1992: 1). In short, examining transnational movements through a gendered lens allows for analysis of the arrival country and the social conditions in the areas of departure, particularly with respect to the status and social roles of women. Women who are "away" have a tremendous impact upon those they leave behind by their absence and by way of remittances. Saskia Sassen argues that while migrant women have been traditionally represented as a burden rather than as a resource for the global economy, their strategies for survival can be paralleled with larger development. These immigrant and migrant women make up a large part of the "serving class" in virtually all global cities (2003: 64). Finally, studying the context of Filipina migrant workers, socio-cultural anthropologist

Martin Manalansan critiques the implicit normative assumptions around family, heterosexual marriage and reproduction that abound in the literature on gender and migration. Manalansan draws on queer theory to characterize the ongoing creation of sexual identities and orientations among migrant women and claims that these identities as well as practices and desires are, though often ignored, pivotal factors for migration (2006: 225):

female sexuality in migration situations functions not as mere symbol of homeland traditions but rather as the site of ideological and material struggles that shape the impetus to migrate and influence the manner of settlement and assimilation. Female migrant sexuality therefore deflects the imputed normative meanings of reproduction and mothering, and poses new ways of thinking about female sexual agency and the redefinition of gender roles in a transnational context (2006: 235).

The questions, issues and silences which arise for Maghrebian women immigrants in France in relation to their own social comportment and the raising of their children thus both challenge and reinforce their previous culturally and religiously-based notions of socialized femininity and female sexuality.

Various contexts and educational and social backgrounds shape the responses of Muslim women in Petit Nanterre to social pressures and notions of the family in France. Most of the more than seventy women of Maghrebian-origin that I met and interviewed had immigrated to France under the category of ‘family reunification.’ They arrived to join their families, in most cases their husbands, who had already settled in France. Many came to marry French-born distant cousins or acquaintances. These terms, of course, are general. The uniform analysis I propose fails to mirror the array of experiences I encountered in Petit Nanterre: some women have university degrees, others cannot read or write; some come from more cosmopolitan cities, others from rural settings; although



many are married, some are divorced or single; many are more religiously-observant than others. While one might argue that focussing on conceptions of virginity, marriage and family life necessarily creates a naturalized or normalized conception of domesticity, childcare and reproduction, this analysis is arguably inevitable as more than 85% of the women I interviewed were married with children. The family's economic situation and employment prospects also shape the way in which mothering is organized and how power dynamics might underlie the gendered division of labour in immigrant families (see Salih 2003: 53).<sup>3</sup> Most families who begin to do well economically, however, are quick to leave the social housing complexes in Petit Nanterre for other neighbourhoods, making the area relatively homogeneous in socio-economic terms.

### **The Centrality of Motherhood and Marriage**

One of the primary hypotheses underlying this project is that the public and private presence of Maghrebian Muslims in France generally contradicts the prevailing French Republican national discourse of *laïcité*. In particular, the choices Muslim women make or accept in relation to social comportment and dress as well as the prescriptions of gender roles and identities conform to a religiously and socially-based understanding of the divisions between men and women, or sexually-segregated space.<sup>4</sup> Some theorists

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<sup>3</sup> I also seek to limit subject/object representation as a method of analysis, so that the lives of these immigrant women are not understood binarily in the context of Cartesian subject/object, intention/cause, choice/obligation categories. The choices of these women cannot be understood so simply. Nor do I want to unnecessarily reduce their relationships with their husbands and children into oppositions between spontaneity/social constraint and freedom/necessity.

<sup>4</sup> Several religious texts and credos in Western monotheistic religious traditions portray this gender separation and modest dress as the guarantor of an everlasting divine order on earth. Islamic writings on the necessity of the veil are not entirely clear, however. Statements attributed to the Prophet Mohammed refer to his wives veiling, but it is uncertain whether this mandate enjoined his wives or all Muslim women

posit that this separation implies the submission of women to their fathers and husbands and their relegation to the private sphere. In a general sense, this conception of gender and the differentiation of tasks places women and men into a structure within which they are equal in inherent social importance, but publicly separated. I discuss and critique the notion of gender complementarity in greater detail in Chapter Six.

One of the most important, prevailing and enforced social distinctions in this neighbourhood is sexual segregation. Within the idealized conception of this paradigm, women's roles are considered equivalent to those of men, but are measured differently because of women and men's distinctive biological and social abilities.<sup>5</sup> Indeed, in Petit Nanterre, there are few shared social spaces for men and women save the local grocery store and the market where women meet and shop for food, inexpensive culturally-appropriate clothing and household items. The unwritten rules of sexual segregation apply to all ages. In general, women can be found in the children's park, at the school entrance before and after classes, in local literacy classes and at some women's-only community events. Men inhabit the local licensed café, the mosque, the soccer field in the centre square of the Cité des Canibouts, as well as apartment building entrances and park benches, particularly on warm summer evenings. These social locations are telling:

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(Ahmed 1992). The veil is not inherently Islamic either, for it predates Islam and was worn by women in a number of religious traditions; references to veiling in the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament suggest a similar Judeo-Christian historical practice. The Qur'anic and Hadithic conceptions of modesty similarly propose proper social comportment in their brief discussion of licit and illicit relationships between men and women (see *surahs* 24:58 and 33:13) and men too are advised to be modest and cover themselves between the waist and knees.

<sup>5</sup> Other social scientists and feminists go further and propose that it is the traditional nuclear familial structure itself which creates inequality, suggesting that it has inherent power structures that typically contrast with production organizations. The existence of this type of family is partly based on non-economic rules of exchange (see, for instance, Curtis 1986).



women mingle and discuss when they are amongst themselves; men appear to move freely in public spaces.

These notions of proper decorum and comportment can not only be determined visibly by noting where men and women move, but also by examining public representations of the feminine in this suburban Parisian neighbourhood. The performativity of these gendered roles are highlighted when compared to the women strolling on the *Grands Boulevards* in Paris, 15 kilometres away. How do women determine what might be deemed proper (and always shifting) social comportment? French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu's analysis of the politics of feminine comportment in a Berber community in Algeria illuminates what he terms "the invisible" veil. This garment, claims Bourdieu, limits not only the movements of women but also the movements of their bodies. In *La Domination Masculine* (2002) Bourdieu offers several examples of how the female body is continually called to order, and how women's movements are further hindered when wearing low heavy skirts or high heels. For both men and women, the way one stands, speaks and approaches others is also shaped by social prescriptions. Bourdieu concludes that these ways of carrying oneself are very profoundly associated with self-imposed moral comportment (2002: 47).

When I casually asked local people why such clear gender-based spatial separations and clothing norms exist, they answered, surprised by the question: this is the way things are and have been, and people are happy with the status-quo. Indeed, such social constructions (found in all societies) are rarely questioned. Social theorists have demonstrated that the ideological model of sexual separation, for one, is often internalized

so that prescribed or restricted social roles appear as natural and not as a product of hierarchical and oppressive social relations (see Bourdieu 2002; Juschka 1999). Furthermore, while the ‘separate but equal’ paradigm can be useful in valorizing the unique role of women, this complementarity remains suspect.<sup>6</sup> Women in Petit Nanterre, for instance, may say that they have no desire to enter the local café, but it is difficult to determine to what extent this deference stems from the social stigma attached to being seen in such a space (see similar examples in Khosrokhavar 1997: 127). Gossip about women who enter the café usually portrays them as “French French” immoral drinkers involved in the local drug trade. I too sensed social pressure to refrain from frequenting this café. Wanting to protect my own reputation, I rarely entered; on the two occasions when I did, it was smoky and filled with men betting on local horse races, certainly not the classical bistro café of Parisian lore.

Oftentimes the separation of space, tasks and social expectations limits and removes power from women: they are refused the possibility of defining themselves. Divisions of space and activity cannot be extricated from distinctions of gender (Carsten 2004). This sexual segregation model also upholds a radically traditional version of the family, so that any possibility which falls outside this nucleus – notably women without children, women who have chosen to remain single or to live with a partner outside of marriage, women who valorize their public lives, and women who are bisexual, transsexual or lesbians – are ignored or treated with great suspicion and disdain. If the

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<sup>6</sup> Useful here is Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza’s notion of the ‘hermeneutics of suspicion,’ which questions the literal or surface-level meanings of a text or social situation in an effort to reveal the political interests which it serves (1992). See more on this topic in the next chapter.

natural destiny of a woman is to be a wife and mother, those who choose or find themselves in circumstances outside of this androcentric milieu are not accorded a recognized or respected space.

During my research, I did not meet a single North African woman who deliberately chose to be childless, or at least expressed her choice in this manner. Indeed, unintended childlessness is considered a tragedy, the basis for tremendous pity and prayer, and grounds for divorce. As Monique Gadant explains in *Le Nationalisme algérien et les femmes* (1995), “Physical appearance, marriage, fertility, these are women’s obligations . . . The most contemptible fate is that of the *vieille fille* (old maid), the one no one wanted, who stayed closed (though this will always be in doubt), sterile and useless” (1995: 256 see more discussion also in Keaton 2006 : 46-53). Women in situations of domestic or conjugal violence also fall into this socially unaccepted space. To discuss or share such experiences is taboo: to do so means that one is not a proper wife. Marriage is therefore central to the lives of the North African women I encountered. Still, many of the women I interviewed described their wedding day as marked by equal degrees of happiness and sadness. While marriage signaled their entry as adults into a larger community of women, it also meant leaving their natal families to live with their parents-in-law and leaving behind childhood and certain forms of freedom. Many of the women I interviewed primarily described the difficult relationships they had experienced with their mothers-in-law. Fifty-three year-old Aïcha, for instance, described the power struggle between herself and her mother-in-law when she arrived at her in-laws’ apartment in Petit Nanterre following her marriage and migration to France. While

pleased that her son had married a “traditional” Algerian woman and a cousin, her mother-in-law insisted on cooking all of Aïcha’s husband’s meals and critiqued her way of doing things. On some occasions her mother-in-law would bake whatever Aïcha had made the day before, presumably so her husband could taste and compare his mother’s superior versions. Aïcha admits that she really only fully relaxed and settled into the apartment and adapted to France after the death of her father-in-law. It was then that her mother-in-law, quite handicapped and unable to walk very much on her own, returned to their family home in Kabylia.<sup>7</sup>

This malaise and awkward type of relationship is quite common, even should one’s mother-in-law be one’s aunt. Fatima, another Algerian-born divorced woman in her mid-fifties who attended the local *Femmes Solidaires* meetings, describes being humiliated by her mother-in-law when she served the family portions of meat at dinnertime. She would be served last and receive the smallest piece of meat. As I described in the previous chapter, in a monologue she created for a summertime amateur theatre-production with *Femmes Solidaires*, Fatima impersonated her mother-in-law’s bossy and overbearing demeanor, wiggling her hips in mock grandeur, drawing many laughs from the crowd. Similarly, Houria, a Tunisian woman in her early thirties who sometimes came to the French course, once arrived to class in tears. She confided that her mother-in-law, also her aunt, had that day, like most days, berated her choice of dress. Houria felt especially exasperated because her husband’s salary as a computer engineer could have enabled them to afford to move out of the apartment they shared with her in-

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<sup>7</sup> Aïcha is now a widow and, since the funerary period for her husband in Algeria more than five years ago, she has not been in contact with her mother-in-law.

laws, but her husband preferred to live with his parents. She had little or no choice in the matter: her husband suggested that if she were unhappy with the arrangement she could return to Tunisia. Social scientific literature on the experiences of North African women in France confirms this sense of powerlessness. Based on her study of maternity and women in the Maghreb, Camille Lacoste-Dujardin describes similar feelings of vulnerability, noting the quandary of foreign young women's social space: "The young woman goes to live in a milieu of strangers who have nothing in common except their husbands (who they haven't chosen); the mother lives with her daughters-in-law, who she has perhaps chosen, but with whom she will be a rival for the affection of her sons, their husbands" (1991: 85). For many first-generation female immigrants marriage also signaled their departure from North Africa to France, a country many had seen only on television and in films.

Marriage is not only central to local conceptions of society; it also comes to characterize national identity. Based on her ethnographic fieldwork in Turkey and in a Turkish community in Belgium, anthropologist Christiane Timmerman claims that in the (generic) Muslim world, the prototypical patriarchal family is often regarded as a microcosm of the ideal moral order, and thus has an important symbolic value to the nation (2000; see also Kandiyoti 1991; Starr Sered 1999: 193-200 and Yuval-Davis 1997). This model of the patriarchal family maintains traditional family ties and does not allow for premarital relationships nor marriage to a partner from outside the religious tradition. It also may explain why women are keen to protect the gendered role of wife in their own practice and encourage their daughters to do likewise. Being a proper



‘Maghrebian woman’ is equated with respect for and loyalty to one’s family, cultural traditions and religious morality and is often, as described in Chapter Six, strongly contrasted to being a typical “French woman.” As sociologist Camille Lacoste-Dujardin confirms in *Yasmina et les autres, de Nanterre et d’ailleurs: Filles de parents maghrébins en France* (1992), despite shifts in time and place (that is, from earlier times to today, and from North Africa to Western Europe), the importance of virginity remains central in the Maghrebian community. She notes that no alternative exists for a non-virgin outside of marriage. Lacoste-Dujardin proposes that the only social positions culturally accorded to women in Maghrebian cultures are those of virgin or whore (1992: 159; see also Guénif Souilamas 2004: 81). This focus on virginity is thus a question of honour, of maintaining family respectability. Ultimately, both categories force Maghrebian migrant women into stigmatized positions related to their sexuality.

### **Honour and Shame**

Since the 1960s, numerous anthropologists have dealt with the themes of virginity, motherhood, and cultural constructions of gender in North African and Mediterranean cultures. In her classic ethnography on the Bedouin Awlad ‘Ali, Lila Abu-Lughod examines an Egyptian nomadic culture (1986). She emphasizes the way in which the society defines itself morally with reference to strongly-held principles of honour and modesty. ‘Honour’ in this instance is associated with independence, autonomy and a stoical acceptance of hardship, whereas to be ‘modest’ is to mask one’s sexuality and romantic attachments. Abu-Lughod demonstrates how traditional oral poetry serves as a

vehicle to express sentiments which would otherwise violate these codes of honour and modesty. While many of her examples are drawn from her fieldwork with this Bedouin nomadic Muslim community, she claims that there is a wide range of societies in which it is held that the sexual purity of a woman reflects the honor and status of her family. This linkage creates a systematic and severe control of social and sexual behaviours. These rules are overseen by the family and by gossip within the larger community. Beyond Abu-Lughod's useful analysis, these notions have become foundational, canonized and debated especially within Mediterranean anthropological literature.

John Peristiany's edited volume *Honour and Shame: The Values of Mediterranean Society* (1966) is the seminal academic treatment of this topic in the Mediterranean, encompassing North Africa through southern Europe. Peristiany argues for the existence of a sex-based, binary opposition in which honour is associated with men and shame with women. This gendered complex, the book concludes, is the central unifying theme of Mediterranean societies. The honour-shame complex is assumed to have been influenced by Christianity and Islam since both religious traditions produce, or at least reinforce, many of the sexual attitudes related to this construct (Brandes 1987: 126). Despite its overarching interest in gender divisions and their expression through honour and shame, very little of Peristiany's volume is dedicated to the experiences of women.

All societies sanction rules of conduct which reward conformity and punish disobedience to some degree. Why does the Mediterranean code of honour and shame receive so much attention? Scholars have a variety of answers. Persistiany offers little

explanation, but claims that notions of honour and shame are historically continuous and persistent in Mediterranean culture and thought. In the same volume, French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu examines male honour in an Algerian Kabyle society based on fieldwork during the early 1960's. Using a structuralist paradigm, he claims that notions of honour and shame are particularly pervasive in this context because they constitute the best way to impose order in a society (in this case, a clan or village) where all relationships are conceived within a kinship model. Within such a small community, "Respectability, the reverse of shame, is the characteristic of a person who needs other people in order to grasp his own identity and whose conscience is a kind of interiorization of others, since these fulfill for him the role of witness and judge" (1966: 211). These social guidelines therefore serve as identifying markers for both groups and individuals.

In the early 1970s, Jane Schneider offered a functionalist explanation of these Mediterranean tropes. Schneider posits that, beyond the gendered differences, the concept of honour keeps pastoral and peasant societies together by aligning and defending the identities of groups of men, families or lineages particularly in the absence of effective state bureaucracies and in the face of difficulties finding and assuring access to land, water and other natural resources. Thus, patriarchal domination secures access to scarce resources. Like feminine honour, masculinity too is both powerful and fragile, requiring constant vigilance and defense. Schneider states that "Honor defines the group's social boundaries, contributing to its defense against the claims of equivalent competing groups. Honor is also important as a substitute for physical violence" (1971: 17). Virgin women



become sacred symbols of purity and control, playing a crucial role in reinforcing male groups in Mediterranean societies (1971: 22).

Anthropologist Sherry Ortner later convincingly critiques the socio-functionalism of Schneider's model in "The Virgin and the State" (1971).<sup>8</sup> In her own description of honour and shame, Ortner moves away from Schneider's analysis to a more systematic exploration, illuminating socio-cultural progress and male/female relations. She charts an important shift between generalized and non-descript 'pre-modern' and 'modern' times in Western societal ideologies concerning women and the social concept of shame. While before women were pure and had to be defended against, now they are "pure" and in need of defending (Ortner 1978: 26). In modern societies, Ortner claims, sexuality is no longer exoticized and considered dangerous but is domesticated and segregated for the protection of women and their honour.<sup>9</sup> Ortner persuasively describes the motivation for the cooperation of younger and older women in their own subordination and control, in creating a sense of honour themselves. Social status as "good girl," Ortner suggests, has the potential to lead toward personal status mobility, actually exceeding that of most men in a similar social context. The "oppressed" thereby gain social prestige:

Here it becomes intelligible that it is often *women themselves* who actively reproduce the patterns of female purity, socializing their daughters in fear and shame of sex, telling them that it is for their own good (which in a way it is), and spying on and gossiping about one another's daughters as part of an overall deep internalization of and loyalty to the system (my emphasis, 1978: 32).

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<sup>8</sup> David Gilmour similarly criticizes Schneider's global perspective on honour and shame, noting that in her formulation Mediterranean people are "more acted upon than acting" (1987: 8).

<sup>9</sup> This is a shift also captured in conceptions of Muslim women in the West, from exotic and dangerous (in Orientalist depictions of the harem) to subjugated and oppressed (cf Alloula 1986; MacMaster and Lewis 1998; Dobie 2001).

Ortner suggests that women themselves seek to solidify these conceptions of female sexual purity in order to separate themselves (or to stratify themselves) from one another, policing themselves and one another. Doing so is beneficial to their social capital and reputations.

There has been a move in more recent scholarship, however, which seeks to deconstruct issues of power and politics within these representations. Carol Delaney's piece in *Honor and Shame and the Unity of the Mediterranean* (1987) presents a provocative and valuable analysis of how the social embodiment of women, that is, their physical characteristics, creates a constitutional inferiority, inevitably placing them in the position of those who are shameful. Delaney considers that, stated broadly, men in the Mediterranean are born with their honour, losing it only should they not protect the social and sexual "boundaries" of their women (1987: 40). At the most basic level, a women's boundary line is her hymen, reserved for her husband, who, in breaking it, possesses her and her honour and shame. Delaney adds that "If the boundary of what is his has been penetrated or broken by someone else, he is put in the position of a woman and is therefore shamed. Thus, male honor is vulnerable through women" (1987: 40). Following this logic, because women's biologically-inherent flaws are inevitable, women must control themselves and their biologically-predisposed tendencies under the watchful eyes of their community. Men, on the other hand, maintain their honour in defending their family reputation from insult. Accordingly, women should be enclosed or domesticated within the home to protect themselves, their husbands and their families' honour. On a more individualized level, a woman can also be protected and enclosed within

voluminous clothing, and her face shielded by a headscarf. These restrictions are often welcomed because they articulate the link to honourable men, accorded by her associated social prestige. Again, the assumption is that a woman is veiled because her husband is honourable.<sup>10</sup> Within the confines of these gendered restrictions, marriage accords women a social identity. Unmarried women are socially invisible and dangerous because of the possible honour violations they may bring to their family.

More recently, anthropologist Jill Dubisch's work on conceptions of gender in a Greek village seeks to move outside traditional anthropological discussions of the control of female sexuality and the relegation of women to the private sphere. Dubisch suggests that while men and women are sharply divided by their tasks and labour, women move across changing boundaries depending upon shifts within their own multi-leveled identities. Women are therefore not singularly labeled; they have a variety of social roles and functions. Still, as representatives of the 'inside,' more often than not, women maintain and symbolically represent the family, their communities (particularly those that are marginalized), and to some extent, the nation. While she seeks to challenge the traditional Mediterranean model of honour and shame, Dubisch tellingly remarks that social rules remain more restrictive for women than for men. Most interesting in Dubisch's ethnography is a shift she traces within the village's gender politics over the course of twenty years of fieldwork, which she believes reflects larger Greek socio-political changes. Dubisch suggests that Greek women have become less responsible for the maintenance of their families' reputation and now have a greater role as consumers,

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<sup>10</sup> As I discuss later in this chapter, in Petit Nanterre the social comportment of young women is often linked to the honour of their older brothers.



demonstrating the material status they share with their husbands and their own increased access to work outside the home (1995: 282).

Based on my own fieldwork in the small, enclosed, suburban community of Petit Nanterre, I would agree with Dubisch that women are not necessarily downtrodden or submissive within societies strongly informed by constructions of honour and shame.<sup>11</sup> Women may nonetheless fall within social structures that may not allow for social and political participation similar to that of men. In the course of my fieldwork within a space informed by the tropes of honour and shame, in a general sense, I observed that for local women, sexual purity was often conceived of as an identity trait. As I will elaborate in the next chapter, this sexual purity was understood as being based on Islamic precepts and in opposition to an impurity associated with secular French women. Also, as in the small village of Anatolian Turks where Delaney worked (1987), within Petit Nanterre there are few real class divisions because of its high unemployment rate and concentration of public housing. While there are status/prestige differentials, these are relative and not necessarily dependent on wealth. As Delaney notes, in this Parisian *banlieue*, “the most important differences and divisions are those of sex” (1987: 38).

These sexual divisions are particularly evident in the segregation of social space based on gender. Prohibitions against girls occupying public space and exhibiting purportedly “masculine” speech and dress (see Dubisch 1995: 197; Tetreault 2001) reflect the recurrent association of femininity with private spaces and masculinity with public

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<sup>11</sup> Although France is not considered in the Mediterranean literature on honour and shame, the Maghreb is featured and shares commonalities with those regions cited in David Gilmour’s edited work (1987).

ones. One of the primary implications of the code of honour and shame is a clearly structured social and moral world. These symbolic associations are elaborated in everyday discourse, casting female virtue as contingent upon discreet behavior at home, and positing (violent) masculinity as contingent upon illicit behavior in the street or outside the home. Relatedly, in Petit Nanterre, to be *dehors* (outside) is commonly used to imply *traîner* (loitering) and illicit drug use or sexual behavior, particularly when referring to girls. Women and girls who *trainent dehors* are the focus of pejorative gossip. Aïcha, the woman with whom I lived often noted, even in the summer heat, how “*on sort pas et les gens nous respectent*” (we don’t go out and people respect us). That is, she and her daughters never loitered or sat outside in the neighbourhood and therefore, as women, they were respected.

On one occasion in a discussion about Aïcha and her two pre-adolescent daughters, another North African woman in Petit Nanterre commented to me, noting positively: “*Ah oui, Aïcha et ses filles. C’est bien – ces filles-là ne trainent jamais dehors,*” (Oh yes, Aïcha and her girls. It’s very good – those girls are never hanging around outside). For this observer, it was a good sign that she never saw the two girls or their mother outside. Marie Josée, one of the Catholic nuns living above the Centre Social des Canibouts noted to me in our interview in her apartment that she observed that, “At a certain moment, girls here separate themselves [from boys]. She has her hobbies, but in the 3<sup>e</sup> ou 4<sup>e</sup> [11<sup>th</sup> or 12<sup>th</sup> grade], she stops. You don’t see them anymore” (Interview 10 March 2006). Always finding reasons to refuse my invitations to visit Paris together, Aïcha eventually admitted that she chose not to visit the city since the death of her

husband more than five years earlier. She feared that if it became known that she was enjoying herself and spending money in the capital, people in Petit Nanterre would gossip about her and question her moral fiber.

Indeed, as I elaborate in Chapter Six, second-generation girls like Aïcha's daughters and others in the community are negotiating more than simple gender norms. As second and third generation adolescents they also navigate conflicting expectations, between a rejection of "French immorality" and Arab/Muslim "tradition," as well as the *Cité* (housing project) codes of conduct. Carol Delaney's (1987) conclusion based on her fieldwork in Turkey that men maintain their honour by defending their family's reputation from insult seems particularly apropos in relation to my own fieldwork.

### **Talking Back**

In Petit Nanterre, anxiety about the norms of honour and shame is not completely silenced. In one instance at the end of June 2005, teenagers at a community centre in the neighbourhood presented a short film they had created during the February school break with the help of the counselors at the centre. The film was aptly entitled "Mix-Cité," a play on words about the mixing of genders in the *Cité* and the notion of *mixité*, the French legal and philosophical program of gender equality and the mixing of both sexes. As a social concept, *mixité* was argued for by the Stasi Commission in 2003 in relation to religious practices, such as veiling, in the public sphere; *mixité* is also a central notion in the discourse of the French feminist organization *Femmes Solidaires*. The atmosphere in which the film was shown was quite relaxed; food was being served and many parents



were present, as it was the last activity of the centre before the summer holidays. We met in the afternoon in the Centre Social des Canibouts. All the parts in the film are played by ten teenagers in Petit Nanterre. They had gone on a five day trip to Normandy with their counselors in February during a school break to conceive, write and shoot the film.

This short film tells the story of a teenaged second-generation Maghrebian girl, Kenza, hanging around after school with two girlfriends outside the door of one of the housing projects. The film begins with a phone call on her mobile phone from a young man in her high school class named Sébastien, who asks her out on a date. She does not know, however, that Sébastien has also called three other girls to ask them on similar dates on different evenings. He asks Kenza whether she would like to go bowling with him, a proposal she agrees to reluctantly, as though to show that she does not accept dates from just anyone. The primary dramatic scene of the short film occurs when a teenaged boy standing in the entranceway of the building overhears Kenza's side of this conversation. He then tells the girl's older brother that she has agreed to an unsupervised date, adding that she told her suitor that she was in love with him (implying that she had or would have sex with him), a dramatic embellishment to the actual conversation.

Shortly after Kenza agrees to the date, the girl's friend sitting next to her gets a similar call from Sébastien asking her out, as well. The girls realize there is a third girl in their class who has also been asked out and decide to scheme together, plotting revenge for Sébastien's flagrant disrespect by dating multiple girls at the same time. The next scene is most telling and takes place in Kenza's bedroom in her family's apartment. The teenaged Petit Nanterrian's playing Kenza's parents and brother confront her in her

bedroom, screaming that she has disrespected her family by falling in love with a young man and sleeping with him before marriage. While the young man playing her father pretends to begin beating her, Kenza tries to defend herself, saying that the rumour was not true, that she only spoke on the phone with the young man and that they had not been on a date. The parents opt to believe their daughter, but warn her to refrain from any behaviour that might be falsely interpreted in the community. The film ends as the three girls arrive at the bowling alley to confront and humiliate Sébastien. Music from a recent mainstream Hollywood production, “Charlie’s Angels” (2000) plays in the background and the girls give one another high fives, leaving Sébastien in the parking lot of the bowling alley alone, shocked that his ruse had been discovered. The crowd that had gathered at the community centre, which included the actors in the film, applauded approvingly at its ending.

This short amateur film, I think, captures the pressure put upon second-generation Maghrebians girls in Petit Nanterre and similar suburban neighbourhoods in relation to sexual morality and proper feminine comportment. I propose that there are three components which can be considered in analyzing the way in which the film reflects local gender politics. First, the film shows how rumours are created and portrays the dangerous situation of girls sitting together in a public place and talking to boys on their mobile phones. Second, it is significant that it was the girl’s brother who received the news of the rumour from another male friend and reported it to his parents who then sought to punish the girl. This policing of sisters by their older brothers or the *grand frères* is a common complaint among young girls in Petit Nanterre, and was mentioned in the



discussion following the film. The phrase *grand frères* refers to older brothers or mature young men who take the role of parent in the public sphere, some even encouraged by community policing. The social control of the young man in the family thus appears to usurp the traditional authoritative and patriarchal role of the father.<sup>12</sup> His marginalization in these suburban spaces may be due not only to his status as immigrant but also as *chômeur* (unemployed). Finally, the conclusion of the film is interesting. The girls, led by Kenza, who had been slighted by the suggestion of sexual impropriety, organize themselves to avenge the wrong, not by confronting the young man (Kenza's brother's friend) who started the erroneous gossip but by showing Sébastien that they knew he had behaved inappropriately by asking all three girls out on a date at the same time, while making them feel they were special to him.

The brief discussion among the crowd following the film was decidedly heated. One older teenaged girl threw out a question which captures "*Mix-Cité*"s paradoxical social reinforcement of sexual segregation within the neighbourhood. She asked, laughingly but seriously, "Why is it that a girl seen outside after 10 o'clock at night is treated like a whore, while a boy would be considered a man for being out so late on a school night?" One of the young men who volunteers at the Centre, Olivier, an unemployed 22 year-old second-generation man of Algerian origins, tried to make a joke and responded playfully that girls had to stay indoors to learn how to do the dishes. While he and his male friends laughed at the comment, the girls, sitting together across from

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<sup>12</sup> Despite often rolling their eyes when talking about their brothers, the girls admit, however, that they also feel protected by them. The pre-adolescent girls in the family I lived with, for instance, did not have older brothers, but knew older boys in the neighbourhood who would "look out for them" and defend them if necessary.

him, did not. One of them who had acted in the film demanded an apology, which Olivier granted, adding several times that he had only been joking.<sup>13</sup>

The discussion then moved to the topic of the *grand frères*. Another older teenaged boy admitted that if his younger sister behaved in a sexually inappropriate manner (*si elle traînait avec les garçons*), he would be ashamed. He said, “*J’aurais honte de ma soeur*,” adding that his own social standing and reputation would be affected and that the other young men in his peer group would tease him about his sister. One of the middle-aged divorced mothers in the crowd whose three daughters attend the GAO at the Centre Social des Canibouts for help with their homework explained that she continues to have conflicts with her older brothers, even though they are grown men and have children of their own. Quite openly, she spoke about their brazen comments on her personal life, particularly the shame they had experienced about her recent divorce and how she has chosen to raise her daughters on her own. For instance, her brothers claimed it was shameful that she allowed her eldest twenty-year old daughter to date a boyfriend without a fixed marriage date in mind, even though he was known to the family. The woman admitted that, after years of being “harassed” by her older brothers growing up in Petit Nanterre, she has learned to ignore them, which has unfortunately created a great deal of tension within her family, caused her stress, and upset her mother.

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<sup>13</sup> Interestingly, the same young woman (born in France, of Senegalese origins) who spoke in reaction to Olivier’s comment and demanded an apology stated “Ok, maybe we (the young girls of the neighbourhood) shouldn’t go outside and shouldn’t date boys. But, how are we supposed to meet our (future) husbands then?! Especially today when we don’t have forced or arranged marriages anymore.” This comment raises an important question: when in France forced marriages are against the law and there is a campaign in public high schools to inform girls of this fact, how are girls supposed to fulfill the social expectations which surround them without opportunities to meet and interact with male peers?

I suggest that this focus upon the sexual comportment and domestication of women (and not of men) is directly tied to the construction of women's respectability in the neighbourhood. Women must refrain from any kind of behaviour that might give rise to gossip or suspicion about their moral choices. The notion of respect is imposed as a guarantor of parental authority, generational hierarchy and sexual segregation. As Lacoste-Dujardin elaborates,

The control of the conduct of young girls is generally reinforced by communitarian structures, these ghettos where [they are] particularly strong because of their frequent organization into gangs, young men make the law and, in the first instance, exert their power over their sisters (1992: 43).

Based on her work with second-generation North-African origin young women living in France, sociologist Nacera Guénif-Soulimas echoes this focus on respect within the “traditional” family. Guénif-Soulimas claims that the politics of “the family” are dictated by immovable social constraints that crystallize around issues of sexual roles, the exercise of authority and family genealogy (2000: 173). *Mix-Cité* aptly captured all of these features and tensions.

### **Peering from the Panopticon**

In Petit Nanterre, the Panopticon-like architectural design of the housing project as well as the high unemployment rate foster easy viewing of the public movements of neighbours (for more on the symbolism of village architecture, see Boddy 1989: 70-72). One can see without necessarily being seen, which, I propose, adds to the possibility and power of gossip. The disciplinary power of the Panopticon, according to Michel Foucault, “is exercised through its invisibility; at the same time it imposes on those whom it



subjects a principle of compulsory visibility” (1977: 187). I became especially aware of this gaze one morning at the outdoor market in the neighbouring city of Colombes (about a 10 minute walk from the Cité des Canibouts) when I met a woman from the same *Cité* who casually asked what I had been doing in building F that morning around 9:30 a.m. She wanted to know who I had seen and whether I had interviewed them. Sensing my unease with her questions, she then graciously asked how the project was progressing, promising I could call her for an interview at a later date. It is common in the neighbourhood to look around and see residents looking out their windows, presumably wanting to know what their neighbours were up to and what was happening outside. Of particular interest was when in rare instances when local police were present in the main square.

It is important to note Foucault’s insistence that the gaze both punishes *and* rewards (1977: 181). One morning at the local *halal* butcher shop, for instance, the owner (who was the cousin of Aïcha’s former husband Mounir) expressed the view that I was fortunate to live with such a ‘good’ family because he never saw the girls *traîner* (loitering) outside. Indeed, this social pressure for women to stay inside was one of the social norms that struck me most forcefully when I first moved to Petit Nanterre. Young women, in comparison to young men, are very rarely seen outside. Significantly, Aïcha often explained that while she does her best to teach her daughters to be proper Muslims, *le quartier fait le reste* (the neighbourhood takes care of the rest). She was reassured that her neighbours were watching her daughters because of the protection offered by this neighbourly gaze.

## Gossip

Perhaps because I moved in circles predominated by women, the public slander I overheard in Petit Nanterre was centered upon women's lack of sexual propriety. Again, because of the sexual segregation in the space, these remarks and rumours were instigated or fueled by other women. Much has been written about the unifying effects of female chastity codes that share the common objective of safeguarding women in a group (Gluckman 1963, Abrahams 1970, Delaney 1987, Besnier 1994, Tebbutt 1995, Guenzouzi 2001). Literature treating gossip highlights the way it serves to transmit and refine judgments and community values. Gossip is a social practice and narrative genre which demonstrates belonging in a certain group. In a similar vein, Foucault notes, more broadly, how speaking serves to integrate individuals into the civil societies that manage them (1977). While group members struggle for status and prestige, the general values of the group must be asserted if the group is to survive. Gossip functions to assert these values (Gluckman 1963, Tebbutt 1995).<sup>14</sup> Niko Besnier observes that gossip "can be a political tool, an instrument of community cohesion, a genre of oral performance with aesthetic value, a context in which personal biographies are constructed, a locus where community history is produced, and a way of displaying and manipulating cultural norms" (1994: 4). In short, gossip attempts to control individual behaviour and morality, including sexuality. Gossip stories operate as moral tales for tellers and listeners, warning both that they might be the next target for rumour. Gossip can therefore serve to indicate

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<sup>14</sup> There is an interesting literature which deems anthropology 'scientific gossip.' Trinh M. Minh-ha (1989), for one, examines notions of power and discourse in relation to the process whereby the ethnographer comes to know 'insider' information and is integrated within a group (see also Van Vleet 2003).

components of public morality and the “native” criteria for a proper public performance (Abrahams 1970). American folklorist Roger Abrahams explains that the public comportment of men affects their reputation, while the comportment of women touches their respectability (1975). Likewise, Pierre Bourdieu confirms in his work in Kabylia in the 1960s, that in opposition to the machismo and male representations of social power, female honour is more of a negative matter of chastity and fidelity (2002).

Social scientific literature on gossip also points to the fact that community gossip often affects women more than men. While all women are subject to gossip and normalizing hierarchical observation, divorced or widowed women are especially at risk. Wearing the headscarf and the *djellaba* may serve to protect her reputation, so that her hair remains covered and her body formless. Indeed, completely hiding the body in Islamic dress and comportment serves not only to deflect attention from it, but heightens her moral status by publicly conveying moral convictions. Moreover, the establishment and maintenance of community norms requires monitoring, and because women have historically had to compete in relation to these norms to ensure their own social capital, they have the greatest interest in their maintenance. In “‘You’ll Think We’re Always Bitching’: The Functions of Cooperativity and Competition in Women’s Gossip,” Jackie Guenzouzi suggests that women typically achieve what Pierre Bourdieu calls ‘symbolic capital’ by proving their moral worth in the social marketplace. Guenzouzi posits that women’s symbolic capital must be evaluated in relation to community norms for their behaviour (2001: 31).



### Gossiping in Petit Nanterre

I overheard and encountered a tremendous amount of gossip about women in Petit Nanterre. I have categorized this gossip into three main ‘functionalist’ types, keeping in mind critiques of functionalist perspectives for emphasizing social stasis, lack of agency and negation of conflict. As I mentioned, women particularly vulnerable to slander were somehow outside the confines of marriage, whether they were single, divorced or widowed. The first type of gossip I define involves discussions of women’s *behaviour*, particularly commentaries on their dress, social engagements with men and smoking. A second type of local gossip I deem *helpful*. This type of gossip circulates information which allows the community to police or take care of their own problems without the intervention of outside French state authority. In the third place, I propose that there are other rumours which are purposefully created to generate *social prestige*, particularly in relation to Islamic religious practice. I will discuss these different idealized types, noting specific instances of each over the course of my fieldwork.

#### *Fascination with the Lives of Divorced Women*

One warm July late-afternoon in 2005 I met a local woman, Soumaya, a tall flamboyant woman of Algerian descent, born in France and living in a common-law relationship with a Tunisian man and their three young daughters. Soumaya was always eager for a chat and had been one of the most involved parents in the *halal* meat controversy earlier that year. I ran into her in the central community square on the Canibouts side of the neighbourhood on my way back from the *halal* butcher shop. We

exchanged kisses and greetings and began talking about how several women we both knew had already left France for the *Bled* to spend the summer months with their families. Over the course of our conversation, Soumaya leadingly asked whether I had heard anything recently about Leila, a woman we had spoken about previously at length in the context of École La Fontaine (see Chapter Three for further discussion). Soumaya and Leila had been at odds with one another over the course of the *halal* meat controversy. Leila was the head of the parents' association and had supported the kindergarten teacher in question and Soumaya was an active parent who had called for her dismissal, and although they were not explicit enemies, these women were not friendly with one another. Soumaya is unveiled and quite politically active. At the time, she had been unemployed for more than a year. She was interested in joining and becoming active in a city-wide left-wing political party.

Leila is 42 and has two children. She came to France from Morocco when she was eighteen to live with her brother, who had already settled in France. Quickly, she was introduced to her former husband, a work colleague of her brother's at a local factory, and married. As Leila describes it, her marriage was one of terror and violence. She was hospitalized on several occasions; her former husband also beat her mother, who encouraged her to fulfill her wifely duty and remain in the marriage. This situation continued for seven years until Leila left her husband and moved into a women's shelter with her children in Paris. She explained that she had preferred to improve her French and plan her exit carefully. After years of legal arbitration, Leila was legally divorced and accorded primary custody of her son and daughter.



Soumaya told me she had heard that Leila was working from her home for the *téléphones roses* (a sex phone line), and that a neighbour had overheard her speaking with a client and was able to validate the rumour. Further evidence “confirming” this story was that Leila had another new job as a community mediator, had bought a new car, and was of Moroccan descent. Despite the socio-political commonalities in France between Algerian and Moroccan immigrant women, and despite friendships between the two groups, Algerian women told me more than once that their Moroccan female neighbours were much more promiscuous than Algerians and that prostitution was prevalent in Morocco. In contrast, the Algerian women sometimes pointed out that prostitution is illegal and therefore uncommon in Algeria.

I feigned ignorance, hoping Soumaya would divulge more details of the story. That evening in July standing in the central square was not the first time that I had heard this rumour about Leila working for the *téléphones roses*. I had heard it initially among a group of women at the entrance to one of the two elementary schools in Petit Nanterre a month earlier in June of 2005, notably right after the *halal* meat controversy had been settled at that school. Soumaya explained rather gravely that while she had once visited Leila’s apartment and everything appeared to be “fine” or socially appropriate, her conduct of late, particularly her extravagant car purchase, was not. Also, presumably with money earned through her job on the sex telephone line, Leila had recently fashionably cut and coloured her hair, and had new stylish clothing. Leila had originally removed the headscarf when she first arrived in France as a teenager and especially after her divorce from her religiously-conservative husband, began to take more fashion risks.

Although I had therefore heard the rumour about Leila and the *telephones roses* twice, over the fall months of 2005 I rarely heard it again. However, on a cool, windy and rainy Saturday morning in November of the same year, I happened to be with Leila when the rumour ‘got back to her,’ and she realized that she had been talked about without her knowledge. Leila and I had agreed earlier that I would go with her to a community meeting about parenting at the Centre Social Valérie Méot in the Pâquerettes and that afterwards, I would go to her apartment in the Canibouts to interview her. We met in front of the elementary school after she had dropped off her children and stopped and chatted with other mothers. As we were leaving the group of women and walking toward Leila’s car, another Moroccan woman came up behind us, asking Leila to slow down because she had heard something unpleasant and wanted to ask her about it. Once she heard about her supposed work with the *téléphones roses*, Leila was astonished and reacted quite emotionally. She begged the woman for more details about the story, her eyes welled with tears and she began crying. After calming down, she asked me whether I had heard the rumour and from whom I had heard it. Wanting to remain nonpartisan, I replied that I was sorry, but that I was not sure who had told me.<sup>15</sup>

After the parents’ meeting at the Centre Valérie Méot, Leila concluded that compared to the hardships she had experienced with her extremely abusive ex-husband,

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<sup>15</sup> This incident highlights the difficult position of the ethnographer, alone in the field. I personally really liked Leila and knew that it was extremely unlikely that she worked as a sex phone operator out of her home. While I defended her and my knowledge of her comportment in the presence of other women when they gossiped about her, I consciously chose not to tell Leila about the rumour. I feared that aligning myself too closely with Leila would compromise my “insider” position with the other women. At that stage, almost one year into my fieldwork, I sensed that women no longer censored their opinions when talking about other women in my presence. This situation relating to Leila’s reputation, however, caused me much concern about the ethics of my silence and my role in the field.

this bit of slander meant nothing to her. She believed that the previous competition for her job as community mediator meant that other women in Petit Nanterre were jealous of her success, particularly following her successful separation and divorce from her husband, who continues to live in the neighbourhood. Leila complete high school, but speaks French well and has a good job with which she could support herself, her children and her mother. The most important implication of this rumour was Leila's fear that might negatively impact not solely upon her own reputation, but also on that of her former husband, who she believed was an active member of the Muslim Brotherhood and participated in the "illegal" mosque below the Centre Social des Canibouts. Leila's former husband lived in the housing project across from hers; she continued to encounter him two weekends every month because he held visitation rights with their children. As I mentioned, Leila had left the marriage because of extreme physical violence, worried that the rumour about her sexual impropriety might provoke more violence, even murder, should he decide she was publicly disgracing him and his children.<sup>16</sup>

Leila's situation thus had serious implications, but there were several other similar instances in Petit Nanterre. In the course of my volunteer work as a social worker at the Association Nadha, I met another woman, Samia, who was in the midst of a divorce. Samia was born in France; her parents had immigrated to France because her father was employed as an industrial worker for Renault, the French car manufacturer that previously maintained a large factory close to Petit Nanterre. Samia did not finish high

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<sup>16</sup> By the end of my fieldwork 10 months later, this destructive rumour seemed to have abated. Moreover, the community perception was that the woman deemed the rumour's initiator was malicious and jealous. Apparently this woman had applied for the same job as Leila as community mediator but had not been successful.



school, since she married an Algerian cousin she had met on vacation when she was sixteen. When her husband left her ten months before we met, Samia had five children. She lived with the children, whose ages ranged from 8 to 18, in their three-bedroom dilapidated two-floor apartment on the Canibouts side of Petit Nanterre. I had heard of her twin fifteen-year old sons early in my fieldwork in gossip among young people about their problems with the law. Because she had never had access to her husband's bank account (he works in a hotel in Paris), Samia had no idea of their family resources and had no financial recourse for herself and her children. When her husband left them, he also took the small car he used to get to work every day. Although she did not know how to drive, Samia hoped he would return with the car so that she could try to sell it. The day I arrived in her apartment to interview her, her children were eating fried potatoes for lunch. She also had another friend with a small child who were staying with her, and were sleeping in her bed. I settled into a deep concave in her long blue chesterfield beside the kitchen and looked at the class photos of her children and scenes of Mecca with Arabic calligraphy she had displayed on the walls. After quietly preparing the tea and cookies that I had brought, along with milk and fruit, Samia asked me point-blank what gossip I had heard about her in the last couple of months. She was aware that I had extensive social contacts in the neighbourhood and knew that I sometimes asked women personal questions. Samia seemed to hope I might share some of this confidential information. No matter my efforts, it was impossible for me to remain outside the circuit of rumours in the relationships I had with these women.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> I later learned that I too was the subject of gossip. People were extremely interested in my

Samia was concerned because, after receiving some emergency support funds from the municipal government when a staff member at Nadha put her in touch with the local member of parliament, she had left Petit Nanterre for a couple of months to visit her extended family in Algeria, with whom she is quite close. In Algeria, Samia met a younger man who was a friend of her brother's, with whom she began an intimate relationship. In her happiness she had mentioned it to a close friend (the one who was temporarily living with her), known for her indiscretion, and word of this affair spread quickly. One of the women I knew well from the Canibouts, Antinéa, quickly concluded that this could not be a love match. Antinéa's friends agreed. She reckoned that it didn't make any sense for a young Algerian man to be interested in or attracted to an older soon-to-be divorced woman without any education or money and with five children (four older boys and one younger daughter). This man, concluded my source, must be "using" her for a quick marriage in order to gain legal entry into France. Moreover, Samia did not help matters for herself as a victim of gossip when she declared giddily to a number of women in the parking lot one afternoon after our conversation in her living room that she was

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private life and why I wasn't married, despite being in my late twenties. I think that gossip around my personal life was not necessarily malicious. I do not believe that I was even labelled a *pute* (whore). Rather, the interest seemed to stem from concern. Because we discussed children and marriage a great deal, the women often remarked that, though I was in a serious relationship, at this rate I would never have children before I was thirty-five. The women were extremely curious to see pictures of this boyfriend, who, while being in France, never came to the field to meet them, unlike my mother and one of my brothers. While I was willing to share some information about my private life, I was admittedly extremely careful to speak as little as possible about my personal life so as not to draw attention to myself as unmarried. I also heard other rumours about myself that were more outrageous. I will share one. As a foreigner who had completely invested herself in the community and spoke some Arabic, I heard at one stage that people thought that I was a CIA agent, trying to gain information for George W. Bush's "War on Terror" campaign. Fortunately, I do not think this rumour gained much interest or attention. As Aïcha told me, she was able to dispel this rumour on my behalf because I was Canadian, had a good reputation, and, according to her, was too tall and thin to be able to carry a gun or do the physical work of a CIA agent. "Just look at your [skinny] arms!" she shouted, as I laughed.

inquiring about having cosmetic surgery - liposuction – in order to better herself, and make herself more physically attractive for her new boyfriend. She asked a small group of us whether we had ever heard (she thought she had) that once a woman had borne more than four children in France she automatically qualified for coverage of the expenses for cosmetic surgery in the belly area. Unfortunately, this question was only met with ridicule. Moreover, the women I was with quickly dismissed her as a “whore.”

More often, however, rumours treating the sexual morality of divorced, widowed or single women were less dramatic. Although perhaps it goes without saying, when I was invited for coffee into the homes of the women I interviewed, our conversations would alter radically depending on who was present. Understandably, the presence of a husband or older son would invariably mean that criticism of the marriage or of their mother-in-law (often the focus of the greatest complaints) would be completely curtailed. Significantly, even though we were alone and I had assured her of confidentiality, one widowed woman pointedly showed me that, following her husband’s early death of kidney failure, she had replaced their double bed with a single. She repeatedly told me how she lived a quiet life with her two teenaged sons. This outward expression of her austerity and chastity assured her respectability.

It is important to point out, however, that other rumours about married women and their sexuality portrayed their agency and ability to fight against and maneuver situations to their benefit. On one of my first days in Petit Nanterre at the French language and cultural class run by Association Nadha, one of the veiled women of Moroccan origin, Malika, laughed uproariously about an incident she had learned of from one of her



neighbours. One of Malika's female neighbours who lived in the Pâquerettes side of Petit Nanterre had an unhappy marriage. This woman, who was not named or identified except through the information that she lived in the neighbourhood and was in an unhappy marriage, had started an affair with a local man. Her husband was very controlling and would not allow her to leave their apartment, making meetings with her secret lover next to impossible. The lovers came up with an ingenious solution. When her husband left the apartment to go to work and their children left for school, her lover would arrive completely covered in a black *hijab* and *djellaba*. Because he was not a tall man and the garment was quite loose, no one suspected that beneath the garment was actually a man. Malika laughed heartily about these secret rendezvous, adding that on one occasion when the husband saw this man arrive, the male lover averted his eyes to the floor and did not speak, the common reaction of any Maghrebian woman who encounters a man she does not know. Even the most socially conservative women in the group seemed to find this story quite hilarious.

### *Social Policing and Control*

Forty-four year-old Linda was born and raised in Petit Nanterre and left when she was 27 to live in a common-law relationship with a local Algerian who three years later became her husband. Throughout our conversations together, Linda often described the pressure she felt to conform to a particular social model. She explained how strongly her mother (who had herself married a cousin at fourteen) felt about remaining a virgin before marriage and how angry she was when she learned that Linda was living with her

boyfriend and that she smoked. Linda explained that “for the Algerian women of my community, smoking is like being a whore. It’s vulgar and the pleasure of a vice. People think that if you’re a smoker in public, you’re likely even less appropriate in private. So it’s seen as an act of aggression and as really unfeminine” (Interview 20 June 2006). In this case, gossip in the neighbourhood informed Linda’s mother that her daughter was a smoker. Yet, while Linda’s mother was quite angry about the smoking, and had referred to it in the interview I had conducted with her earlier, she preferred to deal with this issue, and not with the idea that her daughter was in a secret relationship with a man and was living with him outside of marriage.

Another different type of incident involving social control occurred in the early summer of 2005. Sara, Aïcha’s youngest daughter who was ten years old at the time, was walking with her mother and older sister past the elementary school on their way to the ED, the local grocery store, when a young man passed them quickly on his moped. I was not with them when the incident took place. Young men driving quickly and noisily on their mopeds are common in Petit Nanterre. In an effort to force them to slow down in pedestrian areas, the municipality erected permanent pylons which make passage on the sidewalks more difficult at certain entry points. As Aïcha and her daughters walked by, the young man swerved around Sara, losing control of the bike and hitting her with the front tire. On impact, Sara flew through the air and landed on her side and face. I saw her the following day and she was extremely bruised, bloodied and, according to the emergency room physician, had possibly fractured her nose. After the accident, the boy who was known to them, sped off and seemed incoherent, as though under the influence



of drugs or alcohol. Although the physician advised Aïcha to press formal charges against the boy, she refused, preferring to take charge of matters herself. On their way back from the hospital, she passed by the local soccer field in the Cité des Canibouts, stopping the young men who were playing a match. She told them to tell the boy in question that he had better come to her home right away so that she could talk to him.

Within an hour the young man and his father appeared at her doorstep, both apologetic for what had happened. Aïcha explained to me that the young man's mother had left the family, leaving the father alone to raise his four children. While two older siblings had left the house, the youngest, the perpetrator of the accident, lived at home and no longer went to school. He was known for being involved in the local drug trade. Aïcha told me that his father had begged her not to press charges, said that he would "take care of it himself" and ensure that the boy was properly punished. The father had not known that his son had a motorbike and asked his son whether it had been obtained through theft. The young man apparently remained silent. Aïcha agreed not to press charges and both men apologized to Sara. The young man promised Aïcha he would no longer speed his bike around the apartment buildings. When I later asked her privately whether she was happy with the way things had turned out or whether she would want the young man to be punished by local police, Sara confided that she was not at all surprised that she had been badly injured. Before leaving the apartment that morning, Sara and her mother had had an argument about household chores in which Sara had said that she hated her mother. Although she added that she had not really meant what she said and had said it on the spur of the moment, Sara felt that her injuries were retribution and the result

of this disrespectful behaviour toward her mother. She was therefore not angry about the incident, and apologized to her mother several times.

### *Creating Social Prestige*

On many occasions I witnessed people “starting” rumours about themselves in order to gain social prestige. Many women made great efforts to impress with their cooking skills. Relatedly, one of the more interesting periods when this rumour “creation” became noticeable was during Ramadan. The Ramadan month was important not only for showcasing one’s best dishes but was also a period when rumours enhancing one’s reputation as a devout Muslim were also helpful in increasing personal prestige. While many women were piously quiet about their fasting during this period, a handful of local women were not as discrete. One afternoon I was meeting a woman I knew well, Amina, who was standing in the children’s playground surrounded by a group of older Algerian women, many of whom only spoke Kabyle. I approached them on my way to the apartment where I was staying, stopping to extend greetings. “Ah, it’s the Canadian,” said one woman, in the way I was typically greeted by this group of women. After answering questions about my health, Amina told me, quite dramatically, to go up to the apartment because surely Aïcha’s children were waiting for me to eat lunch, clearly indicating that while I was not fasting, she was. Then, to the nods of the women, she stressed how important it was as a proper Muslim to fast during Ramadan. These white veiled women in their sixties and seventies were also fasting. I smiled, agreed, and left to go up to the apartment, confirming with Amina that we would meet later in the afternoon

to run some errands at the large nearby shopping centre at La Défense. Later, after we shopped for a wedding gift for one of her cousins, Amina confided that she was actually quite hungry. After I promised to say nothing to the women of the neighbourhood, we stopped at McDonald's where Amina ordered a non-*halal* Big Mac Meal with great contentment.

Also during Ramadan on three occasions when we met local men, twice at the outdoor market and once with the local butcher, Aïcha told them that I was so respectful of Islam and Muslims that I was also fasting out of solidarity. While I was quite discrete about eating privately during Ramadan and made no mention of it, I was not fasting. In each instance of these false accounts of my fasting, however, I was met with praise and felt that people seemed to accept me even more. In an awkward position, I could not negate these remarks for then Aïcha would appear a liar, which would have angered her. When I later asked her why she told people I was fasting, she said these little white lies were of no import, and that people liked to hear it. She explained that she only wanted to help me with my project. Significantly, as I explain in Chapter Four, two non-Muslim "Français-de-Souche" women who worked in the after school program for children at Zy'va told me that they fasted out of solidarity during Ramadan, so the practice was not entirely unknown.

### **Concluding Remarks**

Gossip in Petit Nanterre is clearly not without socio-political implications. The religious and moral convictions held by these women in this segregated Parisian suburban

neighbourhood and what they mean for their daughters, born in France, and for the integration of North African immigrants in the Republic more generally are noteworthy. Some of these ideas relating to femininity and proper social comportment – particularly those involving *mixité* (the mixing of boys and girls) and the headscarf - have been challenged both nationally and locally in Petit Nanterre's neighbourhood elementary school. Factors such as the architectural design of the space, that is, that neighbourhood inhabitants can see and be seen from their high-rise apartments, as well as rampant unemployment also point to a sense of disenfranchisement and dislocation from being "French." I argue that, seen as dangerous, the neighbourhood is then experienced as such: it becomes what it is believed to be. For those who visit or live there, the weight of rumours and stereotypes about the Parisian suburbs work to create the space quite pejoratively.

What might be at stake for Muslim-practicing immigrant women in the suburbs of Paris who pragmatically seek French citizenship and who symbolically seek some level of social acceptance, particularly as they raise their daughters educated in France? While each woman deals with and polices her daughter(s) individually, the community generally supports and reinforces these social-sexual mores. As Aïcha noted, "the neighbourhood does the rest."



### **Feminism, Islam and the construction of “womanhood”**

This chapter examines perceptions by and of first-generation Maghrebian Muslim women in Petit Nanterre and members of the local Nanterre branch of the French feminist organization, *Femmes Solidaires*. To reflect on constructions of female identity in France, I begin by describing an afternoon class for *primo-arrivée* immigrants in Petit Nanterre. This example illustrates some of the tensions inherent in gender constructions in France, whether the women involved are feminist, Muslim, both or neither. The debate I describe was not typical of the usual classroom discussion, as we needed to decide on activities to be presented in conjunction with International Women’s Day on 8 March 2006. Yet, while outside of routine classroom work, this debate provides insight into central gender politics for women as they adapt and interact with a French secular landscape on a day celebrating women’s “independence”. I then analyze the complementarity paradigm to which members of Association Nadha’s French class frequently refer in their discourse on gender relations.

The second section of this chapter explores feminism in France more broadly, focusing specifically on *Femmes Solidaires*, and within this organization, conceptions of *laïcité* (French secularism) and veiling. To contextualize *Femmes Solidaires*’ response, I also mention how other feminists treat veiling in France. The third section of the chapter considers how Muslim women in Petit Nanterre often construct “the French woman,” and my interpretation of some of the implications of this gendered conception, for themselves and for their French-born daughters. Significantly, the same North-African-born usually Muslim women that feminists in France often characterize as oppressed have their *own*

notions about the traits that characterize the French women who are so keen to “save” them. Both perspectives – here necessarily essentialized – revealingly judge one another utilizing similar criteria: precepts grounded on positions related to religion, as well as one another’s morality, social comportment, dress and personal relationships with men. These stereotyped positions create two constructed persons that in this chapter I call the “French Feminist Whore” and the “Oppressed Muslim Woman.” Both caricatures are constructions but each is significant in depicting how sets of cultural assumptions on both sides are challenged. The headscarf features prominently in the construction of the “Oppressed Muslim Woman,” making this caricature profoundly public, effectively confronting a French secular perspective which legally positions religion in the private realm. Indeed, popular perceptions of the headscarf are often linked to patriarchal oppression and human rights violations; the veil is thus a “key marker” of the “essential inferiority” of Islamic societies (McMaster and Lewis 1998; Dobie 2001). I contend that this focus on the strict segregation of religion into the private sphere places publicly-visible Muslim women (particularly those who wear the headscarf) outside the accepted boundaries of women’s rights that traditional feminism has fought to secure. I conclude by considering the theoretical implications of these categories. I ask how both “sides” access these stereotypes and how these categorizations might promote false ontological divisions between modernity and tradition, progress and regression, the Republic and *communautarianisme*, and the secular and the Muslim woman. Ultimately, I seek to consider how, within a country whose history involves strong anti-communitarianism, the

separation of church and state and women's rights, notions of femininity and "woman-ness" are imparted to *primo-arrivée* women in the *banlieue*.

### **International Women's Day in Petit Nanterre**

On 26 February 2006, I participated in a fairly typical literacy and social integration class given by Association Nadha, a course I had helped teach and observed four times weekly over the course of my fieldwork. The classes took place in the basement of what, in the 1940s, was a public bath house. As I describe in Chapter One, it is now the *Maison des Jeunes des Pâquerettes* run by the municipality. The class is divided into two groups: the larger group is composed of women who are mostly illiterate and speak and understand little formal French.<sup>1</sup> The other smaller group has more hand-outs and reading and writing tasks as most have had some schooling and a working understanding of French. Although classes are run by two language instructors, outside resources or people also participate on occasion. One Parisian-based association organized outings to the Paris Mosque and to the nearby *Institut du Monde Arabe* (Arab World Institute) in Paris' 5<sup>th</sup> *arrondissement*; another group, *Association Relai*, sent a dietician to talk about health and safety issues related to children and sleeping patterns and health for women. Based on the comments of women after class as we milled about in the parking lot outside before parting ways, these activities have varying success. Some women understand little formal French, and, in my experience, those running the workshops are sometimes not sure what to do or how to facilitate greater interest.

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<sup>1</sup> UNESCO estimates the adult female illiteracy rate in 2003 as 39.1% in Algeria (down from 75.5% in 1980) and as 60.6% for women in Morocco (down from 84.5% in 1980).

Philippe, a French unemployed professional actor who grew up in Petit Nanterre but now lives in Nanterre Ville, came to the amalgamated class to facilitate a drama workshop as part of his larger theatre project with children at the Centre Social des Canibouts. From the moment this activity was announced the week beforehand, the idea of a public play made many of the women uneasy. While there is typically a lot of chatting in Arabic and French when they meet, in general, the women rarely take the initiative to speak in class, likely due to timidity, lack of experience speaking in public or French-language difficulties. In fact, six or seven women, knowing ahead of time that this actor would be facilitating the class, chose not to attend. Despite his kindness and good-naturedness, the fact that Philippe was an actor, a man and French did not facilitate his task.

As I mentioned, in conjunction with International Women's Day, Philippe and another actor had prepared a play with some of the local children in the Canibouts and wanted to include local women in the pivotal scene. During the week-long school holidays in February, the two men collaborated with the children and wrote a fairy-tale-based play about a royal family. This race- and country-unspecific family encounters a moment of crisis with the sudden death of the King. The dilemma: who should be his successor – the wise and capable Queen? Or her young son, spoiled and disrespectful? The story's climax occurs when the young prince declares that women, notably his mother, are incapable of political rule for they lack the intellectual know-how to hold absolute power. On this point Philippe had hoped that he could encourage the immigrant women from Nadha to boisterously and dramatically express their wishes and their



willingness to claim political power. His subtext was clear: all women are “Queens” and are entitled to political voice and power.

This example of the short play and Philippe’s related difficulty in facilitating a discussion on the importance of female political power in the context of International Women’s Day highlight the expectations placed upon these women with regards to their rights and identities in France. Philippe assumed, and members of *Femmes Solidaires* might add quite commendably, that women of all ages and backgrounds should desire and claim political rights and responsibilities. However, in this chapter, I address these questions: are first-generation Maghrebian women interested in expressions of public and political power? *Should* they be invested or learn to be if they are to integrate into so-called “French” society?<sup>2</sup> Must women of Maghrebian origin necessarily speak out for women’s rights in order to participate in “International” Women’s Day? And, perhaps most importantly, what might be the social costs of female “emancipation” for the women of Association Nadha’s French class? In the second part of the chapter I introduce the French feminist organization, *Femmes Solidaires*, and their notable presence and activities in Petit Nanterre. Following a brief history of feminism in France and this organization, I discuss what I observed to be this local group’s primary concerns: assuring secularism and “saving” Muslim women. These issues, I propose, are interrelated. I deem that this linkage between women’s rights and secularism in France is central to the fetishization of the Islamic headscarf in recent public debates in the Republic.

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<sup>2</sup> As I observe in the concluding chapter, “French” society is a far from homogenous concept and is also a continually contested category.

The afternoon of February 24<sup>th</sup> with Philippe was dedicated to brainstorming and “practicing” the scheduled improvised moment in the play when the women of Association’s Nadha’s French class would respond to the prince’s “misogynist” belief that his mother was unable to reign. Seeking to inspire passionate responses, Philippe began by asking point-blank how they would respond if their sons made such a claim. Three minutes later when silence weighed heavily on the air and there had not been a whisper of response, he tried another question: “If you could have anything right now, if the government was obligated to respond to your demands, what would you ask for?” This question incited greater response. The women’s answers were far more diverse and elaborate. Their concerns also speak to socio-economic difficulties in Petit Nanterre. The women took turns answering: I need housing for my kids, I want access to training, I would like to work, I want a husband (put forward by two laughing Algerian-born sisters in their late twenties; both admit that they are anxious to move out of their parents’ apartment and gain French citizenship if possible), I want to speak French well, and to have better health. Inspired by their responses and hoping to push them further, Philippe walked around to the other side of the half-circle of tables and chairs, stood behind them, and, one by one, placed a paper crown on their heads while one of the two teachers filled the uncomfortable silence by explaining the significance of International Women’s Day in defending women’s rights in France.

Most of the women present had already memorized the three fundamental Republican values in September, so Maria, one of the teachers, thought it appropriate to take up the theme of “equality” as a point of discussion. She asked the group whether, for

instance, their sons helped with domestic tasks in their homes like their daughters. A couple of women spoke, sharing their experiences. All of those who replied responded that no, their sons did not help much with domestic tasks. On this point several women replied that because they do not work outside the home, they prefer to do the housework themselves, and do it well. One Algerian-born Muslim conservative veiled woman in her early forties explained that when she is especially tired or not feeling well her husband would take over all the housework and care of the children. She added that she appreciates this effort a great deal because he works full-time outside the home. As she put it, most of the time “He does his work, and I do mine”. Others nodded in agreement and another 52 year-old Moroccan woman, Malika, added that these questions were ridiculous. Life in France, she explained simply doesn’t have the same *goût* (flavour) as in the *Bled*, especially pertaining to men. Men in France are not like the “real” men over there, they lack *caractère* or personal strength.<sup>3</sup> Based on his fieldwork in northern Algeria, French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu notes how unlike in France, in Algeria, honour and virility are far more socially manifest and that “virility must be validated by other men, in the fact of actual or potential violence, and certified by the recognition of belonging to a group of ‘real men’.” (Bourdieu 2002: 77). Malika’s comment may also reflect her husband’s unemployment, a social phenomenon which shifts the prescribed gender-specific social roles.

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<sup>3</sup> The question of male virility also arose in conversations I had with first and second generation single women in Petit Nanterre about their desired marriage partners. While all wanted to marry a Muslim, most wanted a ‘real’ man, someone from the *Bled* or someone whose family comes from there, so he will understand the importance of family and will uphold traditional family roles and relationships. See more on this topic in Chapter Four.

The following day I asked the women in class about their personal, familial arrangements and whether they thought household tasks should be shared, particularly, as is often the case in Petit Nanterre, if the husband was unemployed. This question elicited a variety of responses; many women did not agree. “It’s just not natural [for my husband to work at home]”; “I prefer to stay quietly at home”; “My husband works and when he comes home he’s tired [i.e. too tired for household tasks]”; “My husband’s business doesn’t interest me, and he’s not interested in doing housework either”; “Men and women are not the same. Why do we have to pretend they are?”; and, “*Allah* created us differently for a reason”. While this discourse privileging the radical distinction between private and public spaces was dominant in the majority of the women’s responses, two young Moroccan friends, married in their late-teens and early twenties responded somewhat differently. Djamila, 24, pregnant with her second child and married to a French-born man of Moroccan origins, cannot read or write but understands French well. She met her husband, a distant cousin, when he was on vacation in Casablanca. She was 18 and he was 28. The other woman, Sara, 21, is newly married to a Mauritian-born man with French citizenship, and completed high school in Arabic prior to leaving Casablanca. Although Sara could already read and write in French, she made incredible progress through Association Nadha’s classes in her oral French. In the course of this discussion on the division of household tasks, these two young women of Moroccan origin protested the way in which the other, mostly older, women in the group, framed their responses. Djamila explained that she was very independent. She often goes out unaccompanied by her husband during the day when her 3 year-old son was at school, to go shopping to the

market for food, or to the large La Défense shopping plaza for clothes. “I choose what I want when I go shopping and have my own *carte bleu* [debit card].” Sara often joins her; they make plans by calling one another on their mobile phones and meeting in the afternoon before their husbands return from work. Djamila is often scolded for talking out of turn and giggling in class so it is no surprise when, to emphasize her point, she laughs loudly and adds that when her husband does not allow her to do what she wants, she whips him: “I whip him [*Je le fouette*]! And whip him!,” she cried, gesturing wildly for comic effect. The other women laughed. Djamila conceded that while her husband, who works full-time in a local car manufacturing company, does not do much around the house, neither does she, so she feels she is not confined to their apartment.

### **Separate but Equal**

The debate which emerged amongst these women – most notably between older women who uphold traditional private/public marriage paradigms and Djamila and Sara, who expect to work outside the home in the future to make their own money – aptly characterizes a split I often heard discussed in Petit Nanterre. This dichotomy opposes the “Modern French Woman”, free to go out and to separate herself from her nuclear family, and the “Traditional Muslim Woman”, who owes greater responsibility to her nuclear and extended family. The stereotypical binary couplings of “Modern” with “French” and “Traditional” with “Muslim” are central to the construction of feminine identity. At the outset of my fieldwork, I had no intention of looking at these polarized labels, but having heard them expressed in such a way so frequently, I redirected my attention to them to consider their implications, particularly with respect to the lack of agency of Muslim

women perceived by members of *Femmes Solidaires*, and the lack of family and sexual propriety of French women as perceived by first-generation Maghrebian Muslim women in Petit Nanterre.

The notion of the woman relegated to a private, domestic sphere is, to a great extent, seen by members of the local chapter of *Femmes Solidaires* as necessarily “culturally Muslim” and a religiously-based phenomenon. That is, these prescribed gender roles and identities conform to a common Western religiously-based prescription of the divisions between men and women, implying the submission of women to their fathers and husbands, and their relegation to the private sphere. Indeed, several religious texts in Western monotheistic religious traditions portray this gender separation as the guarantor of an everlasting divine order on earth.<sup>4</sup> This conception of gender and the differentiation of tasks places women and men into a structure within which they are equal in inherent social importance, but publicly separated. Women’s roles are thus deemed equivalent to those of men, but considered different because of their distinctive biological and social abilities. This equity model, according to its proponents, assures that men and women have different natures based on innate characteristics resulting in separate roles. Women are best suited as mothers and wives, men as providers.<sup>5</sup> Equity is based on the notion of fair difference. This ideological model is often internalized so that

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<sup>4</sup> Western feminist scholars have critiqued a variety of religious texts to consider their implications for women (cf Paul’s First Letter to the Corinthians). Arguably some interpreters of Western institutional religious traditions have sought to control women, determining their social comportment (to be docile, obedient and discreet), their bodies (prescriptions relating to virginity, chastity and contraception), their dress, as well as their way of thinking and acting in accordance with traditional ideas (Minces 2006: 84).

<sup>5</sup> One figure often heralded in arguments to work outside the home (while remaining true to womanly nature and duties) is the Prophet Muhammad’s first wife Khadijah who was a successful business woman while fulfilling wifely duties. This paradigm also entails that women may work outside the home but are expected to continue all domestic work as well. Furthermore, the work must be *halal* (permitted by Islam) and appropriate to women’s natural abilities.

prescribed or restricted social roles appear as natural and not a product of hierarchical and oppressive social relations (see Ortner 1972; Juschka 1999; Bourdieu 2002; colonialism, slavery and racism are also arguably justified based on their “naturalness”). As Pierre Bourdieu asserts, in the modern Western world, masculine domination in the public and private spheres is sufficiently secure that no justification is required (2002: 5).

Examining the issue from an alternative perspective, Rebecca Foley explains that the conception of ‘rights’ that Muslim women tend to use differs from that of the Western liberal tradition’s individualism, for there is greater emphasis placed on the community, and responsibilities to the family and community are given priority over the individual. Both groups use communitarian arguments to make a case for women’s rights. Based on her fieldwork in Indonesia, Foley claims that “Those Muslim women who conceptualize women primarily as mothers and wives are not victims of false consciousness. Within Islam, this role for women is highly valued and those who subscribe to the separate but equal thesis can be considered to fight for women’s rights” (2001: 71). Certainly one of the advantages of this model, and an argument I often heard during interviews with middle-aged immigrant women who work in the home, is that it valorizes this work and domesticity and that, unlike the situation they perceive in modern “Western” families, the traditional female role within the nuclear family is sacralized.

This notion of separate but equal domains has been examined by anthropologists for decades. Margaret Mead wrote about gender division in *Sex and Temperament in Three Primitive Societies* (1935) and posited that most societies divide the universe of human characteristics in two, attributing one half to men and the other to women. In her

work describing different masculine and feminine “temperaments” Mead notes its many advantages for society, culture and civilization; her analysis thus legitimates the division of labour. Sex segregation is not limited to Muslim communities. *Femmes Solidaires* itself does not encourage the participation of men, believing the space of ‘Cause Café’ to be more open and safer for women to share their experiences if men are absent. A more recent interpretation of the naturalization of these categories is developed by Alice Schwarzer in her analysis of the contemporary usage of Simon de Beauvoir’s feminist critique:

Given that one can hardly tell women that washing up saucepans is their divine mission, they are told that bringing up children is their divine mission. But the way things are in this world, bringing up children has a great deal to do with washing up saucepans. In this way, women are thrust back into the role of a relative being, as a second-class person (1984:114).

Indeed, in the second volume of *Le Deuxième Sexe*, de Beauvoir charts how women’s identities are shaped from childhood to womanhood to motherhood to become both an idol (the sacralization of this role) and a servant (the relegation to domestic chores) (1979: 31).

Thus, while the ‘separate but equal’ paradigm can be useful in celebrating the unique role of women, because it has historically been men who have defined these differences, this complementarity remains suspect, or what Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza would call “hermeneutically suspicious” (1992). Often the separation limits and removes power from women: they are refused the possibility of defining themselves. As I describe in Chapter Four, the model also upholds a radically traditional version of the family that excludes any possibility which falls outside this nucleus is inappropriate.



## Feminism in France

To consider the larger context surrounding International Women's Day in France, I briefly characterize the contemporary French feminist movement, beginning with an examination of two seminal texts, Simone de Beauvoir's *Le Deuxième Sexe* (1949) and Pierre Bourdieu's *La domination masculine* (1998), and concluding with a discussion of central feminist political associations in the late 1960s. I contend that de Beauvoir's work published in the postwar period served to encourage associations like the MLF (*Le Mouvement de la Libération des Femmes*, or the Women's Liberation Movement), which eventually led to the creation of *Femmes Solidaires*.<sup>6</sup>

Historically it is no coincidence that at the heart of initial tensions between “les deux Frances”, Catholic France and secular Republican France, the status accorded to

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<sup>6</sup> French scholarship has recently suggested that the category often referred to as “French Feminism” is, in fact, an Anglo-American fabrication not reflected within generalized feminist scholarship in the country. French-born feminist Christine Delphy notes that “Most feminists from France find it extraordinary to be presented, when abroad, with a version of their feminism and their country of which they had previously no idea” (1995a: 190). As largely the creation of English-speaking scholars, for Delphy and others, this characterization is baffling not only because it inaccurately represents the intellectual feminist movement in France, but because other types of Western feminisms are not given geographical monikers, like “North American” or “British.” Delphy suggests somewhat conspiratorially that the main motive behind this Anglo-Saxon creation of “French Feminism” is to promote an essentialist agenda (1995a: 221). Delphy asserts that this construction can be characterized as conflating “the feminine” and “the masculine” and the “sexual difference” between them as asserting that the psyche is universal and separate from society and culture, and that the only tenable difference between people is “sexual difference” (1995a:198). Claire Moses adds that the misrepresentation of French Feminism by American scholars – exemplified by an overemphasis on theorists Hélène Cixous, Julia Kristeva and Luce Irigaray – privileges post-structuralism over materialism, and literary and philosophical discourses above social and historical ones (see also Winter 1997: 212). Amazingly, two of these thinkers – Kristeva and Cixous – have been reclaimed as feminists in spite of their own declarations to the contrary, which according to Bronwyn Winter, constitutes “a spectacular manifestation of imperialism” (1997: 212). Also important to note is that French Feminism arrived in the US via university departments of French literature, thereby privileging purely theoretical discourse over and above discussions of contemporary social movements. Still, Delphy proposes that this Anglo characterization of French Feminism has been largely immune to postmodern developments (1995a: 201), and neglects the more current social constructionist model. Bronwyn Winter similarly deconstructs outside largely Anglo representations of “French Feminism” as both reductionist and dangerous. Winter claims they constitute a blurring of the boundaries between the feminist and the feminine (“the biologisation of women”) and between feminism and “queer politics” (1997: 215).

gender was controversial. Republicans, partisans of a more individualistic and feminist logic, defended a conception of *laïcité* which presupposed sexual equality through the establishment of co-education, the abolition of sexual segregation, and the legal institution of equal citizenship. In short, at the beginning of the twentieth century, an open conflict between defenders of the Catholic Church and of the Republic was exacerbated by contradictory philosophical notions about the status and nature of women. Indeed, clerical opposition to the notion of equal rights for women served to radicalize many militants. For Republicans, *laïcité* thus became the indispensable tool for the emancipation of women, related to the demand more generally for equal rights for all. The traditional Catholic position cannot be characterized as being especially interested in the status of women, save for a minority of Catholic feminists whose project sought to Christianize feminism (Rocheport 2004).<sup>7</sup>

Also treating some of these important Biblical figures, French existential philosopher Simone de Beauvoir (1908-1986) a leading figure for a second generation of French feminists. Her work drew a large readership in part because of her reluctance to radicalize herself. Her two volume *The Second Sex* was, however, radical for the late 1940s, treating homosexuality (1979: 207), contraception (1979: 339), abortion (1979: 328) and prostitution (which she claims sometimes can be equated with marriage, 1979: 425). More generally de Beauvoir suggests that within a patriarchal system, women are objectified, never subject nor creator, and are thereby “Othered” (1968: 95, see also 1968:

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<sup>7</sup> This feminist theological position centered on female Biblical figures and the re-valorization or rereading of their importance (i.e. examining the importance of the matriarchs, the women of Jesus’ entourage, scenes that depict particularly strong women and prophetesses of the first century). Lilith, for instance, became an integral symbol for this perspective.

190). The second volume begins claiming that “One is not born a woman, but becomes a woman” (1979:13), thereby marking an early theoretical conception of the separation of sex and gender in feminist theory. This theorization also ruptured socio-patriarchal rhetoric by introducing the separation between sex (as physiology) and gender (as the social distinction between the masculine and the feminine).

Other contemporary feminists have built upon this notion. In *L’ennemi principal: Penser le genre* (2001), Marxist feminist sociologist Christine Delphy shifts the sex/gender paradigm, arguing that sex does not create gender, oppression does. That is, for Delphy, gender creates the category of sex insofar as it promotes a hierarchical social partition with social implications; physical differences are secondary (2001: 230). Judith Butler likewise claims that de Beauvoir’s theory can be extended to the assertion that all gender is unnatural (1986:35); Butler convincingly critiques de Beauvoir’s positioning of gender as voluntaristic and individualistic. That is, if one “becomes” a woman as de Beauvoir suggests, how is agency involved? Can a woman stand outside of a gendered self and choose ways of being? Following Foucault and Wittig, Butler also questions whether the body is a wholly “natural” phenomenon to begin with (if “sex” is equated with anatomy). Of course, social constraints on gender compliance and deviation must also be taken into account; not all choices are socially viable.

Pertaining to my own work, *Le Deuxième Sexe* (1949) also positions traditional religion as one factor, among others, which serves to alienate women within subservient roles, both domestically and socially (1968: 24). As a steadfast atheist, Beauvoir claims that the creation of religion by men surely assures their ability to dominate women:

Now, in Western religions God the Father is a man, an old gentleman having a specifically virile attribute: a luxuriant white beard. For Christians, Christ is still more definitely a man of flesh and blood, with a long blond beard. Angels have no sex, according to the theologians; but they have masculine names and appear as good-looking young men. God's representatives on earth: the Pope, the bishop (whose ring one kisses), the priest who says Mass, he who preaches, he before whom one kneels in the secrecy of the confessional – all of these are men (1989: 289-290).

De Beauvoir adds that while the myths of Eve and of Pandora were particularly useful at the hands of male dominators (1968: 24, 31, 113; 1979:40), in the contemporary world science has assumed the role of legitimizing the domination of women.

De Beauvoir's conception of traditional marriage as facilitating the transcendence of one spouse (the male who inhabits the public sphere) by relegating the other to Sisyphean chores suggests that traditional marriage supplies men with a female "Other" upon whom to take out resentments. In turn, women's intelligence and self-determination are atrophied (1968: 30, 1979: 151). Women, adds de Beauvoir, must use trickery to "catch" and "manage" their husbands (1979: 300); she is "given" by her parents to her husband who "takes" her (1979: 223). Moreover, also pertinent to my observations in the course of fieldwork in Petit Nanterre, de Beauvoir adds that as an institution, marriage is esteemed as the culmination of adult romance so that women are made to feel socially incomplete if single, solidifying marriage as a fundamental life project (1979: 89, 226, 539). While first-generation Maghrebien Muslim women in Petit Nanterre do not equate marriage with romantic fulfillment, they do generally understand marriage as central to their vocation as women. For de Beauvoir, woman's only salvation can be to metaphorically transform her domestic prison into a pleasant kingdom (1979: 259). De Beauvoir concedes that this model is largely a bourgeois arrangement: many poor and working class men do not achieve moments of transcendence in their employed work;

impoverished mothers often work and keep house, which can be even more taxing (1979: 331).

Five years prior to the publication of these two volumes in Paris in 1949, women in France were given the right to vote. Under the Vichy Regime, abortion had been a capital crime (lifted during this post-war period) and contraception illegal. In 1965 women were still unable to open personal bank accounts. By 1974, however, laws prohibiting abortion (or IVG, *Interruption Volontaire de Grossesse*) were lifted following the political intervention of Simone Veil, then attachée to the Minister of Justice. Indeed, the pro-choice movement also served as a means to treat the question of religion and the state in the Republic. More generally, as in other sociopolitical contexts, the women's movement in France in the 1970s was characterized by women's only groups, the valorization of personal experiences (i.e. a North American positioning of the personal as political), and reformism which fought not only for equal rights, but for the liberation of women (Picq 1998).

Co-founded by Antoinette Fouque, Josiane Chanel, Monique Wittig and Christine Delphy, the *MLF* (*Mouvement de Libération des Femmes* or Women's Liberation Movement) enjoyed early success and recognition with its slogan "MLF is all women." Its Marxist politics had a wide following in the wake of the social shifts in May 1968. Simone de Beauvoir joined the group in 1972, later commenting that "The women's groups which existed in France before the MLF was founded in 1970 were generally reformist and legalistic. I had no desire to associate myself with them. The new feminism

is radical, by contrast” (from *Simone de Beauvoir Today* in *Moi* 2002: 89).<sup>8</sup> According to Françoise Picq, however, one of the early problems for the MLF was that in radically allying their political theory of feminism with the exploitation of women in “patriarchal production” and in placing itself within a Marxist utopian paradigm, the group was unable to evolve following a waning of support for communism (1998: 209). The group was divided around the notion that women could not be liberated without the abolition of patriarchy *and* capitalism.<sup>9</sup>

Despite this divide in the MLF, the movement lost its early momentum as it became institutionalized, constituting “a massive return to the reality that the MLF had denied in order to establish itself” (Garcia 1994: 827). Moreover, the group came into conflict again when several lesbian feminists wished to establish sexual orientation as a sign of political purity, prohibiting the equal participation of heterosexual women in the group and dissociating themselves even further from the lives of ordinary women: “the lesbian separatists made no distinction between rape and consensual sex, for instance, or between heterosexuality and support for the traditional construction of gender

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<sup>8</sup> More mythically, the organization is said to have begun with the laying of a wreath at the Arc de Triomphe on August 26, 1970 for the wife of the Unknown Soldier, said to be even more unknown than he. Another highly publicized moment came when the *Nouvel Observateur* published the “Manifesto of the 343” in which high profile women in France publicly stated that they had undergone abortions in order to use their social and symbolic capital to publicly legitimate the procedure (Simone de Beauvoir was one such participant).

<sup>9</sup> Sandrine Garcia points to the separation of two factions – on the one side, the Vincennes Group (from the French university by the same name) which itself was split between followers of Antoinette Fouque and Monique Wittig, but was generally ‘differentialist’, and the FMA (*Féminin Masculin Avenir* or Feminine Masculine Future) led by Christine Delphy and Anne Zélsky which had adopted a more ‘egalitarianist’ position (1994: 835). ‘Differentialist’ scholar Fouque’s psychoanalytic work examined, among others, ‘the imperialism of the phallus’, while sociologist and ‘egalitarianist’ Delphy’s work examined domestic labour and the social construction of gender. Garcia critiques both approaches: “the differentialists glossed over the social character of female specificity, while the egalitarianists denied that male domination, though universal, was heavily dependent on social class” (1994: 836).

differences” (Garcia 1994: 857). Today, the MLF is no longer a broad-based organization and has been replaced by others, like *Femmes Solidaires*. By 1980, the MLF had become a research institute.

Like de Beauvoir (see especially 1968: 40-65), French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu depicts male domination as a universal social phenomenon mistakenly “naturalized.” I mention Bourdieu’s examination of the structural constraints of patriarchy because it is largely based on his (now dated) 1960s fieldwork with Berbers in the mountainous Kabyle region of Algeria, and is therefore especially relevant to the situation of Maghrebien women in France. Bourdieu was also a central thinker in academic feminism in France. Feminist theorist Toril Moi claims that “a Bourdieuan approach enables us to reconceptualize gender as a social category in a way which undercuts the traditional essentialist/nonessentialist divide”, particularly in his micro-theorization of social power (Moi 1991: 1019). Moreover, Bourdieu’s analysis of sex and gender moves beyond the recognition of the arbitrary nature of the categories of masculine and feminine (2002: 8; see also his “dehistorization” of history, 114). The identification of the historical mechanisms that accomplish the ‘dehistoricization’ and the ‘eternalization’ of sexual difference can thus be utilized to challenge pervasive male patriarchy. Bourdieu terms this patriarchy ‘symbolic violence.’

Symbolic violence is attained only through an act of a practical recognition and unrecognition which takes place below consciousness and of willingness and which confers their ‘hypnotic power’ to all its manifestations, injunctions, suggestions, that seductions, threats, reproaches, orders or calls to order. But a relationship of domination functions only by the complicity of dispositions depends profoundly *for its perpetuation* (2002: 64).



This symbolic violence (based on a long understood and utilized system of homologous oppositions) occurs in obvious spaces – i.e. domestic – but especially in ontological methods and in larger social structures, like that of the State, schools and the Church (2002: 15). Some women can be doubly or triply dominated, like an African American cleaning woman or an Algerian-born illiterate woman living in a housing project (2002: 50; see also Guénif-Souilamas 2001). Thus even the act of knowing or learning can lead to further subordination; a sexual relationship can also be a social expression of domination (Bourdieu 2002: 37, 55). Useful in its application to the social presentation of the body, the invocation of biology allows power structures to appear “natural,” masking the production of power relations and allowing the divisions to remain unquestioned. Bourdieu examines other more latent forms of domination which he claims maintain women in an invisible enclosure; the veil, he adds, is the most visible manifestation of this latent domination (2002: 47). Symbolic violence functions in producing women who accept the *doxa* (that which cannot be questioned) which oppresses them; their oppression is therefore a self-fulfilling prophecy. While Bourdieu does offer some hope of relief from this domination through his notion of ‘dehistoricization,’ he asserts that unequal social power structures are dominant because social agents (men and women) internalize social values, consciously and subconsciously.<sup>10</sup> Although useful in its anthropological application, Bourdieu’s analysis can also be critiqued because he makes no mention of the

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<sup>10</sup> Toril Moi offers a lucid contemporary example: “women who laugh at male self-importance in university seminars may find themselves constructed not as lucid critics of male ridicule, but as frivolous females incapable of understanding truly serious thought” (1991: 1031). The powerful thus possess symbolic capital which enables them to wield symbolic power and is legitimized as almost unrecognizable symbolic violence.



likely sociopolitical effects of Algeria's War of Independence (1954-1962) upon the context of the population he studied.<sup>11</sup>

### ***Femmes Solidaires* (Women in Solidarity)**

Following this brief sketch of the contemporary theoretical context of feminism in France, I now turn to the feminist organization with which I conducted fieldwork from September 2004 to June 2006. Like the larger *MLF* (Women's Liberation Movement) which preceded it, *Femmes Solidaires* also has important links to the Communist movement, and specifically the *Parti Communiste Français* (PCF or the French Communist Party). Its roots stem from communist resistance movements to the German occupation of France during the Second World War. Called the *Union des Femmes Françaises* (UFF or the Union of French Feminists) from its conception in 1946 until 1998, the group has an active membership in Nanterre, with two office spaces. Early on, the group mobilized around women's suffrage in 1946, and rallied again with protests against the wars in Indochina and Algeria, sending care packages with food and clothing to those in need. The UFF was extremely publicly vocal once again in the 1970s when debates on the legalization of abortion swept the nation. In 1998, the UFF (Union of French Feminists) changed its name to *Femmes Solidaires* under pressure from members

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<sup>11</sup> Bourdieu also presupposes that his fieldwork findings from the 1960s remain relevant in revealing the relative autonomy of gender domination, even outside Western contexts of capitalism. Furthermore, his characterization of men and women is over generalized – men take pleasure in violence, view their sexual relations as conquests and are deeply afraid of their own femininity (2002: 50-53) while women are complicit and resigned to their secondary status, creating pessimism about agency and the possibility of change. (Bourdieu is clearly not, however, responsible for ensuring a happy ending). While he briefly mentions the possibility of mutuality in gay and lesbian relationships, Bourdieu claims that one respite from the gendered domination is through a relationship of love, reciprocity and disinterestedness.

in Seine-Saint-Denis who felt that foreign women were excluded by this appellation. Following this name change, the organization's 60th anniversary celebrations were an occasion to take stock of the organization. One local journalist claimed that "Following a less active period in the 1990s, *Femmes Solidaires* has recently started to resonate more with its adherents" (Corsier 2006: 1).

The women of the Nanterrian branch of *Femmes Solidaires* are self-declared feminists, "French French" and largely middle class. They do not see themselves as connected to the earlier theoretical models in French feminism that I have previously described; the work of Simone de Beauvoir or Pierre Bourdieu, for instance, was never mentioned in their meetings. Based on my observations, the twelve or so active members of this local association seek to "save" Muslim women in the municipality from the "dangers" of Islam, hoping to share the "freedoms" accorded by Western modernity and supposedly enjoyed by French-born women. Their *espace cause café* ("coffee break space") is generally held on two Saturday mornings each month.<sup>12</sup> It has been the occasion for several foreign-born women to come by the small community meeting-room nestled between a dozen high-rise apartment buildings near Nanterre Prefecture for legal advice and emotional support. One of the brochures available beside the coffee and croissants near the entrance reads: "All women have rights: Forced Marriage is Violence Against Children and Women. *Femmes Solidaires* brings you its support and informs you of your rights." The brochure includes information about available resources and other

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<sup>12</sup> *Femmes Solidaires* in Nanterre has a much larger base of support, but there are a little more than a dozen women who participate regularly in the local group's events. The national office claims to have more than 50, 000 members (Interview 26 June 2006).

advice for women in precarious situations, including the suggestion to make photocopies of all personal identification and give them to a trusted person outside one's husband's reach. According to the local president, immigrant women are often unsure of their rights in France and without financial recourse, so *Femmes Solidaires* has several lawyers at their disposition.<sup>13</sup> The women of the organization are also quite willing to help and listen

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<sup>13</sup> Along with the organizations « Ni Putes, Ni Soumises » and “Groupe Femmes pour l’Abolition des Mutations Sexuelles”, *Femmes Solidaires* has been involved in a recent public campaign targeting high school girls in the hopes of preventing forced marriage in France. While the practice is illegal in France (and magistrates who suspect that women have not consented are encouraged to delay civil ceremonies), it does occur (see some case studies in Petit Nanterre in Chapter Four). To assist women seeking to flee these often abusive situations, as an organization *Femmes Solidaires* works to locate shelter, annul their conjugal unions and locate various other resources. This organization has been involved in several legal proceedings, acting as the civil party in cases involving conjugal violence against foreign-born women. One case settled in 2004 involved the death of Latifa Loulichki, a 24 year old Moroccan-born woman stabbed to death by her father, upset because she had refused his choice of husband. Another case the group undertook along with “la Commission pour l’Abolition des mutilations sexuelles” involved the prosecution of two sets of Malian-born parents who had circumcised their daughters in France in the late 1980s. These parents were found guilty of “complicité de violences volontaires ayant entraîné une mutilation permanente” (or, “being complicit to voluntary violence which led to permanent mutilation”) (Chambon 2002: 9), setting a legal precedence against female circumcision in the Republic.

A more recent legal case involved a former member of the Nanterrian sub-group of *Femmes Solidaires*. Louiza Benakli, a 40 year-old lawyer and assistant to the mayor of Nanterre, and single mother of Algerian origins was assassinated alongside eight other city councilors at the Nanterre City Hall 26-27 March, 2002. Less than a year later in January 2003, members of Benakli's immediate family were questioned about the murder of her former companion, 41 year-old Abdelmalek Benbara, an Algerian deputy with whom she had had a daughter in 2001. Because of its link with the shocking assassination of city employees, this incident was highly mediatized. Interestingly, reports focused on Benakli's immigrant origins. The *Parisien*, for one, reported that: “For the Benakli family, Louiza was a symbol of professional success and integration: the daughter of Algerian immigrants, from a family of seven children, who, at forty, climbed the social ladder to become a lawyer and assistant to the mayor of Nanterre” (*Le Parisien* 2003 :13). Following Benakli's death, it became clear that Ms. Benakli's former partner had led a double life: he also lived with a wife and four children in the Loire Valley region and had a second-wife, a FLN Algerian deputy living in Tizi Ouzou, a northern city in Kabylia. Benakli's 81 year-old mother and 40 year-old sister were found guilty of Benbara's murder in 2005.

In our discussion one Saturday morning about Ms. Benakli's death, her former friends at “Cause Café” called Benbara's death “an honour killing”, claiming that her mother and sister were forced to defend her memory in the face of a man who had called her a “slut” (having borne his child outside of marriage) and had wanted to take the child with him to Algeria to live with his second wife. Benakli and Benbara had been “religiously” married in 1997 and had planned a civil service to legalize their union. According to the women at the Nanterre branch of *Femmes Solidaires*, on three occasions, Mr. Benbara failed to appear at planned civil union services. Their daughter has since been placed under the guardianship of one of Benakli's sisters, who publicly stated at the end of the court case for the murder of Benbara that her sister was a victim twice, once by her assassin at City Hall and once by her former partner's slander (*Liberation* 2003: 24).

to those in difficult family situations. Marie, a 54 year-old divorced mother of two who lives with her common-law partner in a nearby apartment, is the president of the local Nanterrian group. She explains:

We have women who come by for problems with their papers sometimes despite the fact they've sought help through other organizations, whether it be papers generally, their social security or problems related to receiving family allowances, more often than not. *Femmes Solidaires* accompanies them and because we're a well-known organization, not always, but sometimes we get results. We see women who are in miserable situations. Last year, one woman came by on a Saturday morning with a baby in her arms and she didn't have milk for the baby, so the only solution we found at *Femmes Solidaires* was to go to the pharmacy because we needed a special kind of milk (Interview 5 December 2005).<sup>14</sup>

Apart from the *cause cafés* on Saturday mornings in Nanterre Préfecture, the group also has a permanent office centrally located in Nanterre Ville. It is open two days a week and is run by a part-time staff-person who greets women who come by seeking assistance. According to Martina, a 45 year old divorcee from Chile who works part-time for the local association, immigrant women from Petit Nanterre and the city in general hear about the office by word of mouth or because they have walked by the exterior. In our interview, Martina described several instances of young foreign-born women in situations of quasi-slavery and forced-marriages (all African-born Muslim women living in Parisian suburbs) who have sought assistance from *Femmes Solidaires*. Two “liberated” local women from sub-Saharan Africa (notably, most residents of Petit Nanterre are

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<sup>14</sup> « On a des femmes qui viennent pour des problèmes de papiers, quelques fois, malgré qu'elles ont fait tout le circuit, que ça soit les papiers, les papiers de sécurité sociale, les problèmes autour de la famille pour recevoir de l'argent, bien souvent. *Femmes Solidaires* les accompagnent et parce qu'on est une organisation reconnue et des fois quand on se déplace, ça marche. Pas toutes les fois, mais quelques fois on a des résultats. On voit aussi des femmes qui sont dans des situations de misère. Une femme qui est venue un samedi l'année passé avec un bébé dans ses bras et elle n'avait pas de lait pour le bébé, donc la seule solution qu'on a trouvé à *Femme Solidaires* c'est d'aller au pharmacie car c'était un lait spéciale qui nous fallait » (Interview 5 December 2005).

Maghrebien) offered similar testimonies about the assistance of *Femmes Solidaires* to help publicize the group's activities:

I have been a member [of *Femmes Solidaires*] since my departure from prison in 1998 in Djibouti. While I was pregnant with my fourth child, I was extradited and imprisoned for nine months because I exposed a series of rapes committed by soldiers of my country in Ethiopian refugee camps. I worked as a coordinator in a humanitarian aid organization which helps refugee children. *Femmes Solidaires* understood my complaint. Thanks to their international mobilization campaign I was freed. I am an example of their action. I owe them my freedom (*Le Parisien*, 2006).<sup>15</sup>

I was married in 1989 in Mali at the age of sixteen. In 1998, my husband had me come to France with a one-month tourist visa, but he promised to undertake the steps so I could be regularized. I cannot have children. When my husband realized, he confiscated my passport, stopped the regularization process and started to become violent towards me. He hit me with electrical wire and tore out my hair. One day, he even cut my ear. Without papers, I cannot file a complaint. Without papers, I cannot go outside for fear of having my papers checked in the street. Without papers, I do not exist, and my husband knows it. I found out [that her husband had taken a second wife in Mali] when I came across some Malian administrative papers, hidden in the desk of my husband or ex-husband, I no longer know. I would like to leave his residence, but, without papers, I cannot be accepted into a shelter. I cannot return to Mali because my mother no longer wants to see me and I do not want to go to [live with] the family of my in-laws (*Le Parisien*, 2002).<sup>16</sup>

Indeed, the organization's "renewal" in the early 1990s, *Femmes Solidaires*' groups in the

Parisian suburbs have focused much of their efforts and activism on the plight of foreign-

born women in France. Still, the Nanterre branch encounters difficulties in visibility and

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<sup>15</sup> « Je suis adhérente [à *Femmes Solidaires*] depuis ma sortie de prison en 1998 à Djibouti. Alors que j'étais enceinte de mon quatrième enfant, j'ai été extradée et emprisonnée pendant neuf mois parce que j'avais dénoncé des viols commis par les soldats de mon pays dans les camps de réfugiés en Éthiopie. Je travaillais comme coordinatrice dans une association humanitaire d'aide aux enfants réfugiés. Femmes solidaires a été saisi de mon dossier. C'est grâce à leur campagne de mobilisation internationale que je suis sortie. Je suis l'exemple de leur action, je leur dois ma liberté » (*Le Parisien*, 2006).

<sup>16</sup> « Je me suis mariée en 1989 au Mali à l'âge de seize ans. En 1998, mon mari m'a fait venir en France avec un permis touristique d'un mois, mais il m'a promis d'entreprendre des démarches pour obtenir ma régularisation. Je ne peux pas avoir d'enfants. Quand mon mari s'en est aperçu, il m'a confisqué mon passeport, a arrêté les démarches de régularisation et a commencé à se montrer violent envers moi. Il me frappe avec des fils électriques et m'a arraché des tresses. Un jour, il m'a même coupé l'oreille. Sans papiers, je ne peux pas porter plainte. Sans papiers, je ne peux pas sortir de peur de me faire contrôler dans la rue. Sans papiers, je n'existe pas, et mon mari le sait. Je l'ai découvert [que son mari a pris une deuxième femme au Mali] en tombant sur les papiers de l'administration malienne, cachés dans le bureau de mon mari ou ex-mari, je ne sais plus. Je voudrais quitter son domicile, mais, sans papiers, je ne peux pas aller dans un foyer d'accueil. Je ne peux pas non plus retourner au Mali car ma mère ne veut plus me voir et je ne veux pas aller dans la famille de mes beaux-parents » (*Le Parisien*, 2002).

in gaining access to these women. The organization president told me that is often difficult for *Femmes Solidaires* to hold meetings in some neighbourhoods. The leader of *Femmes Solidaires* in Saint-Denis, a suburb north of Paris, noted that when women meet to speak about their rights, “people get upset. We’ve had some issues with young people who don’t accept that their mothers and their sisters want to be autonomous” (cited in Corcier 2006:1). There have not been such problems in Petit Nanterre because the Association Nadha, Zy’va and the Centre Social des Canibouts hold French language classes. Likewise the Saint-Denis-based *Femmes Solidaires* group has begun coordinating French language and literary courses in the hopes of reaching a greater “foreign-born” public. Moreover, *Femmes Solidaires*’ literature explicitly underlines that they are a movement for “toutes celles qui vivent en France, françaises et immigrées” (all those women who live in France, French and Immigrant women).

### **Femmes Solidaires, *Laïcité*, and Women’s Rights**

During the interviews and participant observation I conducted with members of the Nanterre branch, I became particularly interested in the way in which members of *Femmes Solidaires* allied themselves with *laïcité* (French secularism), seeing it as an essential component in guaranteeing women’s rights. I suggest that an important but often neglected component of contemporary debates on secularism in France is perceived to be the link between women’s rights and *laïcité* and the necessity of protecting *laïcité* to ensure the equality status of women. That is, secularism is defended in order to push for gender equality in French society. Forms of institutional religion, particularly those which

are the most visible or conspicuous are depicted by *Femmes Solidaires* as jeopardizing to the equality of women. Despite the media attention in 2005 remembering the centenary year of the 1905 law separating church and state in France, little coverage was given in the country's major newspapers to the gender implications of the law or to feminist interest in its defense, possibly because of the self-evidence of the position. One contributor to *Le Monde* described *laïcité* as a necessary shield for women: "Religious fundamentalists cannot tolerate the two principles which afford women autonomy: control over fertility/reproduction and paid work. Attempts to weaken women's rights are associated with religion and thus, in France, with attacks against secularism" (Vianès 2005). Interest in connections between religion and feminism was more notable in conjunction with International Women's Day. Representatives of the *League du Droit des Femmes* (League of Women's Rights) wrote an editorial piece appearing in *Le Monde* on International Women's Day in 2005 denouncing so-called misogynist practices justified by religion. Other feminists also warn against multiculturalism which they characterize as protecting religious fundamentalists. These feminists rhetorically ask how equality of the sexes can evolve in a culture (culture here is equated with religious practice) where the domination of women is an article of religious faith, and how 'a' country (clearly France) can tolerate practices like genital mutilation, forced marriages and polygamy (*Le Monde*, 8 March 2005: 15; see also Olin 1999 on this topic more broadly). Defending secularism in the public social realm is thus equivalent to defending the rights of women, particularly against the 'cultural' mis/practices of Islam. This position assumes that a religious perspective necessarily creates an unequal gender-based social hierarchy.

While not as prevalent in popular media, for the French feminists in the Nanterre section of *Femmes Solidaires* the centrality of French secularism to secularism was confirmed on many occasions in 2005 with reflections on the centenary year of the legal adoption of *laïcité* in France; at their annual congress 22-24 October 2004; at the association's 60<sup>th</sup> anniversary reflections in October 2005; and during polemical debates on the Referendum on the European Constitution held 29 May 2005 (the French ultimately voted 54.7% against the proposition). Literature distributed during a public debate on the European Constitution highlights the feminists' opposition to the Constitution for two principle reasons: the omission of any assurance of secularism and the absence of any guarantee of access to or the legality of abortion and contraception. Other issues at hand included parity, working hours and social benefits. Poland was cited as an example of a country in the European Union where, as in Ireland, there is a close (and according to the *Femmes Solidaires*, dangerous) alliance between Catholicism and national identity. Similarly, on 8 March 2006, on the occasion of a reception at the City Hall of Nanterre for International Women's Day, women in the Association affirmed that in posters throughout the hall that *la laïcité [est] pour seul remède au développement des intégrismes religieux* ("secularism is the only guarantor against the development of religious extremism"). Of course, fear of religious extremism is not limited to feminist women.



## Feminist Muslims?

In this chapter I knowingly and with hesitation replicate a false separation between ‘feminists’ and ‘Muslims’ in order to categorize my findings in the field and to analyze the caricatured depictions I heard from both sides. Most of the women I interviewed in Petit Nanterre were quick to dismiss any linkage between themselves and feminists, equating this position with being a “French liberated woman” or with “hating men.” There are, however, women who self-identify as both Muslim and feminist. I therefore focus this section upon women who are self-identified feminist Muslims and members of the Nanterrian section of *Femmes Solidaires*. I accept these categories (‘feminist’ and ‘Muslim’) at face value, noting that a feminist revision of this religious tradition might entail a different reading of the Qur’an and its rites or a transformed understanding of the socio-religious spaces accorded to women. Of the 12 regular members of the *cause cafés*, two women self-identify as Muslims. One of these is a practicing Muslim and the other identifies herself as a “former Muslim”. Other veiled Muslim women or women of immigrant descent have attended various *Femmes Solidaires* meetings but did not become regular members during my period of observation, from the fall of 2004 to the summer of 2006.<sup>17</sup> The national president-elect of *Femmes Solidaires*, Sabine Salmon, claims that while the organization includes some practicing veiled Muslim women, their presence makes her uncomfortable:

Quite simply, for us [*Femmes Solidaires*] the headscarf today is truly a symbol of oppression which entails a political project in relation to the freedom of women’s rights.

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<sup>17</sup> There are other reasons why immigrant women do not attend *Femmes Solidaires* meetings regularly. As I signaled earlier, there have been some problems coordinating communication in suburban public-housing areas, particularly in Petit Nanterre whose physical disconnection from the rest of the city results in lower rates of participation in associations outside the district.

But still, this doesn't mean that we close the door to women who wear the headscarf. We welcome them in our 'cause cafés' and other activities, we discuss with them and present our position. For us it's still quite worrisome because with these women, we can't talk about sex, we can't discuss issues of sexuality, we can't discuss or talk about abortion, nor can we talk about contraception, or doing sporting activities, of having that liberty. So, in a way all of these silences create a space we don't want, impede our liberties in a way that we don't feel comfortable. [Interview 26 June 2006]

This position parallels the implicit assumption outlined in Chapter Three within the Stasi Commission report: that there are direct political implications when a woman wears a headscarf in France.

The topic of feminism and Islam was broached during a round table discussion I organized 10 December 2005 with eight women of the Nanterre *Femmes Solidaires* group during a Saturday morning *cause café*. One of the women present, Farah, a well-dressed 58 year-old mother of Algerian origin, described her experience as a Muslim woman and as a former part-time employee at the *Femmes Solidaires* office (Martina later replaced her). The first topic we discussed was *laïcité*. Farah explains how she felt she needed to reconcile being a Muslim while being an active member of the organization:

For me, as an Algerian, there isn't *laïcité*, that's to say, we have a [government] Minister of Religious Affairs. So I don't know the secular discourse in great depth [. . .] I arrived [in France] with my own problems [. . .] but I managed to get by . . . to facilitate my problems. So [after my arrival], I had pretty much completely forgotten about this religious business. And, little by little, with my health problems, I had a renewed interest in religion. And from there I took a break, I distanced myself a little from the Association [. . .]. This Association is against religion. It permits itself to judge women who wear the headscarf.

I have lived conjugally with a man for five years without being married. I drank alcohol. I ate pork. I lived as my companion lived. So, just to tell you that I am a good example of someone to talk about this kind of thing, because I've gone from one extreme to the other [. . .]. I felt that, quite simply, we [*Femmes Solidaires*] judged women who wore the headscarf, without trying to understand them (Interview 10 December 2005).<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> « Moi comme Algérienne, chez nous il n'y a pas de laïcité, c'est-à-dire, on a un ministre d'affaires religieuses. Donc je connais pas à fond le discours sur la laïcité [. . .] Je suis arrivée [en France] avec mes problèmes [. . .] mais on réussi pour retrouver un peu . . . pour faciliter nos problèmes [. . .]. Donc [en arrivant en France], j'avais un peu complètement oublié cette histoire de religion. Et, petit à petit, avec mes problèmes de santé, j'ai commencé à me ré intéressée à la religion. Et c'est de là que j'ai fait un

This mother of two was forced to leave her job at *Femmes Solidaires* when she experienced medical problems and related psychological distress. One of the minor disagreements Farah had with some of the other women in the executive surrounded Farah's teenage daughter's decision to wear a headscarf, a practice she continued for three years. While Farah claimed that she did not encourage this practice and that she had worked assiduously and patiently to encourage her daughter to abandon the headscarf, she also respected and defended her daughter's choice to wear it. One of the older French-born members of *Femmes Solidaires*, Janique, explained that she felt ill at ease during the period when Farah's daughter was veiled and would come by their office, despite the fact that she was *très copines* with Farah (or, quite good chums). Janique's position against the veil is in line with *Femmes Solidaires*' position.

The official position taken by *Femmes Solidaires* towards the Islamic headscarf is clear. As is often repeated in their monthly national magazine *Clara Magazine*, "the headscarf is a symbol of sexism".<sup>19</sup> One of their most important public actions in September 2005 involved a public demonstration and other political agitation against the possible installation of an Islamic *Shari'ah* law court in Ontario, Canada. In a petition letter circulated by members at a demonstration in front of the Canadian Embassy in Paris on 8 September 2005, the threat of Islam was again made clear: "Our experience as an

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« break », que je me suis éloignée un peu de l'Association [ . . . ] Cette association est contre la religion. On se permet de juger les femmes qui portent le voile, et se permet de juger [ . . . ] Moi j'ai vécu maritalement avec un homme pour 5 ans sans être marié. Je buvais de l'alcool, je mangeais du porc. Je vivais comme vivait mon compagnon. Donc, c'est pour vous dire que je suis quand même un bon exemple de vous parler de ce genre de chose, parce que je suis passée par un extrême à un autre. [ . . . ] J'ai ressenti qu'on jugeait les femmes qui portaient les voiles, sans essayer de les comprendre, tout simplement » (Interview 10 December 2005).

<sup>19</sup> « Le voile est un symbole du sexisme » (September 2004, n°85, pg.8).

Association has shown us the importance of *laïcité* for the respect of women, their rights, and their citizenship” (Petition Letter signed 7 September 2005).

### **Broader Feminist Responses to the ‘Headscarf Controversy’**

Other French contemporary feminists (men and women) have written in support of the Stasi Commission law of 15 March 2004 which, as I describe in Chapter Three, restricts conspicuous religious signs in government offices and public schools. Most feminists propose that the headscarf in the public sphere, particularly in educational institutions, signals a regression of women’s rights which must necessarily be curtailed to ward off “danger.” French sociologist Yolène Dilas-Rocherieux, for one, claims that the ‘headscarf question’ in France must be carefully scrutinized because of its shifting meanings. Dilas-Rocherieux claims that most first-generation women who entered the workforce in the 1970s removed their veils, while their daughters born in France often do not. She also claims, in my reading with little evidence, that the headscarf is a form of dress that has been abandoned or is now non-existent in the countries of origin from which Muslim women come to France (2005a: 108). Dilas-Rocherieux concedes that a ‘return to the veil’ which she has observed in her university lectures at the Université Paris X – Nanterre (just across the highway from Petit Nanterre) is related to a desire to defend Muslim women’s right to cover their bodies and to claim their own identity markers, but warns that the ‘freedom’ attained is paradoxical. While it may represent an individual choice, wearing the headscarf puts into question how free Muslim women’s bodies are from masculine control. In two later articles, Dilas-Rocherieux suggests,

similar to the official position taken by *Femmes Solidaires*, that the headscarf does not represent a religious sign, but a cultural positioning: “The girls [. . .] recognize that their decision to wear the headscarf never stemmed originally from a religious reason” (2005b :82). Rather, young female university students who wear the veil chose to do so to disassociate themselves from Western women and mores, protecting their reputations, and positioning themselves against capitalist luxury and a lack of discretion and modesty. Values of decency and virtue, Dilas-Rocherieux argues, are wrongly equated with the act of veiling so that the headscarf is ultimately utilized to protect themselves from the possibility of breaking socio-religious taboos related to sexuality and the body (2005a: 112).<sup>20</sup>

While accepted by most, this position is not shared by all French feminists, notably Marxist feminist Christine Delphy. A useful contrast are the metaphors these two academics use in describing the *hijab*: While Dilas-Rocherieux describes the headscarf as “the tree which hides the forest” (2005a: 112), Delphy claims that the headscarf is the “thermometer for the fever of racial discrimination” (2004: Online). Delphy has been outspoken in her position against the Stasi Commission law, claiming that it discriminates against Muslim and Arab minorities in France and that it fails to touch adequately upon other religious traditions and rights. On the issue of whether the headscarf symbolizes gendered submissiveness Delphy concludes:

It’s more of a sign than a symbol of women’s oppression. But there are so many signs today that we have far too many choices! To focus solely on the headscarf: that is one of

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<sup>20</sup> The larger hypothesis that Dilas-Rocherieux develops in these two articles is more questionable. She suggests that in the wake of the Iranian Revolution, Islamicist organizations have put together a campaign to encourage educated Muslim Westerners to take up the veil in efforts to make inroads in Western democratic nations (2005a, 2005b).

the greatest demonstrations of racism. We see it in the ‘Other’ because it is a foreign sign and [so] we don’t tolerate it. It is not the inferiority of women that we refuse to accept. If French society didn’t accept gender inequality, we would know all about it! Unfortunately, it tolerates it quite a lot. What [French society] doesn’t tolerate is an exotic or foreign element (Delphy 2004: Online).

Delphy thus critiques larger paradigms of racism and discrimination in French society rather than the Islamic headscarf.

In her analysis of feminism and conceptions of Islam in contemporary France, French sociologist Nacira Guénif-Souilamas notes that French feminists generally draw explicit links between sexism, the headscarf and sexist violence in ghetto neighbourhoods. Within these contexts, says Guénif-Souilamas, the Islamic headscarf is a visible sign of the submission of women (2004: 9). She adds that when this brand of feminism is aligned with French Republicanism, two anti-modern emblems are created: a headscarved girl, who lacks agency and is in immediate danger, and an Arab boy, a heterosexist product of the machismo of the ghetto and the racial discrimination which prevents his emancipation and independence. According to Guénif-Souilamas and Eric Macé, these categories function to reduce the veiled girl and Arab boy to their sex and race (2004: 18). Thus, should the veiled girl and Arab boy become publicly visible, women’s rights are threatened, particularly the suburban girl who is *voiler* and *violer* (veiled and raped) by the violent power young Arab male figure.

While very provocative and usefully tied to the gendered violence in the *banlieue*, Guénif-Souilamas and Macé fail to examine the ethnocentrism inherent in the belief that this girl and boy need to be “saved.” Historian Deniz Kandiyoti touches upon a similar issue when she questions the ‘liberation’ of so-called emancipated women in

contemporary Turkey (1987). Kandiyoti claims that despite legal changes and opportunities for women in Turkey, a double standard regarding sexuality and domestic roles remains unchallenged. Furthermore, in her critique of Turkish women's lack of emancipation, Kandiyoti questions her own positioning as a Westerner:

*Radical feminist theories of both the culturalist and materialist variety, insofar as they choose to stress the universal aspects of women's oppression, have few tools to account for the specific historical and cultural arrangements that mediate between biologically rooted universal phenomena (such as childbearing) and their different institutional forms (1987: 335).*

That is, as I explore in Chapter Two, women who work and live in different cultural contexts and have subjective experiences of womanhood and femininity cannot necessarily be analyzed using the same criteria or categories.

### **The Veil as Central Symbol**

The Muslim headscarf in France, while itself an empty sign, has come to symbolize hotly debated positions on immigration, integration, religion in the public sphere and women's rights in France.<sup>21</sup> From a cultural anthropological perspective, clothing is one of the central ways bodies are socially formulated as appropriate; social prescriptions which relate to clothing vary greatly, but are ever-present. Anthropologist Celia Rothenberg notes that concepts of modesty and sexual restraint are central to daily life in the Islamic cultures of the Middle East and of North Africa (2004b). We can turn to various sources to understand these conceptions. Islamic writings on the necessity of the

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<sup>21</sup> This contemporary French context is influenced as well by Western media and the press has been inundated with images of veiled women, particularly over the last thirty years, starting with the Iranian Revolution in 1979, and moving through to the war in Lebanon, the Gulf War, and a supposed rise in international terrorist activities (see Huntington 1994, Appadurai 1996). Indeed, the image of the veiled woman is one of the more effective ways of representing the "problems of Islam" or, to a lesser extent, capturing an element of foreign exoticism.

veil, for instance, are not entirely clear; statements attributed to the Prophet Mohammed refer to his wives veiling, but it is uncertain whether this mandate applied only to his wives or to all Muslim women (Keddie and Baron 1991; Ahmed 1992). The veil is not inherently Islamic either. It predates Islam and was worn by women in a number of religious traditions. References to veiling in the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament suggest a similar Judeo-Christian historical practice. The Qur'anic and Hadithic conceptions of modesty similarly propose proper social comportment in their brief discussion of licit and illicit relationships between men and women (see *Surahs* 24:58 and 33:13) and men too are advised to be modest and cover themselves between the waist and knees. As I note in Chapter Four, many practicing Muslim men in Petit Nanterre grow beards and wear long flowing *djellabas*, often white, with sneakers in the winter and sandals in the summer.

Yet, while there are cultural dress codes for men, both historically and in the contemporary world, Islamic interpretations emphasize the headscarf and centre upon the dangers of female sexuality for social order. The veil becomes a safeguard against ill-treatment. *Surahs* 24 and 33 elaborate these notions: “Enjoin believing women to turn their eyes away from temptation and to preserve their chastity; not to display their adornments; to draw their veils over their bosoms and not to display their finery except to their husbands, their fathers, their husbands’ fathers, their sons” (24:30-31) and “That is more proper [to ‘draw their veils’], so that they may be recognized and not be molested” (33:59). More recently Moroccan feminist Fatema Mernissi offers a useful socio-functional tripartite categorization of contemporary manifestations of the Islamic



headscarf. The first dimension of the headscarf claims Mernissi is visual, that is, its function is to hide, to “disrobe the gaze.” Its second function is spatial, in tracing boundaries between the sexes. And, the third purpose is to promote moral order, for it distinguishes that which is forbidden and therefore cloaked (1987: 119-120). In *La Sexualité en islam* (1975), Abdelwahab Bouhdiba similarly examines how the headscarf serves to give virtue to its wearer. Veiling, says Bouhdiba, gives a woman control over her comportment, and by limiting her powers of seduction, ensures her chastity. Paralleling Mernissi’s third function, Bouhdiba adds that because unrestrained female sexuality can threaten social order, the veil has been invested with the defense of community order and both symbolically and practically defines the boundaries between the sexes.

As I describe in greater detail in Chapter Two, the Orientalist images of the veil in texts, paintings and photographs has come, in part, to signify the larger religious, social and cultural practices of Muslim cultures associated with harems, polygamy, and the subjugation of women. Jean-Léon Gérôme’s “An Almeh with Pipe” (1883) or “Harem Pool” (1889), Pierre Auguste Renoir’s “Woman of Algiers” (1870), and Eugène Delacroix’s “Women of Algiers in Their Apartment” (1834) exemplify this sexualization of the Oriental, North African woman, and have little relationship to actual *hammams* (Arab-style bath-house). Nikki Keddie adds that Westerners who saw photographs (and not paintings) were “disappointed to find the clothing and furniture to be in keeping with Victorian propriety, bearing no resemblance to the paintings of Delacroix” (1991: 11; see also Ahmed 1982).

Visual representations of the Islamic headscarf in French popular culture and other media forms must be situated within the history of colonialism and the continued cultural weight of post-colonialist discourse.<sup>22</sup> This is particularly the case with the arrival of the French in Algeria in 1830. I therefore focus on images related to colonial Algeria in this discussion. Throughout its 132 year colonial period, French and Western governments introduced legal and social reforms to democratize Algeria, abolishing childhood marriage, polygamy and improving women's rights (Mernissi 1990). Debates in this early period concerning tradition and modernity placed North-African Muslim women in a central and paradoxical position. Some colonial administrators depicted them as obstacles to the civilizing missions of colonialism, while others celebrated Muslim women as agents who could uplift Algerian society through Western instruction, arguing that French education should be available to all Algerian women. Still, the colonial gaze fixed progressively upon Muslim women between 1870 and 1900, when the focus on Islam shifted within the writings of many French writers from the "battlefield into the bedroom" (Clancy-Smith 1998:155). Literary scholar Julia Clancy-Smith argues that a supreme irony emerged in the colony by 1900: both societies in French Algeria, French and Algerian, came to evaluate each other's cultural worth in terms of the "female question" (1998: 156).

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<sup>22</sup> Here Nikki Keddie's obvious statement is worth repeating, that "Muslim women's lives have varied greatly by class, mode of production, time and place" (1991: 8); similarly to speak of 'the' or 'a' Islamic headscarf is reductionistic given the diverse styles of dress both within and across social classes in Muslim societies. The overabundance of books and discussion of women "behind, beyond or beneath" the veil gives the impression that a Muslim woman's primary activity and societal function is in a "state of veil" (see Watson 1994: 141).

Clancy-Smith also exposes a unique early twentieth-century French feminist depiction of North Africa. Hubertine Auclert (1848-1914) went to Algeria in 1888 to join her ailing husband and remained there until his death four years later.<sup>23</sup> Auclert was an untrained anthropologist who kept extensive journals when she was in Algeria, eventually publishing a book on her impressions of Arab women. *Les Femmes Arabes en Algérie* (1900) reads like a thoughtfully engaged diary of Auclert's impressions and experiences while in Algeria, and is clearly written with a French learned audience in mind. The text is also pointedly political and highly sympathetic to the social status of Arab women, particularly in relation to the marriage of prepubescent girls. Auclert's comments range from her first impressions disembarking in Algiers and seeing piles of dirty clothes in the street, to the hunger in the eyes of those she met, to the observation that she never saw couples walking up and down the streets together as in Paris. Her commentary relates to gender and social space, to the dress of Muslim women, and to the cruelty she observed in French officers' interactions with native Algerians:

Everywhere only men can be seen on the streets, selling, buying, working; in doorways, the stairwells, the natural pillows of the *yaouleds* (young boys) are useful for the [male] silk spinners and the leather embroiderers (1900: 6).

What Auclert terms an "Arabic marriage" refers, very powerfully, to the rape of a child (1900: 43). Noting that some girls are sold to their husbands before their births, she calls for an Algerian law forbidding marriage before 15; she also includes a petition demanding the abolition of polygamy. Auclert offers no statistical evidence, but notes that

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<sup>23</sup> Auclert was known as a forward-looking feminist and campaigner for women's suffrage. Influenced by her early years in a Catholic convent following the death of her father, like many other leading Republican feminists at that time, she was a militant anticlericalist. In 1876 she founded the organization that would later be known as the *Société de la suffrage des femmes* (the Women's Suffrage Society) and in 1881, *La Citoyenne*, a newspaper which lobbied for women's enfranchisement.

while there are a high number of polygamous marriages among the Algerians she knows, the birth rate remains remarkably low, which she attributes to the “excessive bestiality of the polygamous man” and to women who become sterile following sexual abuse and humiliation as children (1900: 68). Although untrained in the social sciences, Auclert makes several noteworthy comments regarding the power of Islam as a determining factor in the social status of women. She writes that “Mohammadism maintains the same inequality between the sexes on earth as in Paradise [. . .] Muslim women exists only to please men” (1900: 172). Noting sexual segregation in Algiers, Auclert asks a young man in the street where the young women are:

‘Why,’ I asked an older *yaouled* one day who helped me, ‘why are young girls not sent to the market like young boys?’  
‘Because,’ he answered, ‘they would be stolen instead of being bought.’ If the little girls do not live outside like little boys, they are certainly no less intelligent (1900: 107).

While Auclert also makes several observations on the brutality of the colonial regime (1900: 31, 247), her most interesting commentary treats her Orientalist imaginings of the “Arab” women she encountered in Algiers:

For Muslim women, so ravishing in their theatrical clothing or their innocent accoutrements, so divinely enigmatic under the black *haïck*, they would be lost in the cruel and somber European dress, something in their prestigious beauty lost.  
A French women becomes more beautiful dressed as a Muslim, a Muslim women becomes uglier in French dress. Everyone can note this fact (1900: 41).

In sum, while extremely sympathetic to what she perceived as the plight of Arab women in Algeria, Auclert creates an exoticized portrait of veiled women.

A tremendous shift occurred in these representations fifty to sixty years later. The more dominant eroticized representations of the veil and the harem were challenged and eventually overturned by the period of decolonialization and Algeria’s War of



Independence from 1954-1962. This period ensured new publicly shared attitudes toward "saving" Muslim women: "the newly configured colonial project advocated female education and the enfranchisement of Muslim women to save L'Algérie Française" (Clancy-Smith 1998: 174). Photographs in France during this period of completely veiled and covered women also came to symbolize the threat of Algerian women with alliances to the FLN (the National Front Liberation movement). Some women became involved with the movement, transporting arms past French military inspection points under their *djellabas*, the veil and the modest, free-flowing Islamic dress thereby symbolizing colonial chaos (Bouhdiba 1975). Women were also involved in France, including in the *bidonville* of Petit Nanterre. Colonizers also encouraged Muslim women to remove their veils to become more 'European,' consequently leading many to adopt the veil as a symbol of national identity, in support of independence and nationalist movements (Killian 2003: 570; Mernissi 1990).

As has been the case in other nationalist moments in history, and as I describe in greater detail in Chapter Four, Algerian women became guardians of national culture and identity. In her fieldwork in a Belgian Turkish community, anthropologist Christiane Timmerman concludes that women are, despite their omission from academic nationalist literature, at the centre of nationalistic discourses, particularly in Islamic societies (Timmerman 2000). Timmerman claims that in the Muslim world (which she characterizes generically), the prototypical patriarchal family is often regarded as a microcosm of the ideal moral order, and thus has important symbolic value to a nation. Similarly, political scientist Deniz Kandiyoti notes that women may be used to symbolize

the progressive aspirations of a secularist elite or alternatively to promote the aims of nationalist cultural authenticity expressed in Islamic terms (1991: 3; see also Starr Sered 1999: 193-200 and Yuval-Davis 1997).

### **The “French Woman”**

Veiled Muslim women are often criticized and stereotyped in Western media as being passive and oppressed. In France, these derogatory observations, arguably, began historically through France’s former colonial relationship. Still, throughout the course of my fieldwork in Petit Nanterre, I also observed that Muslim women in France have a similar construction of “French women”, like that of the “Muslim Woman”. Both are clichéd and banal. Nevertheless, these characterizations are useful in discerning (mis)perceptions between these two “groups.” I appreciate the arbitrariness of reifying this ‘East’ ‘West’ separation and emphasize that neither representation is wholly uniform. *All* the immigrant women I interviewed in Petit Nanterre engage in selective acculturation, actively working to maintain certain traditions, while, out of necessity or choice, also adapting to French cultural and social norms. Ann Swindler’s notion of cultural ‘toolkit’ sheds light on how immigrants necessarily behave in culturally determined ways when they preserve their former habits in new circumstances (1986: 277). Swindler adds that this adaptation occurs in two ways: some acculturation is involuntary – that is, one must often acquire some cultural literacy in a host country to survive economically – and some is selective, implying an active choice among a variety of available beliefs and behaviours. While some demarcations are clear, particularly for

practicing Muslims who respect *halal* (acceptable) and *haram* (forbidden) dietary and social restrictions, other distinctions are drawn individually, based on socio-economic, educational and other factors. These choices may be dependent upon a woman's personal predilections and whether she is more or less open to various cultural practices. For instance, a handful of women in my sample were educated in French schools in Algeria and Morocco prior to independence from French colonialism, and thus, while 'culturally' Arab or 'practicing' Muslims, they speak French fluently and possessed familiarity with French culture prior to their arrival in France. Many came to France on vacation before immigrating as well and therefore had some prior knowledge of what cultural and social differences to expect. Still, in my experience, many women rarely leave the neighbourhood, and because of the ethnic homogeneity in Petit Nanterre, social or professional mixing with "French French" is limited for many locals. As I explained in Chapter One, there are few *Français de Souche* (Native French) who live in Petit Nanterre.

These social representations and personages vary depending upon social context and the possibilities available to the social actor. For instance, Aïcha would dress more traditionally (with looser clothing and often covering her head turban-style) and speak Arabic (betraying her strong self-identified Kabyle roots) when we went to the local outdoor market, as she felt she would get better deals on meats and produce if she spoke using Islamic greetings and references with local Arabic-speaking merchants. Conversely, she would wear a chic pantsuit with heels and go to the hair salon to have her hair styled when meeting with the assistant to the Mayor at City Hall, all the while speaking

impeccable French. At home, Aïcha wore traditional Kabyle free-flowing dresses and spoke to her children in French, using the odd Kabyle word, often in terms of endearment. Aïcha's actions and language-choices thus varied depending upon her interlocutors and social context. Other women explained to me that while they may not wear an Islamic headscarf in France, they would carry one in their handbags and put it on at the airport when they return to North Africa on vacation. As one Algerian-born social worker in Petit Nanterre explained, "C'est une question de respect".<sup>24</sup>

Still, while "French" modes of dress and social comportment are adopted by some women – including the removal of the headscarf in French work contexts – French "attitudes" are avoided more carefully. According to much of the gossip-like conversations I observed and participated within, for many local women of North African origin, French women are morally and ethically dangerous and must be avoided.<sup>25</sup> While North African women from Petit Nanterre personally control and invigilate their own social interactions, these boundaries are more difficult to manage within their children's lives. The "French woman" must not become manifest in a daughter born and/or schooled in France, nor in a daughter-in-law (in the case of marriage, I observed that cultural similarity generally superseded racial preference, as French-born Caucasian women are

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<sup>24</sup> While I naturally also wore long flowing skirts and loose-fitting clothes, some practices were attributed to me, particularly during the Ramadan period. For instance, although it was not the case, Aïcha often told people we would meet in the street on the way to the market or to other important community members who knew me (the *halal* butcher, for instance) that I too was fasting out of respect. Though I was careful not to eat outside or at regular meal times, this was not the case. Aïcha also liked to tell people who asked about my identity that I was her eldest daughter from Kabylia, since Berbers from this region are often lighter skinned, sometimes with green or blue eyes like my own. This also lent a non-Western aspect to my presence. She took great pleasure in telling people how integrated I had become in her family and their daily life, that I had been "Kabylizée".

<sup>25</sup> I did not ask women specifically in interviews about their perceptions of French French women; these reflections are based on informal comments I overheard throughout my participant observation in this community.



generally welcomed so long as they convert to Islam).<sup>26</sup> The “French woman” is typically characterized as an individualist. She stands in opposition to the strong sanctity of the nuclear family. This unsupportive position is promoted and facilitated by her work outside the home; she typically works full-time. She also cooks badly and does not eat enough; she is too thin. With regards to her individualism, the “French woman” is inhospitable and ignores her family and her elderly parents; she places her elderly parents in out-of-the way nursing homes. Also, she drinks alcohol and smokes heavily. Significantly, some of the immigrant women I knew in Nanterre took great pleasure in smoking in the privacy of their homes; I interpreted the act of smoking in my presence as an act of complicity.<sup>27</sup>

I list these stereotypes not to propagate misunderstandings between these groups, insofar as they can be separated. I suggest that the construction of the “French woman” speaks to ways stereotyped French notions of sexual freedom are perceived by non-native women. To be blunt, the unfavourable “French women” is characterized as a whore: she

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<sup>26</sup> Here I do not treat the positive components of integrating within French culture. While I list some complaints about the stereotypical French woman, the largely first-generation Maghrebian Muslim women I interviewed are generally pleased to be living in France and, with few exceptions, are not interested in returning to their countries of origin.

<sup>27</sup> These mores against smoking in public are not enforced solely by women, but by their male partners as well. As I describe in Chapter One, in the basement one of the community centres in the Canibouts side of the neighbourhood is a space which I heard numerous times referred to as “the illegal mosque”. This is a prayer room attended by Orthodox Muslims. I often passed men leaving after morning or afternoon prayers going up the stairs to the Centre Social des Canibouts. One winter morning I stood outside the main entrance with two French women who worked in the Centre, one the young assistant director and the other a middle-aged literacy teacher, as they took a break to smoke a cigarette. As one man exited the mosque, he stopped, turned around and glared at the three of us with a judging look. The male director of the Centre later confided to me that he had approached this man to see whether his Algerian-born wife would be interested in some of the activities proposed for women at the Centre. The couple lives in the HLM apartment across the sidewalk from the Centre. In recounting this conversation, the director told me that the man apparently replied that he did not want his wife to take the popular morning beginner French course because he often saw ‘dishonest’ women outside the Centre, presumably referring to the women who would smoke outside. I read this attribution of dishonesty and bad reputation to the women as related to the fact that they were smoking publicly.

has sexual relationships with men before knowing them well, outside of marriage and without regard for her family's reputation. She might have had an abortion or have a sexually transmitted disease.<sup>28</sup> The "French woman" is not necessarily linked to anything inherently "French," but rather to notions of consumerism and "Western-ness". Often in the evenings Aïcha's family and I would watch films on one of the six available French television stations. Contrary to public television in Canada, for instance, nudity is not taboo on prime-time French television. Once or twice we shared the company of some of my host's female neighbours. Reactions and responses to sex scenes were similar: "Aye! Look at that French woman!", even if the film was an American production starring American actors. Ironically, Aïcha's daughters usually agreed, covering their eyes, despite the fact that they, born in Petit Nanterre, are themselves French young women.<sup>29</sup>

### **Caricatured Categories**

The focus and disdain for this stereotyped "Western" or "French" woman focuses primarily on a type of sexual depravity, and subsequently, becomes a way to promote virginity and sexual restraint among local women. Not being a "French woman" is thus equated with respect and loyalty to one's family, cultural traditions and religious morality. As I have described in Chapter Four, this focus on virginity serves to promote familial honour and respectability. In my observations of comments made by mothers to their daughters in response to television scenes, provocative public advertisements, or on

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<sup>28</sup> Aïcha's oldest daughter was purportedly encouraged by her family doctor at 11 years old to contact her at anytime for birth control pills. Aïcha was scandalized and changed doctors.

<sup>29</sup> Admittedly, however, this scenario is not necessarily typical of other families in Petit Nanterre, as many households own satellites connecting them with Maghrebi television stations and programming, thereby likely avoiding seeing these sex scenes in the presence of their children.

a bi-annual visit to Paris by Metro with the Association Nadha, sexual purity is often portrayed as an identity trait. In short, a distinctly Maghrebian “purity” is juxtaposed against a French “impurity.” As I argue in the preceding chapter, the sexual comportment of women (and not of men) is directly tied to the construction of respectability of women in Petit Nanterre, and is enforced by gossip and the Panopticon-like architecture of the public housing. As I note at greater length in Chapter Five, it is noteworthy that all slander I overheard maligning women in the neighbourhood was directed toward their lack of sexual propriety.

Of course, this moral positioning is not exclusive to North African societies. Written in the post-war period, in *The Second Sex* (1979), Simon de Beauvoir points to the social constraints placed upon French women and their expressions of sexuality, noting that “free” women are often confused for “easy” women (1979: 600). Nacira Guénif-Souilamas similarly utilizes similar categories in her examination of the organization *Ni Putes, Ni Soumises*. She defines ‘veiled’ and ‘whored’ women in order to link female prostitutes and veiled women. Very provocatively, Guénif-Souilamas seeks to connect these archetypes, concluding that in both cases, left-wing feminist movements, whether they be political or associative, have trouble taking positions other than complete prohibition. Their absolutism is the price of their own radicalism:

If one is criminalized, the other is diabolized, and both [veiled women and prostitutes] may be considered as victims. They are both under the influence of men, who whether in the name of their faith in money or in a god who they claim is sensitive to sexual partitions, impose rules which satisfy their conception of the world (Guénif-Souilamas 2004: 81).

Both extremes (of the oppressed and the whore) thus, according to Guénif-Souilamas, ultimately serve the social positioning of male dominance.

The “French woman” is not always vilified, however. In certain instances choreographed ‘Frenchness’ is useful for Maghrebian women in the *banlieue*, particularly when undertaking administrative tasks at the *Préfecture* (local police station) and local government office or other official tasks or important meetings, like job interviews. When I asked about their ‘success strategies’ for such occasions at one of Association Nadha’s language classes, the women and their teachers (who have also had to establish themselves and find employment in France) answered frankly: removing the headscarf is imperative. Some women who were able to receive residency cards and other documentation when wearing their headscarves agreed that they were lucky to fall upon “quelqu’un de bien” (a good person) who facilitated administrative processes without discrimination. “Better not to tempt fate,” added Maria. Maria recommended going to Nadha Coiffure to get a *brushing* (a blow dry) and to put on a little make-up (red lipstick is good, but avoid kohl around the eyes). Perhaps most important, however, is that even should Maghrebian women be accompanied by their Francophone husbands (many women in the group are married to cousins who were born in France), it is a good idea to avoid having these men speak or intervene. Fatima, a childless Moroccan-born woman explained how when she was attempting to receive permission to care for children in her home during the day (to become to a state-approved childcare giver) she failed her first interview because the social worker thought her husband intervened too often on her behalf. Fatima had asked her husband to accompany her during the interview because she

was nervous she might make syntax errors. The women in this group realize that intervention or help from their husbands can be wrongly interpreted by French administrators as a sign that the woman lacks her own agency and belief in her right to speak for herself.

### **Daughters' Experiences**

The social constraints and gender boundaries I have described – the strong privatization of women's space, the emphasis on their role within the nuclear family structure, the imperative of virginity – touch second generation Maghrebian women in Petit Nanterre differently than their mothers. While my research did not focus specifically on their experiences, but in this section I briefly comment on how this gendered landscape shapes opportunities and challenges for the daughters of the Maghrebian women I interviewed. Contemporary scholarship examining Maghrebians in France and/or the *banlieue* has focused a great deal on the social space and options afforded to second-generation immigrants, particularly for young women (Cesari 1998; Guénif-Souilamas 2004, 2000; Guénif-Souilamas and Macé 2004; Hammouche 1990; Lacoste-Dujardin 1994, 1992, 1991; Khosrokhavar 1997; Venel 1999; Tetreault 2001, 2000). In her thoughtful and comprehensive ethnography of second-generation *beurettes* (2000) (the feminine form of *Beurs*) French sociologist Nacira Guénif-Souilimas claims that these young women are triply dominated, as young, female immigrants living in France's poorest sectors (2000: 61). While as French citizens educated in the public school system their lives are often quite different from their mothers', they too experience social

marginalization. Guénif-Souilimas explains that unlike their “French French” classmates, these young women feel great pressure in preserving types of social comportment to uphold the reputation of their families (2000: 254). In the course of my fieldwork I noted some of the important shifts in the social space and functions of these second-generation women that are suggested by Guénif-Souilimas and other scholars. Some young women in Petit Nanterre have adopted a certain masculinization or defiance of gender norms and comportment and, compared to their mothers, many participated in women’s associative social structures.<sup>30</sup>

Sociolinguist Chantal Tetreault’s fieldwork in the “Park” neighbourhood of Nanterre examines the ways second-generation young people living in social ghettos express themselves linguistically. Tetreault found that many young women rejected the idealized Maghrebian model of femininity in which women are wives, mothers and domestic workers by adopting a toughness or masculine-style comportment. Tetreault analyzed the uses of speech and masculine dress in moments of conflict or discord to construct a positive reputation among other young people. For young women in the *banlieue*, this masculinization is “especially significant considering the predominance of Algerian-Arab culture in the neighborhood which dictates the strict gender stratification of most public space, that is, parking lots, parks and local sports facilities” (Tetreault 2000 :180). In the social space of the *banlieue* where the sexes are strongly segregated and where the dress and social comportment of women are scrutinized, the fact that these

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<sup>30</sup> In her ethnographic study of young women of African descent from Parisian suburbs, Trica Danielle Keaton charts how young second-generation women cope with family and societal tensions and pressures by lying to their parents about their whereabouts and activities. This strategy, Keaton suggests, while not unique to Muslim girls, is useful for maneuvering within highly volatile social contexts and facilitated by mobile telephone use (2006: 176).

girls speak and dress in a masculine manner is an indication of a subversion of social norms. This “gender-bending” also suggests that imposed rules or expectations placed upon young women are not without flexibility, that there are alternative and creative options open. Of course, this example constitutes a shift in gender norms, not a deconstruction of the categories themselves. That is, Tetreault does not take Guénif-Souilamas’ critique of masculinization into account. Guénif-Souilimas claims that such gender-bending or crossing of gendered boundaries, does not empower, particularly in the case of young men:

With regards to her scholarly or professional successes or her tenacity, such a girl [who stands outside gendered expectations] will be considered like a man. In opposition, the son who demonstrates neither respect, nor combativeness, nor authority will be reduced by his parents and by his sisters to the rank of ‘girly-man’ (2000: 140).

Thus while young girls can assume some power in gaining a certain masculinity, conceptions of femininity remain unchanged and irrevocably tied to larger issues of virginity, sequestration, and arranged marriage.

Another noteworthy shift for second generation women in social conceptions and manifestations of gender, particularly because of its links with French feminist groups like *Femmes Solidaires*, lies with the 2002 creation of the organization *Ni Putes, Ni Soumises* (Neither Whores, Nor Oppressed Women). The organization was spurred by Fadela Amara, herself a second generation woman of Algerian origin who grew up in a suburban housing project (Amara 2003). Amara explains she felt impelled to create change following the widely-publicized and violent death of Sohane, a young Muslim woman burned alive by teenage boys in her *quartier*, apparently in reaction to her defiance and rebuff of a young man’s advances. NPNS aims to represent this new

generation of young suburban women of non-French origins who seek to denounce domestic violence and the sexual oppression of young women in the *banlieue*. Interestingly, NPNS has taken an outspoken stance against the headscarf, and thus supported the ban of conspicuous religious symbols following the Stasi Commission recommendations in 2004. As president, Amara has made several public statements about her disdain for the headscarf, typically pointing to the dangers of what she deems as a “multicultural” policy. In *Le Monde*, for instance, Amara stated, “I refuse to accept that we should tolerate the headscarf under the pretext that we must respect the cultures of countries of origin” (8 March 2005: 9).

While NPNS has not been very active in Petit Nanterre (posters advertising upcoming events in the nearby city of Colombes were posted in Zy’va and the Centre Social des Canibouts), the organization is worth examining because, by its title alone, it appears to speak directly to the categories of “French Feminist Whore” and “Oppressed Muslim Women” that I have discussed earlier in this chapter. Moreover, when examined more closely, NPNS shares several central characteristics with 1970s-style feminism in its focus on personal experiences of oppression and sexual trauma and in its desire to create a collective female impetus (Rochefort and Zancarini-Fournel 2005: 352), much like *Femmes Solidaires*.

The group is not without its critics. Several first-generation women I interviewed in Petit Nanterre who had heard about NPNS on the news or through their daughters avoided using the word *pute* when referring to the group, deeming it extremely offensive. In her examination of the group and its influence on second generation *beurettes*, Nacira



Guénif-Souilamas warns that NPNS members “docilely maintain themselves in a secure rhetorical perimeter . . . of the ‘war of the sexes’” without challenging gender constructions themselves (2004: 95). In an article co-authored with Eric Macé, Guénif-Souilamas goes further in her critique, claiming that NPNS have been good students of a “rigid and dated” feminism which necessitates universalistic positions (2004: 60). Macé and Guénif-Souilamas suggest the organization would be much more powerful were it to reverse the stigma by asserting: “We are all whores.” This strategy would parallel the powerful shift made available to gay and lesbian activists with the reclaiming of the term ‘queer’.

### **On Feminism and the Construction of Gender Mores in the *Banlieues***

In this chapter I highlight how identity constructions – related to social comportment, dress (particularly the headscarf and modest, “traditional” clothing like the *djellaba*), and relationships with men (be it their husbands, sons or unknown men) – shape the experiences of first generation, *primo-arrivée*, North African immigrants living in ethnically homogeneous enclaves in the outskirts of Paris. I point out that certain factors often grouped together, creating stereotypes which I have labeled “French Feminist Whore” and “Oppressed Muslim Woman”. As both a legitimator and boundary-maker, “religion”, whether it be defined in opposition to *laïcité* or relating to the visibility of veiled Muslim women, is central to these gendered constructions. As I suggest briefly in Chapter Two, these binary characterizations do not, however, necessarily create agonizing choices between tradition and modernity, the headscarf and the miniskirt, or as

a *Libération* article decried, between the veil and the “g-string” (Ayad, 22 December 2004). As dominant representations of polarized versions of femininity in France, these opposites fail to capture dynamic processes of identity creation engaged in by all women, by Feminists, first-generation immigrants and their daughters. The categories of “French Feminist Whore” and “Oppressed Muslim Woman” situate women in a stagnant cultural universe, where Muslim women in particular are seen as guardians of a tradition incapable of developing original or alternative choices, lacking agency and knowledge.

I question this interpretation of the lives of the first generation women I have met, interviewed and spent time with in Petit Nanterre. As I suggest in the third section of this chapter, their social space as ‘separate but equal’ does not necessarily accord them equal rights or options in the public sphere, particularly if they have difficulties in French. As I observed in preparations for International Women’s Day, while some Maghrebien women live in situations of domestic violence or are married to men they would rather not have for husbands, most claim to be content in their familial situations and are not interested in the ‘emancipation’ offered to them by Philippe, the local actor in Petit Nanterre or that offered to them by voluntary members of the French feminist organization, *Femmes Solidaires*. If I interpret “equality” as the freedom to choose (as much as one can) one’s personal and professional contexts, how do I then explain the silence of the women I met in Petit Nanterre on this issue or their desire to limit these choices? Is the acceptance or desire for personal liberty, here understood as the opportunity to make choices, part of successful integration into French culture, whose *Liberté, Egalité, Fraternité* is its central creed? In other words, how does one explore issues of power and agency for women not

interested in seeking a formal education, agreeing (again critiquing the notion of ‘choice’) to marry men recommended by their families, and preferring, for the most part, to stay home with children? These judgments become more muddled in practice. Djamila, the pregnant 24 year old woman of Moroccan descent who married her French-born husband at 18 and never attended school, might laughingly tell other women in her French class that she whips her husband so he will recognize she is strong enough to go out on her own, but she is also limited in her outings by her illiteracy and her financial dependence on her husband. When asked whether she is happy with the choices she has made, particularly that of marrying a French-born Moroccan, Djamila claims her life in Petit Nanterre is her *mektoub* (destiny). What are the implications for Djamila when outside organizations seek to enable her “happiness”? Is it the role of French feminist organizations like *Femmes Solidaires* to counter “destiny” and “save” Muslim women in bad marriages from oppressive personal relationships? Is *Ni Putes, Ni Soumises* effective in dismantling these highly sexualized stereotypes of whore and submissiveness, or does it simply serve to sustain them?

With these questions in mind, I return to my application in Chapter Two of Donna Haraway’s notion of “situated knowledge” (1988), and revisit two points. First, it is imperative to question one’s own involvement as ethnographer in upholding stereotypes and categories of knowledge. My own education, personal background, and social context create a “hermeneutic of suspicion” (to borrow Schüssler Fiorenza’s 1992 phrase) with regards to pointing to “destiny” to describe situations of disempowerment and one’s inability, unwillingness or disinterest in “liberating” potentials. In response, Saba

Mahmood would remind us to critique the liberal Western feminist paradigm which privileges and overemphasizes personal and political moral autonomy (2001, 2005). Attempting to move away from these categories, of personal and political moral autonomy and of “French Feminist Whore” and “Oppressed Muslim Women,” is the only solution. Second, Homi K. Bhabha’s notion of “hybridity” (1990a, 1994) is useful in conceptualizing a shifting space between these categories, including “tradition” and “modernity,” which I develop in the general conclusion of this dissertation. Challenging the “naturalization” of these polarized positions demonstrates how, on the ground, women imagine, create and contest their destinies often in ways which challenge these artificially polarized and bifurcated separated categories.

### **General Conclusion: Imagining/Creating/Contesting a “Third Space”**

This dissertation has focused on the transnational experiences of largely first-generation Maghrebian Muslim immigrant women in Petit Nanterre, a suburb fifteen kilometers northwest of Paris, France. By way of conclusion, I briefly review the dissertation’s primary arguments, suggest possible areas for further research, and consider the notion of a “third space” as a possible description of the political and social location of these women.

Throughout this study, I have suggested that although they are often in the “private” margins of the “public” domain, Maghrebian Muslim immigrant women in France are at the centre of Islamic/*laïque* debates concerning tradition and modernity, secularism and religious rights.<sup>1</sup> The central position of these women is evident in the recent controversies surrounding young Muslim women who have “chosen” to wear headscarves in the French public school system. It is this element of choice which is most contentious in contemporary debates about gender politics and French secularism. I have noted that the public and private presence of Maghrebian Muslims in France generally contradicts the prevailing French Republican national discourse of *laïcité*, the separation of religion from state institutions, legally enacted in 1905 (Baubérot 1990), and reinforced and reshaped throughout the twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. Many cultural theorists maintain that the ideology of *laïcité* creates an impenetrable social and religious landscape for Muslim “foreigners” (Lewis 1993; Bencheikh 1998; Asad 2003). The ethos

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<sup>1</sup> In Chapter Three I point to how “public” and “private” spaces are politically motivated and complex categories (see Currie and Rothenberg 2001; also Casanova 1994 and Asad 2003).

of *laïcité* is directly challenged by the religious visibility of Muslim women, expressed symbolically through their clothing and their social comportment. Moreover, in general, these women's sense of "French Muslim womanhood," fostered within gender-segregated social networks in Petit Nanterre, often defies Republican notions of feminism and of participatory citizenship. Conversely, I also have suggested that stereotypical apprehensions of France's *étrangers* have led the larger French community, colloquially known as the "French French," to re-examine its sense of authentic communal identity, particularly with respect to shared nationalism, gender politics and secularism. The legal shift in immigration policy under former President Valéry Giscard d'Estaing in 1974 which led to the appearance of Muslim families in French urban daily life has, according to French social scientist Jean-Loup Amselle, generated an "ethnicized" and essentialized French identity conceived in opposition to immigrant identities (2003: 119; also Hamel 2002: 300 and Bloul 1996: 234). I would argue that the recent renewed social and legal focus on *laïcité* and on women's rights in the *banlieues* reflects this counter-reaction.

More pointedly, in reaction to fear that young women were being coerced to wear headscarves, and on the recommendation of former President Jacques Chirac's Stasi Commission [or the "Commission de réflexion sur l'application du principe de laïcité dans la République"], French legislators banned conspicuous religious symbols in public schools and government offices in 2004. While the ban included other signs like large Christian crosses and the Jewish *kippa*, for a variety of reasons elaborated upon in Chapter Three, the law largely affects female Muslim students. Motivation for this legislation stemmed in part from the government's drive to preserve French secularism

from so-called Islamic fundamentalism and to ensure women's equal status in the public sphere, as guaranteed by existing French law.

The “choices” transnational Muslim women make in their self-representation have thus become the battleground for debates in parliament, in the media, and locally in the Parisian *banlieues*, where many French Muslims live in socio-economically impoverished and disenfranchised suburbs. As one of the most visible markers of Islamic identity, the *hijab* is depicted as a threat to national unity and to authentic shared French culture. This semiotic sign has become particularly salient around the issue of women's rights. North African Muslim women thus play an essential role in constructing and maintaining the public image of Islam in France.<sup>2</sup> It is for this reason that, as I have described in this dissertation, many actors seek to control or guide the options available and/or the representations of these women in France, and more broadly, in the “West.”

Following an initial introductory chapter which describes the setting of Petit Nanterre, including its marginalization and relatively ethnically and socio-economically homogenous population, Chapter Two points to contemporary scholarship which has sought to understand and categorize “Islam” and “Muslim women” into interpretive frameworks. I position my fieldwork in Petit Nanterre with reference to these anthropological analyses, demonstrating that the distinctions formerly made by researchers between Great and Little Traditions (Redfield 1967; Bowen 2003) are complicated by these migrants' transnationality. I also argue that despite French-French

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<sup>2</sup> Muslim identities in France are complex and multi-faceted. Muslims in France come from a variety of countries, and include French converts. Because of the concentration of North African Muslims living in Petit Nanterre, itself a reflection of former colonial ties and heavy migration from this area, I have focused on their history and present experience in the *banlieue*.

popular and stereotyping discourses which often depict Muslim women in an essentializing, singular fashion, there is no one “Muslim woman” of the *banlieue*. Conceptualizing the agency of Muslim women living within sexually segregated societies has implications, as well. Given the complicated and sometimes contradictory choices women make in relation to their gendered and religious affiliations, I utilize the notion of “situated knowledge” (Haraway 1988) to consider how women can be both “traditional” and “modern” in the strategies they employ to live their daily lives.

As I note in Chapter Three, through the Stasi Commission and subsequent law banning conspicuous religious signs, the French government in 2004 also sought to determine the clothing choices available to Muslim women in government offices and public schools, notably targeting the headscarf. The desire to remove religious symbols from the Republic’s public sphere can be traced historically to the French Revolution in 1789 and to concern about the former social power of the Roman Catholic Church. In relation to Petit Nanterre, I describe how the limited scope of the application of this law (Law 2004-228 passed almost unanimously 15 March 2004) had little impact for headscarf-wearing first-generation women living in this *banlieue*. An incident with greater local implications occurred when non-*halal* meat products were served to kindergarten children in a Petit Nanterre public primary school. Central to the controversy surrounding religious symbols is how *laïcité* is defined in the French context, and currently, how *laïcité* is commonly (and erroneously) set in opposition to “Islam.” I depict how the discourses on both Islam and secularism in the popular French context invariably focus on women as symbols of social appropriateness.



In Chapter Four I examine how immigrants of North African origin in Petit Nanterre have sought to shape their shared identities through continued selection of marriage partners from North Africa. This preference creates important guarantors of the social values and practices associated with honour and shame, as well as challenges for women and for those who seek and contest these unions. I suggest that this pattern of preference for North African marriage partners and the continued arrival of “traditional,” largely Muslim, Arabophone women creates powerful cultural boundaries, which both protect and exclude local women, whether they are first, second or third-generation immigrants. I also propose that the continuous entry of “traditional” first-generation women into the community promotes a “cultural freezing,” insofar as many residents claim they feel greater pressure to be publicly Muslim in Petit Nanterre than in their country of origin. Furthermore, I note that these public cultural norms are shaped and controlled by local gossip about female propriety and by an outward on-looking gaze, itself facilitated by high unemployment and the architecture of the *Cités*, where, in Petit Nanterre, tall apartments face one another separated by minimal public shared space.

Finally, I demonstrate the role of French feminism in debates about femininity and human rights for Maghrebian women in Chapter Six. I note how French feminist organizations like *Femmes Solidaires* strive to shape the social identities and possibilities of Maghrebian women living in Petit Nanterre, offering an open-door policy for women in need of legal council. This stance becomes most discernable in attempts to “save” Muslim women from the patriarchal confines of their familial situations, perceived as being characterized by forced marriages, domestic abuse and lack of encouragement to

acquire French language and literacy skills. These issues and related tensions are best illustrated in activities associated with International Women's day in Petit Nanterre in March 2005 and 2006. I describe female members of *Femmes Solidaires*' caricatured and polarized notions about Maghrebien women in France, who also share exaggerated stereotypes about native French women.

### Future Research

There are two areas of future research I would like to pursue related to this work in France.<sup>3</sup> The present project is focused on how gender affects the female North African immigrant experience in France but is limited to the voices and experiences of women. While I did interview men in the course of this research in Petit Nanterre, those with whom I spoke were husbands of women with whom I had close relationships or men working in community associations this *banlieue*. I met four husbands in their homes and interviewed them with their wives present or within close physical proximity, preparing food in the kitchen or caring for children nearby. Wanting to maintain my own reputation among women in Petit Nanterre I was careful not to transgress unscripted social rules surrounding sex segregation and social comportment.<sup>4</sup> That is, as an unmarried Western

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<sup>3</sup> Beginning in January 2008 I will undertake an eight-month postdoctoral research project entitled "Immigration, Gender and Islam in the Greater Toronto Area: Defining Ethnicity and the *Ummah* among First-Generation Immigrant Muslim Women." This ethnographically-based research will focus on how secular, multicultural Canadian and Islamic religious discourses influence and challenge Muslim women's construction of gender and ethnicity in relation to Canadian social norms and public policies, particularly Canada's immigration policies, the Multiculturalism Act (1988) and legal statutes on the separation of church and state. I will be affiliated with Harvard University's "Islam in the West" program and have received funding to undertake this project from the Canada-US Fulbright Foundation.

<sup>4</sup> Lila Abu-Lughod notes in her overview of ethnographic work on the Arab World that "Nearly all the segmentation theorists are men, while nearly all those who theorize about women are women" (1989: 287-288; see also Nelson 1974: 553). In short, I would also be interested in considering the implications of

woman, I chose not to undertake participant observation research with men during my fieldwork. Now more confident of my place in Petit Nanterre, however, and with greater familiarity with many of its 8000 residents, I would like to return to explore how the issues I discuss in this dissertation affect local men. One of the second-generation women of Moroccan origins I interviewed described, for instance, how her older brother had married a French woman who converted to Islam and prefers to cover herself completely. He is not a practicing Muslim himself but often receives “dirty looks” from non-Muslims when he walks in the street with his wife.

A second possible future project would be to travel with one or two of the women I met from Petit Nanterre to their *Bled* when they return for summer holidays. Some local Petit Nanterrians invest their life savings into land or small homes in their countries of origin, like other North Africans living in Western Europe (see Lazaar 1996; Salih 2003:71-77). Over the course of my fieldwork I heard a great deal about these spaces and received two formal invitations, both to visit Algeria. This possible future ethnographic fieldwork would allow me to consider transnationalism in greater depth, garnering a better sense of the social context where these women originated, and their relationships with their families in the *Bled*. More than half of my respondents try to return to their country of origin every summer. These trips are important to their sense of personal and social identity. Women in Petit Nanterre spend a great deal of time preparing for the trip, especially buying gifts for family members.

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transgressing social norms should I work and participate in circles populated by men in Petit Nanterre. However, such work might be limited were I unable to enter certain mosques or other gender-segregated spaces.

### **A Transnational Third Space**

First-generation transnational Muslim Maghrebian female immigrants in the Parisian *banlieue* effectively occupy a location of “hybridity” or a “third space.” Following Homi Bhabha (1990a, 1990b, 1994, 1996; Salih 2003; see also Gilroy 1987 on alternative public spheres, and Agamben 1999 on the notion of the remnant), I suggest that in spaces like Petit Nanterre new types of imagined communities and practices are being negotiated and tested which are neither intrinsically “French” nor “North African.” Bhabha writes that it is the interstices, “the overlap and displacement of domains of difference – that the intersubjective and collective experiences of *nationness*, community interest, or cultural value are negotiated” (his emphasis, 1994: 2). Bhabha adds that these hybridities often emerge in moments of historical transformation (1994: 2). New social and religious practices also emerge. In Petit Nanterre, 19 year old Zohra has openly discussed her unmarried relationship with her French-French boyfriend with her twice-divorced, yet “traditional,” North African grandmother, who as a young woman herself never imagined she would learn the word for boyfriend in French.

Literature on transnationalism further suggests that cultures, as well as identities, are constantly shifting, which may inspire a desire to solidify components in identity construction (see Safran 1999; Dirlik 2003). According to Arif Dirlik, the economic and socio-political globalization of the modern world works to reify the resurgence of religion in particular as a cultural guarantor in changing globalized communities (2003; see also Casanova 1994, Hefner 1998). Referring specifically to Islam, Dirlik claims that religion “provides a language of protest and social activity against colonialism old and new, as



well as for movements of those marginalized or discarded by the same globalization” (2003: 162). A reinforcement or “cultural freezing” of Muslim and North African cultural elements – especially those associated with dress and sexual comportment -- serves to reshape boundaries and define them forcefully.

As North African women continue to migrate to France, largely under the family reunification category of migration to join their husbands, the space between tradition and modernity, secularism and Islam, feminist liberation and oppression, the Maghreb and France, is in flux. While I point to Donna Haraway’s paradigm of “situated knowledge” (1988) in Chapter Two as an overarching approach to deconstructing these binaries, Homi Bhabha’s notion of an “interstitial” third space, introduced in my concluding remarks in Chapter Four, is a second useful paradigm. With reference to Walter Benjamin’s essays on translation (1982), Bhabha explains that hybridity is built on a notion of translation and “the genealogy of difference” (1990b: 211). A third space distinct from the first two, that is, formed from them, but able to assume their structures of authority, becomes manifest. While Bhabha turns to forms of hybridity represented in Salman Rushdie’s *The Satanic Verses* and Toni Morrison’s *Beloved* to highlight questions of identity, authorship and authority, I suggest Bhabha’s theoretical work has a more “on the ground” application, as well. Some anthropologists have challenged the applicability of this “hybridized” analytical category (see Mackey 2002). For example, Katherine Pratt Ewing (2006) alludes to her own frustration with Bhabha’s theory in her work on Turkish women in Germany:

an ideology based on the assumption of cultural difference and the celebration of hybridity as a strategy for the mediation of this difference actually makes the process of

integration more difficult. Not only does it posit and constitute homogeneous collective identities that hamper recognition of the actual heterogeneity of those who fall within the category of this collective identity; it also exacerbates miscommunications between Germans and Turks (Ewing 2006: 267)

I disagree with Ewing. Hybridity may offer both immigrants and members of the host country a way out of characterizing one another in terms of polarized binaries. While admittedly apolitical in its conception, the term remains useful, particularly in the way that Bhabha links it with the postcolonial subject. The postcolonial subject is defined as located between an “original” or the authoritative source and its repetition or difference.

Bhabha analyses the colonial subject by claiming that colonialism was the founding moment of Western modernity:

the West was producing another history of itself through its colonial possessions and relations. That ideological tension, visible in the history of the West as a despotic power, at the very moment of the birth of democracy and modernity, has not been adequately written in a contradictory and contrapuntal discourse of tradition. Unable to resolve that contradiction perhaps, the history of the West as a despotic power, a colonial power, has not been adequately written side by side with its claims to democracy and solidarity. The material legacy of this repressed history is inscribed in the return of post-colonial peoples to the metropolis (1990b: 218; see also 1994: 6).

This “return” of postcolonial peoples to the metropolis, which itself has repressed its legacy of despotisms and colonialism, thus necessitates a new category of representation, aptly captured in hybridity. The presence of the postcolonial subject in the West effectively questions the authority and the authenticity of founding Western narratives of modernity, and its links to democracy, women’s rights and secularism. The history of colonialism therefore is a *counter-history* to the normative, traditional history of the West. The postcolonial subject’s identity within what Bhabha terms the “borderline community of migration” (1994: 9) is inherently part of the Western narrative, while powerfully excluded from it. Of course, as I describe in Chapter Four and Five, the migration

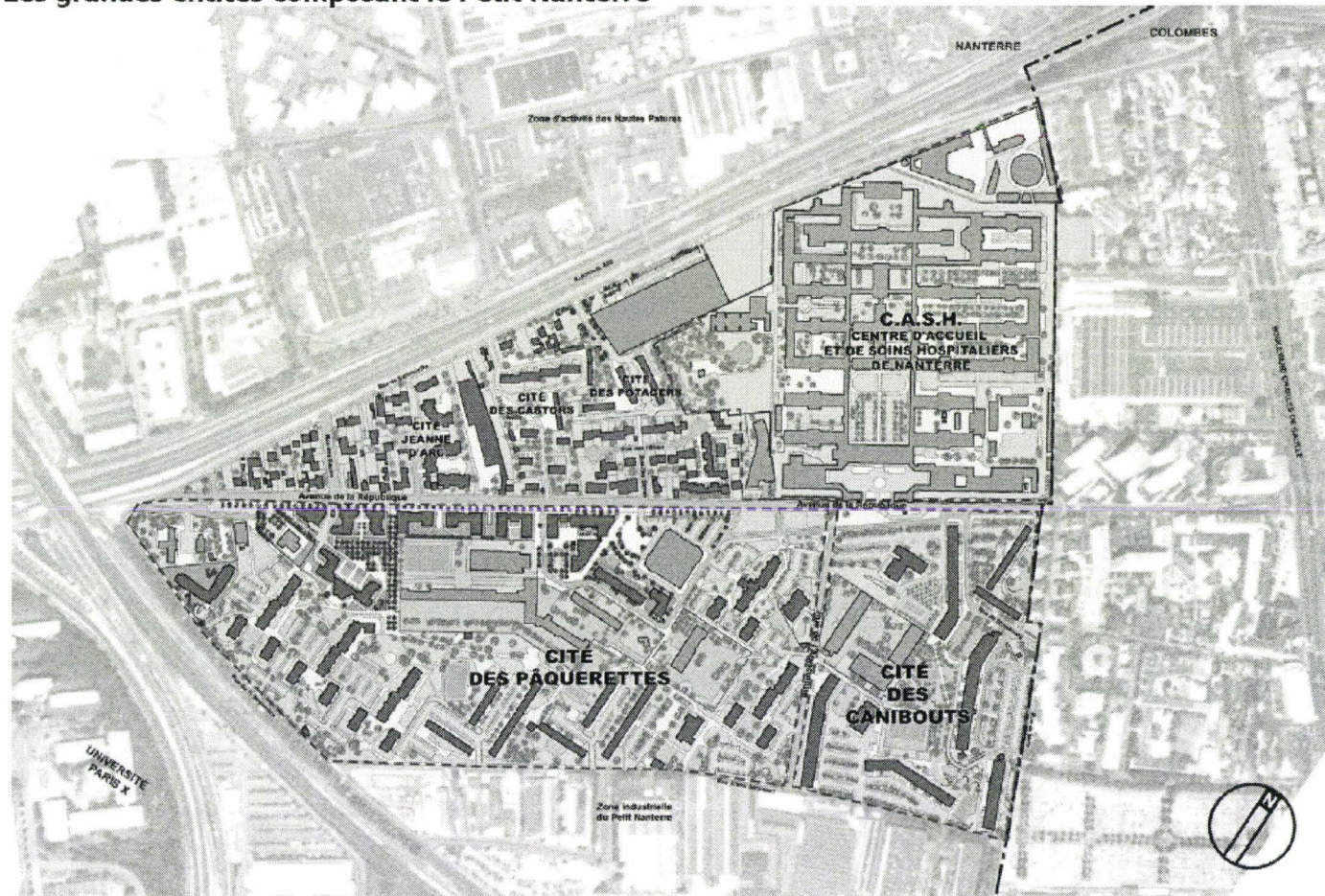
experience of women differs greatly from that of their husbands. Women are often not integrated into the French workforce, and as such, have less social mobility and capital and more difficulty with French language skills. Moreover, as I describe in Chapter Four, women often also carry more symbolic weight as transmitters and producers of the national culture and as representative signifiers of national difference (Yuval-Davis and Anthias 1993; Waetjen 2001; Kandiyoti 1991; Mosse 1985).

Thus, while Bhabha claims that the third space allows for a “strategic reversal of the process of domination through disavowal” (Bhabha 1994: 112), I suggest that power and agency in the “third space” is far from uniform, even among women themselves. This research has examined women’s “strategies.” Moreover, French French dominant cultural forces are also far from homogenous or unified. Components of French culture, normative notions about secularism, religion in the public sphere and feminine roles and social comportment, are being continually questioned and renegotiated by transnational postcolonial women living outside of Paris in the *banlieues*. Understanding these women’s experiences in the marginal socially-disadvantaged suburban neighbourhoods of France’s capital unveils the recreation, contestation and shifting conceptions of secularism, women’s agency and gender politics.



## Appendix One: Map

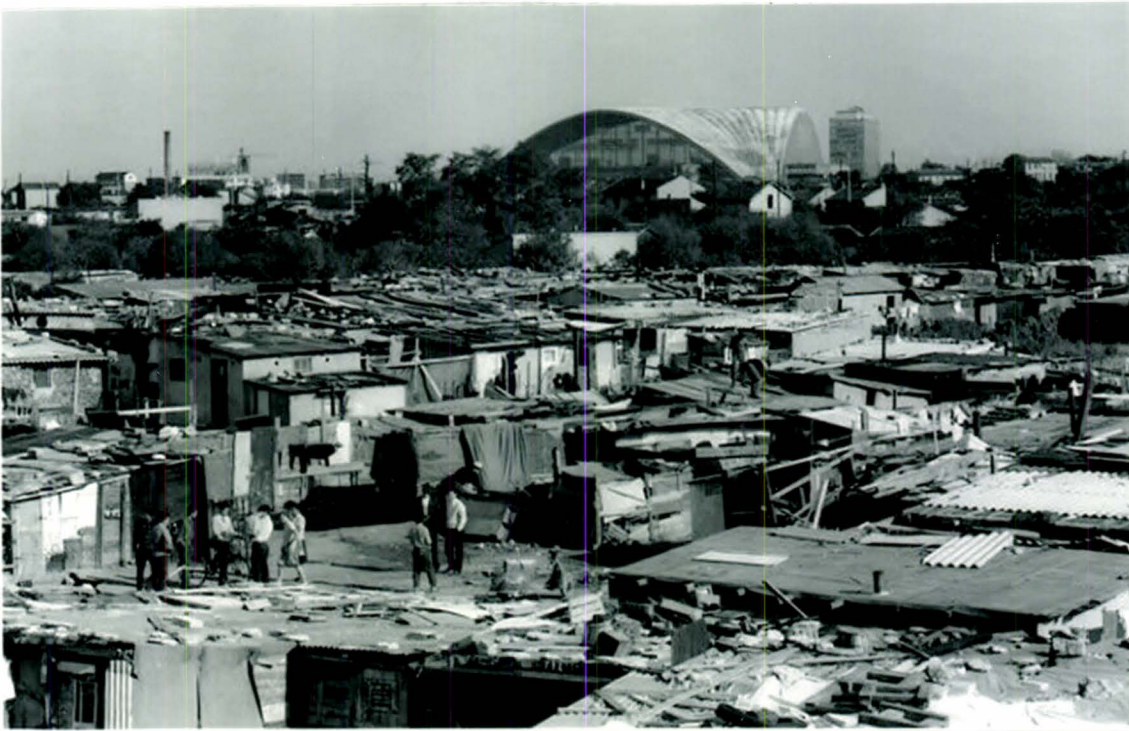
### Les grandes entités composant le Petit Nanterre



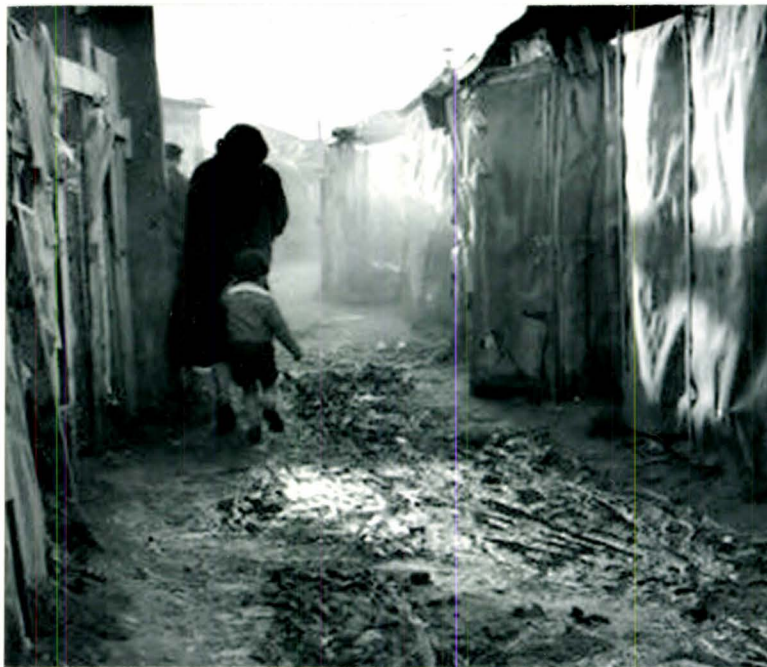
Map courtesy of Jacques Guével, Centre Sociale Valérie Méot.



## Appendix Two: Photos of Petit Nanterre



A View of the Bidonville de Nanterre (photograph used by permission of Jean Pottier, 1956).



A muddy morning in Petit Nanterre (photograph used with permission by Jean Pottier, 1956).





Making coffee inside a family's shack (photograph used with permission of Jean Pottier, 1956).



Mothers getting their children ready for school (photograph used with permission of Jean Pottier, 1956).



Five-story walk-up buildings in the Cité des Canibouts, Petit Nanterre (photograph by Jennifer Selby).



Homeless men outside the CASH centre on the Rue de la République in Petit Nanterre (Photograph by Jennifer Selby).





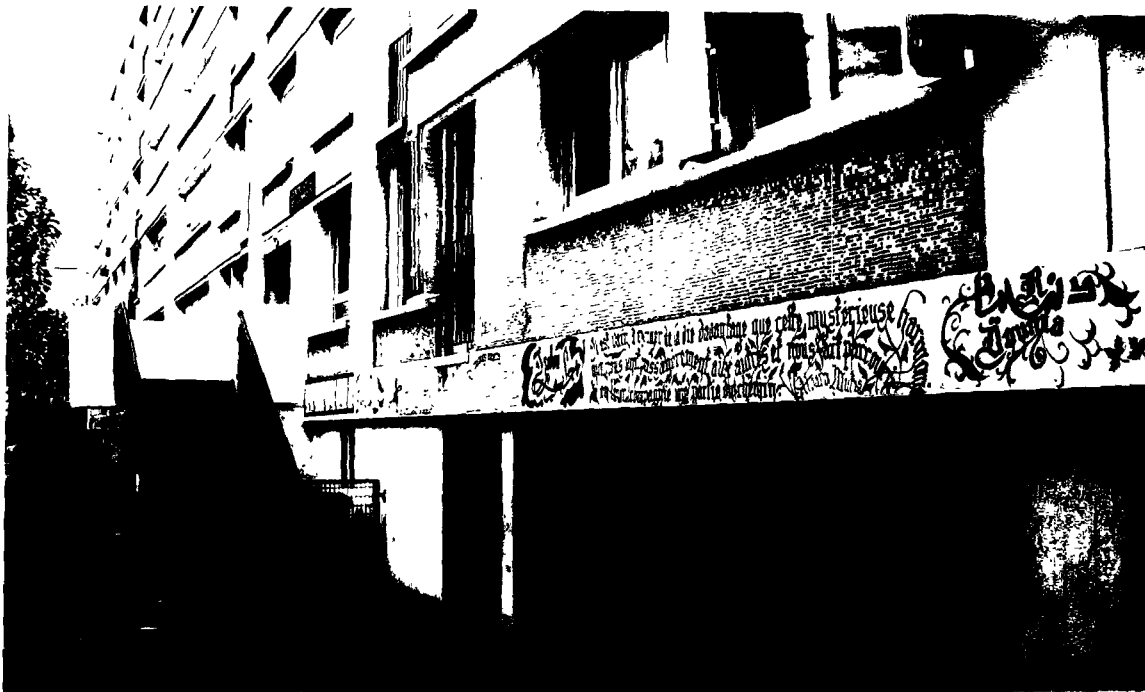
The Nadha Coiffure hair salon in a small shopping complex in the centre of Petit Nanterre (photograph Jennifer Selby).



A commemorative plaque in the entranceway of the Centre Social Valérie Méot (photograph Jennifer Selby).



The Sunni Mosque in the Rue de la République in Petit Nanterre (photograph by Jennifer Selby).



The stairs lead up to the entrance for the Centre Social des Canibouts. The “illegal” mosque is below. A pillar near the door reads “Allah” in Arabic (photograph Jennifer Selby).



Parents' protest signs outside of École La Fontaine in Petit Nanterre. The sign reads: "End insults, respect the personnel. Angry communal agents," and the teacher to calf: "My little rabbit, I'm not saying anything to you, but you understand me" (photograph by Jennifer Selby).

## SI VOUS DESIREZ

### ME CONTACTER

Si vous avez des questions ou des commentaires, veuillez me contacter au :

(mon numéro de téléphone à Paris)

ou par e-mail à l'adresse :

selbyja@mcmaster.ca

### DE MANIÈRE PLUS GÉNÉRALE

Ce projet contribue à une compréhension au sens plus large de l'interface entre la soi-disant laïcité occidentale et les idéologies «religieuses» islamiques. J'émet également comme hypothèse que les Musulmanes françaises jouent un rôle primordial en ce qui est de promouvoir la visibilité des Musulmans dans le contexte de l'Union européenne.

Mes conclusions au terme de l'enquête pourront être très utiles aux communautés musulmanes et françaises en France dans le sens où elles favoriseront une meilleure compréhension inter-culturelle.

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Ce projet a été examiné et autorisé par le Comité d'éthique de la recherche McMaster (MREB).

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Si vous avez des questions sur la recherche de Jennifer Selby ou si vous désirez connaître vos droits en tant que participant, veuillez contacter :

### Le Comité d'éthique de la recherche de l'Université McMaster

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**«L'évolution des limites du  
nationalisme et de la laïcité :**

**Une ethnographie des  
maghrébines musulmanes  
en banlieue parisienne.»**

CHARGÉE D'ENQUÊTE :  
Mlle JENNIFER SELBY  
ASPIRANTE AU DOCTORAT  
UNIVERSITÉ McMASTER  
HAMILTON, CANADA



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## **LE PROJET**

Cette étude d'anthropologie sur le terrain examine la façon dont le laïcisme français et l'islamisme religieux influencent et défient l'effort de construction de la femme musulmane sur le plan de son identité féminine. J'émetts comme hypothèse que les immigrantes musulmanes maghrébines en France sont au centre de débats islamo-laïcs sur la tradition et la modernité, et sur la laïcisation et les droits religieux.

Peu de recherches académiques sur les femmes maghrébines ont été entreprises d'un point de vue ethnographique. Mon étude met en relief la voix d'immigrantes musulmanes en France que les récents écrits académiques ont ignorées.

J'encourage quiconque désirant participer à mon projet à venir témoigner de ses expériences et luttes politiques et religieuses en France.

## **VOTRE RÔLE**

Vous pouvez contribuer à cette étude en m'offrant une heure de votre temps pour répondre à des questions sur votre vie et votre expérience d'immigration sur les plans personnel et familial, sur la façon dont vous pratiquez l'Islam en France si vous le pratiquez, et plus généralement sur vos pensées concernant l'intégration des Musulmans en France.

Les entretiens que j'organise sont non limitatifs dans le sens où je ne me réfère à aucun questionnaire spécifique. L'heure et le lieu de cette conversation sont à votre convenance. Avec votre permission, il est possible que j'enregistre vos propos sur un magnétophone.

## **CONFIDENTIALITÉ**

Ce projet respecte des règles strictes de confidentialité. Les observations et échanges recueillis demeurent privés et ne seront communiqués qu'à mon responsable et aux membres du comité de supervision. Vos propos seront utilisés uniquement à des fins de recherche. Toutes les informations seront conservées par le chargé d'enquête principal.

Si certaines questions vous mettent mal à l'aise, vous pouvez refuser d'y répondre ou même décliner de participer. Les participants ne perçoivent aucune rémunération dans le cadre de cette étude.

## **LA CHARGÉE D'ENQUÊTE**

Les rapports entre la religion et la politique m'ont toujours intéressée. Au cours de mes études universitaires du premier cycle, j'ai examiné l'importance ethnique et historique du leader métis du Manitoba Louis Riel. Mes recherches de maîtrise à l'Université Queen's de Kingston (Canada) m'ont amenée à me pencher sur la religion civile et le nationalisme aux États-Unis, surtout particulier après le 11 septembre 2001.

Bilingue en anglais et en français, j'ai commencé à étudier l'arabe en septembre 2003. Je suis née et j'ai grandi à Winnipeg au Canada et j'ai passé plusieurs étés en France. Je suis actuellement étudiante à l'Université McMaster à Hamilton au Canada.



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