The shade of the colonies in urban France

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When the social mobility of black citizens disturbs the dominant racial and spatial order, the members of the minority are sometimes abruptly put back to their place. An article by Elijah Anderson shows how the black ghetto, in its social and symbolic dimensions, contributes to the exclusion of African-Americans. What would be the American ghetto's French equivalent?

On a cold day in January I decide to take advantage of the seasonal sales in order to prepare for the winter ahead. I take the opportunity to linger in the warmth of the department stores at the affluent neighbourhood of the Opera of Paris. I languidly observe the ebullient environment that attracts hundreds of tourists to the capital of fashion and let the crowds carry me along the aisles of the store. Suddenly, I'm torn from my reveries by a man's voice. Obviously in a hurry, a white man in his fifties, wearing an impeccable suit, loses his patience at the brink of the escalators. In front of him stands a black woman in her sixties, wrapped in a heavy winter coat and hesitantly stepping on the mechanical steps. She clings firmly to the railing with one hand, and to a young white woman with the other. The man grumbles: "If you're afraid of the escalators, why don't you just go home!" The elderly lady clutches to the young woman, both look stupefied, and without saying a word they recede. I descend from a daydreamer's state. Do people look at me like they look at the lady? Do they see us as immigrants or foreigners, out of place among the clientele consisting of white Parisians and Asian tourists?

Contrary to what France's colour-blind tradition[1] would lead us to expect, *nigger moments* (Anderson 2011), so particular to America, occur in France as well. These moments consist of manifestations of acute disrespect towards black people who are reminded of the colour of their skin and of the social status that colour confers. The moments are characterized by an inherent ambiguity: the experience of injustice can be explained away by the exchange's seemingly harmless air. The racist nature of the interaction therefore often remains disagreed upon. Furthermore, they often occur in places where the presence of blacks is unexpected and may be perceived as a threat to the social status of the white majority.

Elijah Anderson, specialist of urban sociology and race relations, opens his article *The Iconic Ghetto* by recounting a personal experience. On holidays at the affluent Cape Cod, his jogging routine is suddenly disrupted by a stranger who hails to him through his car window. Anderson approaches in order to distinguish the word the white driver seems to be repeating: "Go home!" Despite the nearly identical content of the two remarks, it appears that the Cape Cod driver and the Parisian client of an up-market department store do not direct their black counterparts to the same place. Anderson interprets the driver's comment as a command to return to the ghetto. Where should the black lady return to from the department store? Might it be that she's encouraged to go back to Africa?

Although the image of the ghetto is not directly applicable to the French context because of historical, social and cultural differences between the two countries, Anderson's analysis inspires an examination of the structural conditions and cultural representations informing interracial encounters in France. The article offers analytical tools for analyzing the elusive object of *nigger moments* in a contextualized and systematic manner.

The haunted social mobility of African-Americans

In *The Iconic Ghetto*, Elijah Anderson highlights the extraordinary persistence of the ghetto in the American collective imagination. Despite the progress of racial incorporation, racial exclusion still shapes the lives of African-Americans, yet manifests itself in new ways. Many Americans' conceptions of the ghetto have remained largely unchanged despite the growing size of the contemporary black middle class, the advancement of African-Americans in the educational and professional fields, and the decline in the proportion blacks among residents of the ghettos. Anderson's recent book, *Cosmopolitan Canopy,* already analyzed forms of racial exclusion operating beyond the confines of the ghetto. However, it was the book's more optimistic content, regarding the role of non-segregated urban areas in improving race relations, which caught the attention of the wider public[2]. The present article tackles the consequences of the projection of the pejorative attributes associated with ghetto to African-American citizens, with no regard to their class position or residential address.

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[1] Bleich, Erik, 2001, The French Model: Colour-blind Integration, in Skretny, John D. (ed.) *Color Lines. Affirmative Action, Immigration, and Civil Rights Options for America*. Chicago: Universiy of Chicago Press.
[2] Tonnelat, Stéphane, 2012, "Hopeful Sociology. How to Become Cosmopolitan in Urban Public Space", *La Vie des Idées*. Available online : http://www.booksandideas.net/Hopeful-Sociology.html.

Anderson underscores the ambiguous ways in which the black ghetto, as a symbol, operates. Middle class blacks navigating traditionally white milieus need to manage their appearance and behavior in order not to be associated with the stereotypical representations of the inhabitants of the black ghetto: the dangerous and irresponsible man and the hyperfertile woman benefitting from welfare programmes. Theirs is the burden of feeling of being "on stage" and having to constantly prove themselves. When their success is recognized, it is taken to reflect the universalistic and egalitarian nature of the American society rather than the highly valued individual success. Successful black citizens therefore risk passing for token indicators of the healthy functioning of programmes of racial incorporation. This type of tokenism is particularly dangerous as it effectively masks durable forms of racial inequalities.

It also follows that in a society where racial inequality supposedly no longer prevails, the persistently disadvantaged position of some African-Americans becomes commonly perceived as resulting from an individual's lack of effort to advance in life. Offering a structural explanation to the disadvantage, Anderson discusses unemployment, welfare state retrenchment, and privatization of housing schemes as major structural forces contributing to the maintenance of blacks in ghettoes. The reproduction of the inner-city poverty in turn sustains the ghetto as a stigmatizing cultural repertoire. A vicious circle emerges: the social mobility of the middle class blacks is used to denounce the lack thereof among the most disadvantaged, and the social representations related to the immobility of the latter undermine the upwardly mobility of other blacks commonly confused with the disqualifying stereotypical figures of the ghetto inhabitants.

Black France: A minority in the making

In the absence of accurate statistics[3], France's black population is estimated at approximately two million people. The black minority thus accounts for 4-5% of the national population, in contrast to 12% in the United States (Ndiaye 2008). While the African-American minority is composed mainly of descendants of slaves who have been American citizens for several generations, the French black population is comparably more diverse and consists of French citizens from overseas territories, African immigrants, and their descendants. If 4% of immigrants entering the United States in 2009 were of African origin (Capps, Fix & McCabe, 2011), in 2010, 54% of immigrants entering France came from Africa, and 42.8% of them from countries outside the Arab-speaking North Africa (INSEE 2012). In terms of social inequalities, Sub-Saharan African immigrants to France are overrepresented among the nation's unemployed (15% against 8% of the majority population in 2008), as well as at the bottom of the professional hierarchy (30% are unskilled workers compared with 13% of the national population), and their descendants seem to inherit the professional position and the high risk of unemployment (Beauchemin, Hamel & Simon 2010). Some view this as a continuation of the colonial relations of domination and highlight the multiple forms of discrimination that hamper social mobility among the descendants of immigrants (De Rudder & Vourc'h 2006). Indeed, 67% of French

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3 Simon, Patrick, 2008, "The Choice of Ignorance. The Debate on Ethnic and Racial Statistics in France". *French Politics, Culture and Society,* 26 (1), pp. 7-31.

blacks declare having experienced racial discrimination, with incidents occurring in public spaces and work environments being most frequently cited (CRAN, TFN-Sofres 2007).

As residential mobility is bound to social mobility, immigrants are overrepresented in the underprivileged urban neighborhoods of big cities, in the *banlieues*[4]. The concentration in these areas is the most pronounced among immigrants from Turkey, Africa and Southeast Asia. In 1999, 21.1% of African immigrants lived in ZUS[5] neighborhoods, against 5.9% of the national majority population, and residential segregation has since increased (Pan Khé Shon 2009). However, the index of dissimilarity between immigrants from Sub-Saharan Africa and the majority population was 0.33 in France in 1999, compared to 0.82 between blacks and whites in New York in 2000 (Préteceille 2009). The division of cities into areas of ethnic minority concentration is hence less developed than in the United States. To this first difference, the lesser degree of ethnic segregation, is added the multiethnic character of French *banlieues* that contrasts starkly with the black ghetto and ethnic enclaves found in the United States.

The imaginary home of the black French: a moving object?

Whereas it is inarguably wise to be cautious when discussing the cultural repertoire of the ghetto in the French context, the exercise is worthwhile considering some recent developments in interracial relations on the two sides of the Atlantic. While the racial segregation of residential spaces has decreased in the United States (Iceland 2004), a tendency towards increasing segregation has been observed in France. While the advent of a post-racial era has been debated in America, France is just beginning to conceptualize its black population independently of the migration paradigm. Whether it is convergences we are observing or not, examining the shifts in the cultural representations of the "home" of black people, and the implications of these often pernicious representations on everyday interracial encounters, paves way to better understanding how racial stigmatization operates in France.

When commanding the black lady to "go home", is the white client of the Parisian department store implying that she is a foreigner? Besides the color of her skin, it is hard to think of another cue for such a judgment. Following Anderson's argument, interracial encounters in unexpected places are often informed by knowledge based on stereotypical figures. In our case, we need to take into account that the stereotypical representations of blacks available in France are sensibly different from those available in the United States. While the adult black man is readily equated with the figure of the docile immigrant worker collecting the garbage or sweating in a car assembly plant, the younger generation is projected as the image of the juvenile delinquent from the *banlieue*. Encounters with black women are informed by the powerful stereotype of the mother of a large family, possibly illiterate, having recently arrived from a

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[4] For a comparative analysis of the American Ghetto and the French banlieue, see Wacquant, Loïc (1996) Red Belt, Black Belt: Racial Division, Class Inequality, and the State in the French Urban Periphery and the American Ghetto, in Mingione, Enzo (dir.) *Urban Poverty and the "Underclass": A Reader*, Oxford and New York: Basil Blackwell.

[5] ZUS, *"sensitive urban zones"* are underprivileged neighbourhoods targeted by politics of urban renewal.

remote African village, and unaware of the functioning of French institutions, except those distributing the French equivalent of the AFDC (Aid to Families with Dependent Children).

Moreover, if African-Americans are systematically associated with the ghetto, Africa's status as the permanent address of the black French is solid. Suggesting that the black client is afraid to take the escalators, the white man draws on the popular representation of African countries as underdeveloped, politically and economically lagging, without modern infrastructure, and filled with emigrant candidates. The majority of whites only know these imaginary homes through the media and fiction, in perfect analogy with the black American ghetto. However, new imaginary "homes"*,* such as the *banlieue*, may be emerging and challenging the representation of the French black as foreigners. To the extent that these representations of people and places convey a notion of social and moral inferiority, these stereotypes are not unlike those discussed by Anderson. The main difference lies in the legacy of colonial history and the patterns of contemporary migration: the image of the subordinate foreigner lingers over the French black, according them a provisional status on the soil of the Metropolitan France.

Despite the differences between the American and French cultural repertoires in informing unexpected interracial encounters, a major similarity draws our attention: the durable and monolithic quality of the repertoires and the kind of knowledge they perpetuate. They prove to be extraordinarily resistant to both the diversity and transformation of the social positions occupied by the black minority on both sides of the Atlantic. Regardless of the size of the contemporary African-American middle class and the growing number of black French citizens, the shadows of the ghetto and the colonial order still serve to remind blacks of their place in the dominant social order while simultaneously punishing mobility.

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