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URBAN SILHOUETTES: MOHAND MOUNSI'S CREOLIZED PARIS

DAWN FULTON

Ce qu'on a de plus important à dire, on ne le proclame pas toujours à haute voix. On le confie au silence le plus intime. La page blanche est le lieu de cet aveu.

[The most important things we have to say aren't always declared out loud. We confide them to the most intimate silence. The blank page is the site of this confession.]

—Mohand Mounsi, *Territoire d'outre-ville*

During the past half-century, France's capital city has come to offer a microcosmic view of the nation's relationship to its former colonies in North Africa, West Africa, and the Caribbean. Immigrants from these countries carry memories of a French colonial past, and their children maintain a "second-degree" cultural and linguistic knowledge of their parents' origins that engenders an often skeptical relationship with the French national identity into which they are born. While urban centers in all former colonial powers manifest these frictions, postcolonial immigration in Paris is particularly inflected by the country's Enlightenment ideals of Republicanism—by understandings of national identity that make uneasy company with the celebration of cultural difference that characterizes many contemporary conceptualizations of urbanism. An acutely violent path to independence in Algeria, coupled with the fact that North Africans represent the largest percentage of France's non-European immigrants, mean that the tensions inherent in this relationship between "host" and "guest" come sharply to the fore for writers and artists of Maghrebian origin in France.¹

Franco-Algerian writer and singer Mounsi has not received the attention accorded such prominent *beur* writers as Azouz Begag, Mehdi Charef, Farida Belghoul, or Faïza Guène, but his work offers a unique view of the incidence

of postcolonial immigration on the landscape of Paris and its outskirts. In particular, his use of the silhouette to signal the attenuated presence of the city's disavowed figures—the garbage collectors, the factory workers, the petty criminals who slip virtually unseen through its streets—marks a striking intervention into contemporary readings of the globalized city. As I hope to show here, Mounsi points to the unacknowledged history of a postcolonial metropolis as a representative impasse for the contemporary writer of urban migration, prompting us to define more carefully what a Creolized cityscape might look like. Focusing on the author's literary and critical works published between 1990 and 2000, this essay will read the figure of the silhouette as an evocative if fleeting symptom of the representative and formal contingencies of Mounsi's urbanism.

TO THE LITERARY PAGE

Born in 1951 in Kabylia, Mohand Nafaa Mounsi moved to France as a child to join his father in the suburbs of Nanterre outside Paris. One of the first to use rock music as a medium for giving voice to the experiences of young Algerians in France in his 1984 debut album *Seconde Génération*, Mounsi began to publish literary works in the 1990s (see Derderian, *North Africans* 52). His four novels, *La Noce des fous* (Revels of the Mad, 1990), *La Cendre des villes* (The Ashes of Cities, 1993), *Le voyage des âmes* (Voyage of Souls, 1997), and *Les Jours infinis* (Infinite Days, 2000), along with the autobiographical essay *Territoire d'outre-ville* (Territory Beyond the City, 1995), trace the lives of first- and second-generation Algerians in Paris and its outskirts, capturing the contrast between the pastoral spaces left behind in the Maghreb and the racial tensions and hostilities of an unwelcoming metropolis. The author's arresting first novel, translated into English as *The Demented Dance*, paints a particularly bleak portrait of the city through the narrative of Tarik Hadjaj, a young second-generation immigrant who, having lost his mother at birth, watches his father lose his job and turn to alcohol as he himself is absorbed into a life of petty crime, drugs, prostitution, foster homes, and incarceration.

Mounsi's work joins the corpus of so-called *beur* literature that first flourished in the 1980s, establishing the complexities of binationalism and biculturalism experienced by second-generation Maghrebi immigrants in France as a signature marker of *beur* identity. In 1983, for example, Mehdi Charef's *Le Thé au harem d'Archi Ahmed* (translated into English in 1989 as *Tea in the Harem*) catapulted its author to fame and introduced mainstream French audiences to the hidden stories of immigrant families in France, and particularly to the frustrations of their younger generations trapped in the unforgiving landscape of Paris's public housing projects. As Charef's novel recounts, these

young men are caught between two worlds—French and North African—and see few inroads to reconciling them. *Tea in the Harem's* embittered protagonist Majid holds immigration to Europe, driven by the hopes and idealism of his parents, to blame for his untenable situation. In a French-Arabic dialogue of strained communication with his mother, he protests:

'I never asked to come here. If you hadn't decided to come to France, I wouldn't be "finished", would I, eh? So leave me alone, will you?' . . .

She leaves the room and Majid flops down on the bed, reflecting that for a long time he's been neither French nor Arab. He's the son of immigrants—caught between two cultures, two histories, two languages, and two colours of skin. He's neither black nor white. He has to invent his own roots, create his own reference points. (13)

These "reference points" underscore the questions of citizenship and belonging that are particularly fraught in the French Republic, where a resistance to *communautarisme*, or community-building based on racial or ethnic identity, discourages any collective expressions of divergence from dominant narratives of national identity. Mounsi himself enacts a parodic emblem of this dilemma on the cover of *Seconde Génération*, where he appears with an Algerian flag in his hand and a tiny French flag on a toothpick in his mouth.

Shifting from music to writing, Mounsi entered the literary marketplace at a time when the quick and simplistic associations that so often burden minority writers were firmly in place for the fiction of North African immigration. The 1990s marked the gelling of a certain set of stereotypes surrounding young *Beurs*, and particularly the space of the public housing projects in the outskirts (*banlieue*) of France's largest cities, where many of the Maghrebi immigrant populations live. The association between the *banlieue* and the violence of a young, male, disenfranchised population gained widespread international purchase through Mathieu Kassovitz's 1995 film *La Haine* (*Hate*), which, while it presented its own critique of media sensationalism, seems to have left an indelible imprint of young urban violence. The media coverage of the 2005 riots that took place in various urban areas across the country following the deaths of two teenagers running from the police in Clichy-sous-Bois further served to confirm the connotative linking of young immigrants, violence, and the space of the *banlieue*.

This stereotyped reading thus serves as a kind of counter-narrative for many *beur* artists. Their work could be seen as an effort to write the *banlieue* out from under this media-produced image, rejecting facile sensationalism and decrying the marginalization of France's immigrant voices. For his part, Mounsi evokes this project in terms of translation, attesting that French

society distorts the immigrant experience with inaccurate subtitles or dubbing, replacing the “original version” of these lives with a poor translation (*Territoire* 18).² Like many contemporary writers, he eschews the term “*beur*” itself, suggesting that it is so saturated with stereotyped associations that it imprisons its referent (*Territoire* 72–74).³

Indeed, in this regard, Mounsi’s work delves a bit deeper than that of his contemporaries to point out that the apparent counter-narrative to “*beur*” stereotypes can be just as problematic as the criminalizing ones. In *La Noce des fous*, for example, when the novel’s protagonist and his friend are arrested for an accidental murder that occurred during a burglary, Tarik notes wryly that their “arrest was headline news,” devoured with frenzy by a crowd that “bayed for monsters, heroes and victims.” But the multiple interpretations of their story are misleading: “The reporters’ versions varied slightly and inevitably contradicted each other according to whether they were left or right wing: for some we were criminals, for others, martyrs. Both were wrong, of course, as usual” (92). Mounsi thus embeds a caveat for some of his well-meaning readers into his novel: that a thoughtless championing of the *beur* cause does little to provide complexity and nuance to this public image.⁴ His work, with its insistence on the pitfalls and contingencies of attempting to capture marginal existences, seems infused with the desire to reject and rewrite the reductive media portraits to which he was himself subject: “[I] m’a fallu attendre de longues années,” he claims in an interview with Yamina Benguigui, “avant de passer de la page des faits divers à la page littéraire” (161) [I had to wait many years to get from the last page of the newspaper to the literary page].

PRAYER ON THE PÉRIPHÉRIQUE

On that literary page, Mounsi’s voice brings to life a hidden urban narrative. Like many immigrant writers in Paris, Mounsi evokes a dual image of the French capital: on the one hand, the city is idealized as a land of promise and prosperity, but on the other, it is experienced by its less desirable inhabitants as a space of rejection and degradation. The narrator of *Les Jours infinis*, for example, recalls thinking that Paris must be “the greatest and most beautiful city in the world,” where “nothing was banal” and where “people spent their time living and dreaming” (61), and Mounsi himself affirms in an interview that as a seven-year-old in Algeria he pictured Paris as a “giant Eiffel Tower covered in lights” (Benguigui 153).⁵ But the Paris Mounsi discovers upon his arrival is instead the mud- and garbage-filled shantytown on the outskirts of Nanterre where his father lives, and the Paris of his novels is a place where “life is so vulnerable, it’s impossible to harbour any illusions about a harmonious outcome

in the hereafter” (*Demented Dance* 7). “This is my inner city,” Mounsi writes, in one of his many bleak portraits of the Parisian *banlieue*:

Where I live, the entrance to hell lies on the west side of the sinuous, rapid course of the capital’s ring road. Towards the alley that circles the rough façades, at the threshold of a world where only dreams are real and life does not exist. In this scraheap of modern buildings, higher than the pylons planted in the black mud, walls grow like prisons, supported by thin partitions. . . . Kitchen fumes and a nauseating stench rise from the rusty pipes, a lingering odour of dungeons. It’s like the breath of death, a foul smell in the mouth and the air, a build-up of decay, a pitiless stink that inflames the sinuses. There are those who die, unsure they’ve ever lived, while others go on living, trapped in a habit they cannot break. Scorned faces swarm in the obscure light. A thousand lives, all the same, today and yesterday. A mass of humanity, humiliated, trampled, crushed, spreading across the earth like sediment. (*Demented Dance* 7–9)

This is the world into which the first-person narrator is born, the place where “my mother shat me” (8) before dying in childbirth. In a notable instance of Mounsi’s literary style, though, the diegetic moment of birth is almost incidental: here, and throughout the novel, the teeming masses of anonymous, humiliated beings that populate this disavowed city seem to overwhelm the narrative. The particular characters in Tarik’s life—his father, his friends, fellow inmates, his schoolteacher—do not drive the narrative arc of the novel, but instead emerge and disappear at turns into a more generalized portrait of urban decay, an impressionistic canvas filled with unnamed shadows and ghosts. Mounsi’s narrative thus hovers intriguingly between the sociological, the autobiographical, and the lyrical.

Conversely, when one of these characters—the narrator’s father—does figure relatively briefly in the first part of *La Noce des fous*, he attains a symbolic resonance that reverberates throughout Mounsi’s literary works. He first appears as an unidentified man praying in the *périphérique*, the ring road that surrounds Paris and famously segregates it from the housing projects of the *banlieue*:

In the middle of the capital’s ring road, between the lanes, surrounded by the rumble of metal and the rush of cars, motorbikes, buses, the stink of petrol and gas and the deafening city roar, a man prays. He has spread out a white cloth before him and neither the curses nor the jeers of the drivers interrupt his slow prostration. He prays on the tarmac as if on holy ground. (*Demented Dance* 15)

This striking, slightly fantastical image crystallizes the contingencies of Maghrebian immigration in France: the dissonance of Muslim practices in a French secularist landscape, and the mockery and anger of the “mainstream”

Parisians whose daily life is disrupted by this exogenous chronology. Played out on the critical non-space of the ring road—neither a destination nor a stopping place but a border between center and margin—this confrontation also dramatizes the meeting of urban and rural. Tarik’s father forgets the concrete walls around him to immerse himself in the memory of home: “He is over there now, in the midst of songs, locusts, wasps, among the shepherds and the herds of goats and sheep and clumps of nettles” (16). The father’s pastoral re-creation of his homeland forms a defiant erasure of the “deafening city roar” and of the curses and jeers that accost him.

In its defiance, this disruption must be removed, however, and soon enough four men in white coats restrain Tarik’s father in a straitjacket and whisk him away in an ambulance. Madness, then, rather than criminality, is the pretext for removing this Muslim Arab from Parisian society, and as Tarik recounts, his father’s turn towards alcohol after losing his grueling factory job had served as easy material to feed the stereotypes of the collection agents who come to the door threatening eviction. “I could hear them laughing under their breath at my father’s accent,” Tarik recalls: “Got enough money to drink, though, eh, Mustapha . . . ?” “The entire fate of mankind and of the world lay in that remark” (18), Tarik notes, as the French state, having exploited his father’s labor in its factories for years, peremptorily disposes of this man, equipped with the ready tools of racism and stereotype. Their impetus is simultaneously to remove this obstacle from the circulation of mainstream Paris life and to erase this Muslim man’s presence from the very public space of the *périphérique*.

The moment thus becomes the portrait of an entire generation of Arab immigrants in France, many of whom were recruited to provide manual labor during the “trente glorieuses,” the three decades of economic prosperity following the Second World War when France looked across the Mediterranean to replace its labor force. The resentment faced by many of these laborers, fuelled by the violence of the Algerian War of Independence, was the symptom of a larger cultural clash between non-European immigrants and Republican ideals that maintained a strict separation between secularist public space and the private sphere of cultural and religious practice. The scene is also pivotal for the narrative of the second-generation offspring of these immigrants. Tarik frames the witnessing of his father’s humiliation as the crucible for his own life of defiance: “Later, with all the paltry ferocity I could muster, I avenged him with love and a hatred of the world. I wreaked my revenge on everything that crossed my path. . . . I have long felt the urge to disfigure, to defile every living creature, by branding them with the stamp of my life” (*Demented Dance* 19). The protagonist’s stance in the country that unceremoniously eradicated his father, then, is forcefully to proclaim his existence, to “brand” others with the

mark of his presence. In his interview with Yamina Benguigui, Mounsi elaborates on this imperative, describing it in Freudian terms:

Nous, les enfants du Maghreb périphérique, on a bien besoin de revoir les valeurs de base de la psychanalyse ou du freudisme. Dans l'Œdipe, il faut tuer le père, mais nous, au contraire, il nous faut le déterrer, il nous faut le faire revivre. Il a été tué socialement par le colonialisme, par les guerres, puis par l'émigration. Au lieu de le tuer, il nous appartient à nous, les enfants, de le faire revivre, de lui faire redresser la tête. (163)

[It is time for us, the children of the Maghrebian periphery, to review the basic principles of psychoanalysis or Freudian thought. In Oedipus, the father must be killed, but we, on the contrary, must dig up the father, we must make him live again. He has already been killed socially by colonialism, by wars, and then by emigration. Instead of killing him, it is up to us, the children, to make him live again, to make him hold his head up high.]

The *beur* trajectory that Mounsi draws through the streets of Paris and its outskirts can thus be seen in direct lineage to the fragile figure praying in the roar of traffic on the *périphérique*: as a struggle against destruction by an uncomprehending metropolis. In Mounsi's vision, that very humiliation, rather than being buried as a shameful memory, becomes the driving force of the second generation's existence.

The injunctions, insults, and imprisonments to which Mounsi's young protagonists are subjected in the French capital are all the more telling in light of the implicit comparison with this father's fate. Indeed, what the author underscores in his narrative of Parisian disillusionment is the fact that the dichotomy between the idealized postcard version of Paris and its underground is fundamental to the city's self-representation, and that the consequence of this conceptual dependence is the negation of Paris's immigrant populations. In *La Noce des fous*, Mounsi aligns a politician's claims that he has successfully "stemmed the flow of immigration in this time of recession" with the willful self-effacement of the city's foreigners, who "slipped surreptitiously through the streets" in fear of police raids and deportation (142). His novels thus expose the extent to which the glorified image of Paris depends upon the erasure and invisibility of its disavowed poor, paradoxically creating the very world it must then conceal. The fear of expulsion, meanwhile, ensures that the unwanted "foreigners" often themselves participate in deleting any trace of their own presence in the city.

Much like Ralph Ellison, then, whose iconic figure of urban invisibility captured the necessary violence of defying metropolitan racism, Mounsi underscores the demand for recognition that drives his characters' actions, positing their criminalization as the state's suppression of their violent acts

of protest. And like Ellison's narrator, who envisioned "a whole unrecorded history" of Harlem (471), Mounsi enacts a reversal of those suppressions in his literary work, recovering and rewriting the lives "mistranslated" in the tabloids and police records. These are the existences that hardly leave a trace on the urban landscape: willfully discounted and self-censoring, the characters populating Mounsi's novels have no place in the official narrative of this city. As he sits at a police station after his arrest for murder, *La Noce des fous's* Tarik watches his life being "classified, delivered up" in a criminal report, effectively sealing his existence into oblivion. He imagines "the whole history of this ill-fated breed, written upon headed police notepaper": like his, "their history was buried by the centuries; there were no words to say it nor ink to write it" (*Demented Dance* 91).

The title of Mounsi's third major publication, *Territoire d'outre-ville* (Territory Beyond the City), underscores in particular the colonial history embedded in the Parisian landscape, producing a resonance between France's (neo)colonial *territoires d'outremer* (overseas territories) and the postcolonial *banlieue*. At the same time, the notion of a "territory" suggests a claim to land and space on the part of a marginalized community, and Mounsi's work suggests that this spatial claim will be made simultaneously with a claim to history. As he puts it, "the children of immigrants . . . are part of this country's history" (161).⁶ To articulate that participation, his work suggests, is a reciprocal process whereby Paris too must recognize the colonial path that ties these multiple generations of North Africans to its cityscape, and must draw the link between that colonial history and the criminalization of its own citizens: "Delinquency among North African youth in the present . . . cannot be understood in isolation from the colonial and immigrant past" (Derderian, "Confronting" 250–51).

A particularly traumatic set of events in this common history occurred in Paris in October 1961. In response to a curfew imposed by Prefect of Police Maurice Papon, tens of thousands of North African men, women, and children participated in a peaceful demonstration in the heart of the city. Alerted ahead of time and unhinged by escalating violence between police and the FLN, police officers attacked the demonstrators with guns and clubs, killing scores of them and throwing their bodies into the Seine to cover their actions. Because of the subsequent censorship and state denials of any responsibility for the deaths, the night of October 17, 1961, stands as an emblem of all that has remained unaddressed in the relationship between Algeria and France.⁷ The blank surface of the Seine, revealing nothing of these crimes, signals the deletion that leaves this bilateral history in a constant state of irresolution; as Mounsi puts it, "La guerre d'Algérie a laissé dans l'histoire des points de suspension en forme d'impacts de balles" [The Algerian War left an ellipsis

made of bullet holes in our history]. Still, these wounds are the very material of history for Mounsi's generation, who, like him, witnessed the war as children: "C'est à Paris, en octobre 1961, que je découvrais l'histoire" [It's in Paris, in October 1961, that I discovered history] (*Territoire* 30–31).⁸ As in the case of the anti-Oedipal father figure in *Demented Dance*, Mounsi claims the act of destruction itself as the source of artistic—and historic—self-creation.

THE CANVAS OF THE CITY

In the effort to find the words and ink to tell this unrecorded history, Mounsi's work is particularly notable for its attention to the ontological uncertainty of that history and of the lives it recounts. His characters inhabit a state of attenuated existence: unseen and constantly hiding, their presence erased by both the state and themselves, the young "delinquents" who populate his novels express an existential uncertainty that defines their contact with the city. "I was never sure I existed," recounts Tarik in *La Noce des fous*, "I've had a kind of relentless hesitancy about myself, an extreme doubt that made me ask myself, when I saw my reflection in the mirror, if I wasn't just an optical illusion. Can you assure me that such a person, who looks like me, ever existed?" (*Demented Dance* 3; 4–5). The originality of Mounsi's literary project lies in the attempt to find a form of expression that captures the representative uncertainty of this experience. Indeed, Mounsi frames his first novel around this endeavor: a prologue introduces the text as an account of the many lives he encountered in his own navigations of the Parisian streets, particularly its prisons, where, in the words carved into the walls of locked cells, he saw "an unhappy conscience, expressed in the form of a deletion."

Mounsi's literary project could thus be read as an effort to capture that mode of "expressed deletion." In this respect, it is striking how often he returns to the silhouette in his descriptions of the urban landscape. The characters populating his novels are shadowy figures, darting through the shantytowns and suburban housing projects, or slipping undetected through the streets of central Paris. Although the wealthy citizens of Beaubourg are repelled by the drunks who drift past, the quality of this interaction is haunting rather than concrete, connoting no recognition and according no humanity:

Suspicious shadows prowled the narrow streets, beggars and thieves flouting order and custom. They could die of grief and life would leave them there, broken and bloody at the foot of a wall. Nothing is ever said about what dogs have seen, or what the poor have died from. You have to walk the streets to see what they have in common: a cortège of blurred, distorted shapes emerges from underground tunnels, rushes through Beaubourg like a herd of wild beasts, squealing and bellowing through the streets in a rolling, echoing howl. (*Demented Dance* 60–61)

This recurring image of the silhouette or the shadow seems to capture eloquently the state of precarious visibility in which these characters live: viewed in peripheral vision through the eyes of bourgeois Paris, they are at once there and not there, cutout figures with no content, unheard screams and shrieks, shadows that brush obliquely against the consciousness of mainstream urban life.

The form of the silhouette also lends itself to an interpretation of the larger context of Mounsi's narrative world, as a means of confronting the problem of historical representation. If Mounsi's characters question their own existence, it is in part because of their relentless marginalization by French society, but it is also due to the loss of history that is both cause and consequence of that rejection. As we have seen, for North African immigrants living in France, especially those of the second generation who now claim roots in French soil, what marks this particular experience of exile is the denial of a shared history of colonialism. A complex psychological network melding French Republican ideals and the rupturing—or “dismemberment,” as historian Benjamin Stora puts it (16)—of the close ties between France and its most important colony through a long and violent Algerian War have meant that the effort to assert a North African identity in a French landscape has been particularly treacherous. The silhouette also seems to evoke this partial recognition, the uncertain presence of a population whose origins have been stamped out of the narrative of national identity.

Following the trope of the silhouette, moreover, foregrounds the graphic component of Mounsi's literary work, positing an underlying affiliation with visual art as a complement to the musicality of his prose (and to his work as a musician). The evocative relationship between the silhouette and disavowed history brings to mind in particular the work of US artist Kara Walker. Walker's room-sized installations present boldly disturbing images of the antebellum South in a black-against-white format made all the more stark by her use of cut silhouettes. The controversy generated by her work, which seems to reproduce the nation's racial injustices and stereotypes in the most graphic terms possible, illuminates the trenchant commentary embedded in both the content and the form of her pieces. As numerous critics have noted, the unique form of the silhouette provokes an uncertain stance in the viewer. The starkness and size of the silhouettes mean that the viewer feels confronted, even assaulted, by these “difficult” images, but the internal emptiness of each cutout demands a process of inference and second-guessing that highlights the fact that one is not always entirely sure what one is looking at.⁹ The images are at once graphic and shadowy, transparent and opaque, present and absent. Like Mounsi's novels, they trace an abstracted existence, evoking a presence that is glimpsed only in its partiality, and experiences that are not fully legible or accessible.

In the case of Walker's work, the practice of the silhouette is itself a historical reference to the popular and scientific uses of the silhouette in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, calling up its inscription in a sustained discourse on race and physiognomy. But the attenuated visibility projected by these silhouettes—the viewer seeing and not seeing—also reflects a collective inability to come to terms with a traumatic and shameful national past. The void imprinted by the silhouette captures the unassimilated status of this country's history of slavery, the guilt and discomfort provoked by the "dark blankness" of those otherwise too precise images. As the artist herself suggests, the silhouette represents a surplus—an excess—arising from these centuries of repressed knowledge, troubling the relationship between history and fiction: "My art also depicts silhouettes in order to clarify that it shows silhouettes of fictions, the fiction of history above all, and the fictions that arise from history" (Berg 11).

The color scheme of Walker's pieces also focuses our attention on the interdependence of these binary images. The polar relationship between the black cutouts and their white backdrop recalls Toni Morrison's reading of American literary culture, where the denial of the four-hundred-year-old presence of Africans and African-Americans has been fundamental to the formation of the American literary canon. In *Playing in the Dark*, Morrison casts this obliterated history as a haunting presence, a "shadow that is companion to [the] whiteness—a dark and abiding presence that moves the hearts and texts of American literature with fear and longing" (33).¹⁰ Yet the task of reassessing this history is twofold: it demands both an acknowledgement of the history that has been suppressed and a recognition of that denial. The singular power of the silhouette—a form that renders presence as a void—is that it puts a painful history on display in unswerving terms and yet preserves that history's inaccessibility.

Walker's silhouettes present a vision of US history as a narrative defined by what it has rejected. In Mounsi's reading, Paris too has defined itself by what it is not, and has yet to come to terms with either its manifold history or the silencing of its defining narratives. In a Walkeresque confrontational style, Mounsi directly addresses his comfortably middle-class audience by describing his discounted protagonists as a negation that the readers have themselves created: "Someone where you come from might have dared to say 'They are everything we are not'" (*Demented Dance* 143). Similarly, Mounsi's 1984 song "Bâtard" (Bastard) demands that the city of Paris itself acknowledge its collective amnesia: "Paris, your racists have already forgotten / To refresh their memories, / Tell me, should we make them drink / The blood of the foreigners who died for France" (see Derderian, "Confronting" 250). This reference to the unrecognized military debts of France's colonial history underscores the

constitutive nature of that relationship: the lives of the nation's "foreign" soldiers were sacrificed to and for the preservation of French national boundaries that exclude them. In the mode of Kara Walker's "difficult" reminders of an unassimilated past, the silhouettes with which Mounsi imprints his literary descriptions sit on the cusp of that shared history, standing in for France's unrecognized debt to its colonial subjects and for the city of Paris's unrecognized dependence on the erasure of its immigrants. The young *beur* delinquents, barely surviving as they make their surreptitious way through the alleys, garbage heaps, and prisons of the wealthy First-World capital, form the polar opposite against which Paris, with its "giant Eiffel Tower," defines itself. To inscribe their stories into the narrative of Parisian experience, then, is to tell the story of that defining absence, to tell a tale of urban haunting.

CREOLIZING PARIS

What stands out stylistically in Mounsi's work is the uncanny combination of gritty detail and poetic lyricism. As critics have noted, his frank descriptions of the poverty, theft, prostitution, and drug use that permeate the lives of his characters are rendered in a poetic language that marks a significant contrast with the youthful informality and rebellious slang for which *beur* literature has been celebrated.¹¹ While the use of *verlan*, or "backslang," in literary works by second- or third-generation Maghrebians in France has now become almost overdetermined as a gesture of linguistic resistance, Mounsi's writing is notable for its absence. In fact, the author evokes *verlan* only to criticize it, characterizing in particular its most widely adopted instance—the word "beur" (a reversal of the word "Arab" in French)—as a pitfall laden with stereotype and exoticism.¹² Rather than contesting the canonical French literary tradition through a non-standard language and register, Mounsi inserts himself esthetically into that cultural heritage, citing fifteenth-century poet François Villon as his literary inspiration:

[C]'est en prison que j'ai appris à découvrir la littérature. C'est Villon qui m'a sauvé, c'est sa *Ballade des pendus*. J'avais trouvé ma voie, moi aussi je ferais éclater ma révolte, ma violence et ma haine à travers des mots, plus éloquentes que des insultes ou des gueulantes. (Benguigui 160)¹³

[It was in prison that I came to discover literature. It was Villon who saved me, his poem "Ballad of the Hanged." I had found my way: I too would give vent to my outrage, my violence, and my hate through words, more eloquent than insults or abuses.]

In the treacherous linguistic politics of the postcolonial literary landscape, Mounsi chooses appropriation over resistance: rather than disrupting the

literary canon through a dissonant language, he inscribes his dissonant voice and experience into the dominant language.

In this respect, it is intriguing to reread the opening lines of Mounsi's first literary publication in light of the widespread attention received by *Entre les murs* (*The Class*), Laurent Cantet's 2008 film adaptation of François Bégaudeau's book about teaching minority high school students in Paris. The film, winner of a Palme d'Or at the 2008 Cannes Film Festival, features an often cited scene in which the teacher (also named François) tries to convince his students of the merits of using the imperfect subjunctive, a rarefied and primarily literary tense. As François writes the relevant conjugation on the board, the students erupt in protest, ridiculing the mode as a form "from the Middle Ages" and vowing never to use it:

SANDRA: [S]i nous on l'utilise, j'allasse ou j'sais pas quoi, tout l'monde va dire ;
 "Hou là, qu'est-ce qui font, là ? Ils sont malades ou quoi ?" (Bégaudeau et al. 31)¹⁴

[SANDRA: [I]f we say that, "that I might go" or whatever, everyone's gonna say,
 "What's up with that? Are they trippin'?"]

Although the teacher somewhat playfully acknowledges the irrelevance of the imperfect subjunctive to the everyday lives of his students, he insists on their learning these grammatical structures before dismissing them, and underlines the importance of being able to identify discursive register in the French language. As the scene aptly demonstrates, the conjugation lesson is also a lesson in class politics, as the students probe the collusions between linguistic register and socioeconomic status. While the lesson affords François the chance to demonstrate the ways in which class hierarchies are embedded in language, however, the moment forms a striking contrast with the teacher's more general blindness to the ways in which his students are simply *written out* of French pedagogical discourse. He appears baffled, for example, when the students point out that names such as "Rachid" and "Aïssata" never feature in the grammatical exercises they are given to learn (Bégaudeau et al. 25). The posture of universalism subtended by the stalwart secularism of the French educational system (which integrates Judeo-Christian but not Muslim holidays into its calendar) is clearly not something he has questioned at this discursive level.¹⁵ Even as he tirelessly endeavors to offer socioeconomic and cultural access to his students via their mastery of the French language, then, François fails to perceive the intractable gap between his students and his pedagogy.

In this light, Mounsi's choice of the imperfect subjunctive in his inaugural sentences as a novelist leaves little doubt as to the linguistic imprint he wishes to accord his work: "J'eusse pu me permettre toutes les débauches,

commettre le pire des méfaits sans qu'on s'en étonnât ou que la victime s'en offusquât" (*La Noce des fous* 13) ["I could have indulged in every debauchery, committed the worst crime, and no one would have been surprised, my victim wouldn't have taken offense" (*Demented Dance* 1)]. The juxtaposition of form and content here, underscored by the evocation of everyday prejudice, reveals an exaggerated disconnect between the lives Mounsi is describing and the discourse he uses to do so. The surprise provoked for the mainstream reader by the appearance of the imperfect subjunctive in this *beur* text comes in direct opposition to the lack of surprise provoked by the speaker's hypothetical crimes. Like Kara Walker, who turned to a genteel, middle-class medium—the silhouette—to expose some of that milieu's most appalling history, Mounsi explicitly inscribes his tales of disavowed erasure and contempt in the refined literary language of the French elite (see Malik 182; Berg 10–11). At the same time, he aligns the expression of discounted existences, otherwise written out of language, with the defiance of stereotype at the discursive level.

The poetic register of Mounsi's texts thus demands a recognition of the mutually constitutive relationship between French literary history and the nation's "deleted" narratives. Just as the humiliated father is the source of the son's claim to identity, just as the obliterations of October 17, 1961, are the conduit to the discovery of history, the French language is the very site of the restoration of migrant memories. But the author's rejection of the linguistically divergent texture of other *beur* literature also shifts our attention from language to the other ways in which the urban landscape represents a plurality of experiences. If Mounsi presents the Creolized city as a palimpsest of multiple histories and memories, he does so in an etymologically precise way, capturing not just the composition of layered narratives, but also the formal complexity of coexistent texts with varying degrees of visibility. Indeed, the author's attention to the deletions and erasures inhabited by his characters reveals the assumption of equivalence that underlies conceptions of *Créolité* and *Creolization*: the "magma" of intertwined histories envisioned by the Martinican authors of *Eloge de la Créolité*, for example, assumes cultural narratives that are coeval and that have equivalent representative expressibility.¹⁶ Mounsi's work reminds us that in urban landscapes, where narratives of national identity obliterate generations of inhabitants, to see a city as a Creolized space must mean to see its heterogeneity not only materially but also formally and ontologically. The silhouettes that populate his novels thus become the sign of a distinctive experience of urbanism in postcolonial Europe: a narrative of uncertain presence and muted history, expressed necessarily in the form of a deletion.

NOTES

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1. Here I borrow the vocabulary of hospitality explored by Mireille Rosello in her study of francophone literatures and cultures of migration, *Postcolonial Hospitality*.
2. "La version originale de nos vies n'a rien à voir avec la version sous-titrée qu'on présente: les paroles traduites n'ont rien à voir avec les personnes qui parlent" [The original version of our lives has nothing to do with the subtitled one: the translated words have nothing to do with the people who are saying them] (*Territoire* 18). See also Ireland 70.
3. See also Sylvie Durmelat's excellent article on this topic.
4. The cover blurb on the English translation of *La Noce des fous*, however, points insistently to the similarities between the novel and Kassovitz's film, showing that these associations pursue Mounsi across linguistic and national boundaries: "Set in the same explosive tradition as *Trainspotting* and *La Haine*, the novel is fast-paced, funny, fantasy-fuelled and disturbing."
5. "Paris, je pensais que ce devait être la plus belle et la plus grande ville du monde . . . un mirage de ville où rien n'était banal, ni sale, ni dangereux. Une ville où on passait son temps à vivre et à rêver" (*Les Jours infinis* 61); "Paris, pour moi, ça voulait dire une immense tour Eiffel pleine de lumières!" (Benguigui 153).
6. "Et j'ai pensé que nous, les enfants d'immigrés, nous aussi nous avons beaucoup de choses à apporter à la France, car nous faisons partie de l'histoire de ce pays" (Benguigui 161).
7. Estimates of the number of demonstrators killed by police range from thirty to over two hundred. See House and MacMaster for a detailed examination of these events.
8. Mounsi also describes his childhood memory of the events of October 17 in his interview with Yamina Benguigui (154), and evokes them in the song "Bâtard" from his album *Seconde Génération* (see Derderian, *North Africans* 164).
9. Amna Malik discusses the "anxiety of fixing gendered and raced identities" onto Walker's figures (190). See also English 85–89.
10. Eungie Joo also draws this connection between Walker's work and Morrison's discussion of Africanisms (30).
11. See in particular Lay-Chenchabi and Dejean de la Bâtie.
12. See *Territoire d'outre-ville* 72–74, and Lay-Chenchabi and Dejean de la Bâtie's discussion of this aspect of Mounsi's work (261–62).
13. Susan Ireland characterizes this and other references to key writers of the French canon in Mounsi's work as a demand for "equal literary citizenship with mainstream French writers" (72).
14. As the authors explain in their preface, the filmed performance of *Entre les murs* was improvisational and thus diverged regularly from the published screenplay (Bégaudeau et al. 10–11). On screen the most direct challenge to François's pedagogical efforts in

this scene comes from Angelica, who asks the teacher to name the last time he heard the imperfect subjunctive actually used in conversation.

15. On this topic, see Sachs.
16. "Creoleness is the *interactional or transactional aggregate* of Caribbean, European, African, Asian, and Levantine cultural elements, united on the same soil by the yoke of history. . . . *Let live (and let us live!) the red glow of this magma*" (Bernabé et al. 87; 89).

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