

## **Portrait of the *transclasse* as a White man: *Class* and *Race* in French Contemporary Literature**

### **Between *race* and *class***

When I wrote my PhD on the literature of Maghrebi-French migration in the early 2000s, it was suggested to me, in conversations with (older, mostly French) colleagues and in secondary literature (see Lamrani; Woodhull), that my postcolonial perspective on texts by Azouz Begag, Sakinna Boukhedenna, Mehdi Charef, Rachid Djaïdani, Tassadit Imache, Nacer Kettane, Mohand Mounsi, Leïla Sebbar, Akli Tadjer, and other authors of *beur* literature, with a particular focus on experiences of exclusion due to their ethnic origin, was problematic, if not wrong. I learnt that what these texts were really about was not *race* or racism, but rather *class* and classism. The suggestion to replace one functional position with another and specifically to take the category *race* out of the picture seemed to be consistent with an image of France as envisioned by republican universalism: if the universalist assumption was true that all French were equal and that there was no such thing as race, neither as a physical nor as a social category (see Ndiaye 21 and passim, 78-81, for the central place the “question sociale” occupies in French discourse and research; Reeck 3-4), then the discrimination perceived by the protagonists of the literature of migration could not be accounted for by their ethnic origin but must have its reasons elsewhere – most probably in classism. Instead of developing an understanding for how precisely the combination of these two categories might lead to a multiplication of experiences of discrimination, proposing to study the effect of only one of them would have resulted in the obliteration of the other.

Yet another perceived “flaw” of the texts was the fact that their literary value was considered minimal, if it existed at all – and this was accounted for by their close referential relation to the social reality they depicted (see Struve 26-28). While Azouz Begag and Abdellatif Chaouite note with resignation in 1990 that “la critique [...] traite la littérature beur comme un phénomène social plutôt que littéraire – et [...] n’y voit que des simples témoignages” (Olsson 93, see Begag and Chaouite 104), nearly twenty years later, Kenneth Olsson, who re-evaluates the reception of *beur* literature in the French press for the years 2005/06, concludes with the cautious remark that while “l’examen [...] montre la possibilité d’une autre lecture,” “l’influence des facteurs sociaux sur la critique” was still very substantial in those years (Olsson 104): the texts were read as mere testimonials of a regrettable social reality at the periphery of contemporary France. The fact that a considerable number of first texts (or films) by *beur* authors showed autobiographical features – another proof of the ‘influence of social factors’ and of their highly referential nature, which was considered another defect at the time – led to Christian Bosséno’s characteristic remark that “with hindsight it is easy to see that Charef’s closely autobiographical first film *Le Thé au harem d’Archimède* [based on his first novel *Le Thé au harem d’Archi Ahmed*] fulfilled the function of a much-needed personal exorcism” (Bosséno 56). In lieu of psychotherapy, Bosséno suggests, these texts or films are a literary or filmic therapy for their authors; a necessary, if highly personal, step in their evolution as individuals.

To sum up: the texts were not considered worthy of interest, at least not as literary texts, but rather as symptoms of a regrettable personal and social situation which had its cause in an inequality preferably to be discussed in terms of *class*. At a time when autofiction was still

“decried [...] as a ‘mauvais genre’” (Gronemann 241, citing Lecarme) their autobiographical character made them additionally suspect.

In hindsight, a pivotal moment for the evaluation of fictions from the *banlieue* was the success of Mathieu Kassovitz’ film *La Haine* not only at the Cannes Film Festival in 1995, but also on international screens and even with the French government, who organised a screening: its white director freed the subject from the necessity of autobiographical (post-)migratory experience, its *black-blanc-beur*-team was seen as ample proof of the fact that the problems of the *banlieue* did not have their origin in ethnic, but rather in class inequality (see Higbee; Ruhe 2006: 108-09). Schuhen argues plausibly that the fact that Pierre Bourdieu’s *La Misère du monde*, published two years before *La Haine*, dedicated a chapter to a white and a *beur* youth, both living in the *banlieue*, and explained their exclusion with the “fracture sociale”, gave the classist perspective the necessary sociological legitimacy (see Schuhen 2022: 485-487).

The uneasy tiptoeing around the questions of *race* raised by *beur* fictions had temporarily come to an end, the new picture was again consistent with the universalist ideals the country adhered to. The blind spot of *race* and racism that the debate had brought into the spotlight was relegated to the cultural subconscious again, not without a noticeable sense of relief (see Konstantarakos 160; Jousse 37-39; Reader 12). It was only a few years later that the riots in the *banlieues* raised the question again in an even more pressing manner, although not as a subject of fiction, but of political and sociological debates. It is, as Didier and Éric Fassin put it, the “émergence d’une ‘question raciale’ que jusqu’alors, dans la France républicaine, on croyait volontiers impensable” (Fassin and Fassin 5).

## The triumph of referential literature

However, the status of fictions focussing on contemporary problems and their reception in the French academic context began to change during the first decade of the new millennium. What Dominique Viart and Bruno Vercier asserted in 2005 has been confirmed since:

Aux jeux formels qui s'étaient peu à peu imposés dans les années 1960-70 succèdent des livres qui s'intéressent aux existences individuelles, aux histoires de famille, aux conditions sociales [...]. Le goût du roman, le plaisir narratif s'imposent à nouveau à des écrivains qui cessent de fragmenter leurs récits ou de les compliquer outrageusement. Et les nouveaux venus [...] sont [...] prêts [...] aussi à plonger dans le réel qu'avait déserté une grande part de la littérature, à s'installer dans l'arrière-fond de la province, dans les banlieues populaires: autant d'espaces depuis longtemps laissés en jachère. (Viart and Vercier 7-8)

Realist descriptions of social or maybe even political issues, once dismissed as not being 'real literature', and close referential links to the situations described, are no longer deemed problematic, but rather considered new and exciting features. A few years later, Dominique Rabaté also diagnoses a "reflux de la vogue de l'autofiction" (Rabaté 266), of the intimist "écriture de soi" which had long dominated at least the international perception of French literature. However, he suggests that the focus was now shifting from the individual to the collective, in tune with the above observation and with an "envie de *faire monde*" of the French authors (Rabaté 262). Even the term *littérature engagée*, virtually ostracised for decades, can be used again in a positive sense (see Demeulenaere; Schuhen); a text can now be an intervention in a political context without being denied its literary status. Nevertheless, what might be termed a paradigm shift in literary studies, in tune with a turn towards the Francophonie in French cultural politics (see Gefen, Panaïté and Ruhe 9-10), has not led to a re-evaluation of *beur* authors.

Instead, when France was guest country at the Frankfurt Book Fair in 2017, despite the presence of nearly 200 authors writing in French – all of them with at least one book translated into German –, the German speaking press focused particularly on three of them: the triad of Annie Ernaux, Édouard Louis, and Didier Eribon (Hethey and Struve 81). On the one hand, it appeared that the message “que la littérature française ne se résumait pas à la seule autofiction et à Michel Foucault” (Payot) had actually been received; on the other, it appears that not only for the German speaking press, but also for an “international audience” (Prestwich 1), French literature was now best known for these three authors and for their “autosociobiographies” – a term coined by Annie Ernaux (Ernaux 2011: 23). Their shared focus on the topic of *class*, classism and its consequences for individual biographies, while having a collective dimension, generated an acutely heightened interest in this topic not only on the international literary market but also in academic research (see Jaquet; Blome; Kargl and Terrisse; Blome, Lammers, and Seidel; Schuhen).

The texts by Ernaux, Eribon, Louis and other “transfuges de classe” or “transclasses” (Jaquet) are not only great sales successes – the German translation of *Retour à Reims* is in its 21<sup>st</sup> edition –, they are also published by publishers enjoying high literary prestige<sup>1</sup> and are some of the most widely translated and discussed texts of French contemporary literature today.

What does the success of these three authors have to do with the – not only relatively – much lesser prestige enjoyed by those of the literature of migration in the 1990s? Is it not quite simply an effect of unfortunate timing that what the earlier writers were condemned for is precisely what the later authors’ texts are praised for? Even though the paradigm shift mentioned above, for which the texts of migration literature came too early, has certainly played an important role in this, I would like to argue in the following that it is particularly the

specifically French uneasiness with the notion of *race* and the specific position of the White author in the French literary field that impeded a more positive reception of *beur* literature. Or, to put it another way: it is significant that the “autosociobiographies” enjoy international success from the very moment they are no longer represented by minority authors, but by those belonging to the ethnically white majority.

### **Portrait of the *transclasse* as a White man**

The categories of *race*, *class* and *sex* are fundamental for the construction of difference and for understanding the mechanisms of domination and exclusion.<sup>ii</sup> The concept of intersectionality that takes into account the combinations of different modes of discrimination has made it into the French discussion as well, but not without encountering rather specific objections: whereas, according to Éric Fassin, it has become increasingly common to consider not only sex but also class inequality and its possible combinations, *race* is a category “qu’en France on continue d’énoncer qu’à grand-peine” (Fassin 5), while domination is “traditionnellement [...] avant tout étudiée comme un rapport de classe” (Faure). French society has been and still is much more reluctant to accept that despite its universalist values, *race* and racism are challenges that should be addressed with equal and perhaps even greater urgency than social inequality. Unsurprisingly, positive opinions on texts dealing with inequality due to *class* and *sex* are much more easily accepted in contemporary critical discourse in France than those adding *race* to the picture, as will be shown below.

Although the term did not exist then, it could be argued that *Le gone du Châaba* by Azouz Begag or *Journal: ‘Nationalité immigré(e)’* by Sakinna Boukhedenna have auto-sociobiographical character. They already contain just about all the elements for which

Ernaux', Eribon's and Louis's texts are celebrated: through their success at school, they succeed in extricating themselves from a family and social context that they perceive as restrictive. This success leads to a distancing from their families – emotionally and in most cases also geographically –, a situation that they perceive as a betrayal of their origins, despite feeling intensely ashamed of their families at the same time, to the point of denying them. Their integration in a social context unknown to their family of origin – the lycée, the university – in turn poses other challenges for them, as they must adapt to social codes of which they were previously unaware, learn and use a language that is unfamiliar to their parents. All these distinguishing elements of narratives of “transfuges de classe” were, however, not invented by authors such as Azouz Begag; they could instead rely on a body of work of earlier French texts such as Mouloud Feraoun's *Le fils du pauvre* (1954), Albert Memmi's *La statue de sel* (1953) and Driss Chraïbi's *Le passé simple* (1954).<sup>iii</sup> It is noteworthy how Debra Kelly characterises these latter texts in her study *Autobiography and Independence*:

Many critics analysing North African literature in French [...] will maintain that the collective voice is more important than the individual, that every 'I' masks a 'we', that the writer speaks on behalf of a community that has often been deprived of a voice, due to colonialism, or due to slavery in the case of America. In the work of writers active during the 1950s, those most directly linked to independence movements in North Africa, there is certainly the will to 'represent', in both meanings of the word (to portray and to speak on behalf of) [...]. (Kelly 23)

The texts by Begag and Boukhedenna, and others, follow their predecessors in that they are not or not only about an individual's experience with exclusion due to ethnic and social categories – thus about *race* and *class* – but correspond to Chantal Jaquet's definition of the perhaps not so new genre of the auto-sociobiography – with the significant difference that the community they speak for was not also “deprived of a voice, owing to colonialism”, but only because of their low social and educational status:

À la différence de l'autobiographie qui a tendance à imposer l'image réductrice d'un auteur qui parle de lui, le travail d'écriture auto-socio-biographique prend la forme d'un récit où il ne s'agit pas tant de retrouver le moi que de le perdre au sein d'une réalité plus large, d'une condition commune ou d'une souffrance sociale partagée. (Jaquet 19)

However, in spite of their representative qualities, the tales of upward social mobility told by French authors from North Africa or *beur* authors, or, to use Jaquet's term, of their experiences as *transclasses*, were mostly not read as exemplary stories of a broader phenomenon, but rather as radically personal accounts,<sup>iv</sup> whereas the texts by Eribon and Louis were immediately accepted as “voices of precarity in contemporary French literature” (Demeulenaere). Texts with striking similarities are thus judged by strikingly different standards if and when the exclusionary category added to *class* is *race – sex*, in turn, does not seem to be a game changer.

It is characteristic of scientific compartmentalisation that in her otherwise very accomplished analysis of the *transclasses* through the prism of literature, Jaquet draws her examples from the nineteenth century (although the classification of *Le rouge et le noir* as auto-sociobiography could well be debated) or from Black American literature, but never even alludes to any antecedents in literatures in French that are not ethnically white. Jaquet is aware that

[l']idée d'une résorption totale des luttes féministes, homosexuelles, raciales, dans la lutte des classes est une illusion qui a pour effet de masquer les discriminations particulières dont sont victimes certaines catégories, de les maintenir dans une position d'attente et de reconduire la violence en délégitimant et étouffant des revendications, au nom de leur caractère secondaire et subordonné. (Jaquet 228-229)

Her lucid remark makes it even more bewildering that her careful examination of literary narratives of upward mobility shows such a remarkable omission. Jaquet takes for granted that a Black American author such as Richard Wright speaks for “une réalité plus large, [...] une



condition commune ou [...] une souffrance sociale partagée” (Jaquet 19) – that of the African Americans –, but it seems that to her in France, the country from whose literature she draws the most examples, there were no groups excluded based on their ethnicity. Whether this is considered as a blind spot or as an actual taboo, it is a sign of the effectiveness of universalism.

In this context, it is even more significant that Albert Camus’ *Le premier homme* is the only at least geographically North African text mentioned by Jaquet – a text that intentionally follows the autobiographical tradition inaugurated by Albert Memmi, Mouloud Feraoun and the like (see Ruhe 2014). Camus, whose origin from a very poor family of  *pied noirs*  in Algiers is never even mentioned by Jaquet, is as white as the other French examples that she analyses, so that his experiences of exclusion can be ascribed to classism only. Exclusion or discrimination on ethnic grounds appears to be an issue that only the protagonists of the US-American texts she analyses struggle with.

When Frantz Fanon’s theories on “la honte raciale et sexuelle” and on the performance of Whiteness are commented upon, Jaquet uses it to equal the experience he describes to Eribon’s experience on discovering his homosexuality (Jaquet 173-74), an equation that, once again, ascribes greater importance to one category – *sex*, in this case – than to the other, thus suggesting that they are mutually interchangeable – and making *race*, central to Fanon, disappear. She thus performs the same operation that Sartre had proposed in “Orphée noir” and for which Fanon had vigorously criticized him. In his preface to Léopold Sédar Senghor’s *Anthologie de la nouvelle poésie nègre*, Sartre establishes “nègritude” as a necessary but temporary consciousness that would be and had to be dissolved in class consciousness (Sartre XL-XLI). Fanon reacts directly to his assumption by stating:

Quand je lus cette page, je sentis qu’on me volait ma dernière chance. Je déclarai

à mes amis: 'La génération des jeunes poètes noirs vient de recevoir un coup qui ne pardonne pas.' On avait fait appel à un ami des peuples de couleur, et cet ami n'avait rien trouvé de mieux que montrer la relativité de leur action. (Fanon 130).

Shortly after Fanon's disagreement with Sartre, Aimé Césaire left the French Communist Party (PCF) and in the open letter that accompanied his move, he attributed it to the insistency with which *race* was obliterated in the party's discourse, to be subsumed under the "greater cause" of class struggle (Césaire). Jaquet seems either to ignore their criticism or to be unwilling to take it into account; instead, she connects directly to Sartre's argumentation.

Jaquet's study on the *transclasses* thereby becomes a vivid example of how in an otherwise very accomplished analysis of upward class mobility through literature, France is constructed as an ethnically white country whose authors, accordingly, create protagonists struggling with issues of *class* and/or *sex* – but not with *race*. After reading Jaquet's book, one could conclude that all *transclasse* authors in France are white.

### **The White Writer and French Literature**

Leïla Sebbar and Annie Ernaux, Didier Eribon and Azouz Begag have very similar professional trajectories: Ernaux, born in 1940, studied *lettres modernes* and taught in *lycées* before joining the *Centre National d'enseignement à distance*. Sebbar, born in 1941, also studied *lettres modernes*, and taught at a *lycée* whilst dedicating her life to writing. The parallels are still more pronounced in the case of Eribon and Begag: Eribon was born in Reims in 1953 and is now a renowned philosopher and sociologist, a university teacher with a particular area of interest in the fields of gay and queer studies, an aspect that plays a major role in his texts. Begag, born in Lyon in 1957, is a politician and a researcher in sociology at the renowned CNRS, whose

major area of scientific interest is ethnic inequality in the French banlieue, which, at least in the field of sociology, was considered a “peripheral topic” (Boudou 404) at the time he began his career as a literary author. The banlieue is also the space where most of his literary texts are set. For Eribon as for Begag, their auto-sociobiographical texts are thus a prolongation of their scientific endeavours, centring on *sex* and *race*, respectively.<sup>v</sup> Their auto-sociobiographies reflect and complete their scientific texts and provide them with autobiographical legitimation. But while Begag’s texts were devalued for just that (see Reeck 28-29), Eribon is lauded for it. Hence, despite all similarities, it appeared as if “la position à partir de laquelle l’auteur intervient” (Achille 18), while seeming similar, was fundamentally different.

The Call for Papers for this volume proposed a working definition of “White Writer” in current literature in French that defined him as

a neutral, invisible, and free-flowing agent of the literary field whose body, name and subsequent production are not ‘marked’, as opposed to those associated with racialized groups of writers operating within a set of binding rules endlessly cementing the artistic field’s partition. (Achille and Panaïté)

Other than Annie Ernaux, whose international success came late and, paradoxically, only in the wake of the triumphs of those who consider her a role model, Didier Eribon and Édouard Louis as white male authors fulfil all these conditions.<sup>vi</sup> If the texts of the latter are perceived as “marked” by the critics, it is in a way that seems to trouble considerably less than the ethnic “marks” perceived in those by *beur* writers: the critics greeted Eribon’s *Retour à Reims* and Louis’ *En finir avec Eddy Bellegueule* mostly with enthusiasm, never failing to mention that their protagonists were suffering exclusion due to their working class origins and their

homosexuality. This strengthens the impression that an intersectional perspective is possible and elicits positive reactions – if the categories involved are *class* and *sex*.

As “free flowing agent[s] of the literary field,” Eribon and Louis are visibly constrained by fewer “binding rules” than Begag. Whereas it seems easy for the critics to accept that Eribon speaks on behalf not only of himself, but of a community of white working-class gays, Begag, although his position within the literary and scientific field is largely similar, is not accorded the same legitimacy as a representative of immigrant working-class youth. He is often criticised for being a “*beur de service*,” a “token *beur*” (Reeck 25), a criticism that never seems to have come up in articles about Eribon. As a writer “associated with racialized groups” (Achille and Panaïté 2022), Begag’s texts are judged by different criteria.

Two conclusions can be drawn from this observation: retrospectively, the comparison between the two groups of writers who have so much in common sharpens the view for the fact that the White writer was already an operative category *avant la lettre* in the discussion on *beur* authors in the early years of the new millennium, impeding on their freedom to choose and treat their subjects. The bigger difference, however, lies in the respective relation of both groups to (literary) tradition.

Both groups of writers come from working-class contexts, their starting conditions in life consequently endow them with very little cultural capital. Nevertheless, it is easy for Eribon’s and Louis’s protagonists to find access to canonical literature and to identify with the characters – it is in these terms that Eribon describes his discovery of Sartre and Marx (Eribon 89) and Louis his first reading of Thomas Mann’s *Death in Venice* (Louis 164) and then his immersion in the books that Eribon recommends to him (“Jacques Derrida, Pierre Bourdieu, Michel Foucault, Jean-Paul Sartre”, Louis 209<sup>vii</sup>). The canon they soon share is largely one of White

writers and despite their working-class origins, they have no qualms in joining it, they see it as “their right, as depository of a certain tradition and therefore embodiment of a cultural specificity, to enter the literary space without any identitarian precondition or justification” (Achille and Panaïte 2022). The genealogy they establish with each new text and with each public appearance is equally white and serves in each case to legitimise their own texts and their belonging to this tradition: all three emphasise their deep indebtedness to the works of Pierre Bourdieu. While for Annie Ernaux, reading Bourdieu was “un choc ontologique violent” (2002), for Eribon, it meant that “[m]on univers théorique allait basculer” (Eribon 196), to the latter, he becomes not only a point of reference but also a friend. Eribon further explains *in Retour à Reims* how he recognised himself in Annie Ernaux’s texts (Eribon 28) and how much his auto-sociobiographical text owed to her. Eribon, in turn, is an indispensable reference for Édouard Louis, who describes their first encounter at a lecture Eribon gave in Amiens as an epiphany (Louis 169-179). It is Eribon who then advises Louis to read Bourdieu – the genealogy has come full circle. They do not question their belonging to this self-reflexive network any more than the critics who see them as some of the finest exponents of (an unmarked) French contemporary literature.

In the case of the *beur* authors, there is no network to speak of and the question of legitimacy is more precarious: Begag’s protagonist in *Le Gone du Châaba* is chided for having unknowingly and, more importantly, badly plagiarised Maupassant (Begag 1986: 220). The protagonist of *Dis oualla!*, physically rejects the literary form his friend Momo gives to his life in the *banlieue*, they cause him “des mots d’estomac” (Begag 1997: 89). It seems as if life in the *banlieue* and French canonical literature were incompatible. The author Begag remembers that his first reading of Mehdi Charef’s *Le Thé au harem d’Archi Ahmed* was fundamental not

only for his own career as a writer, but also because it made him realise that the world he lived in could be turned into the subject of literature (Begag 1998: 9). However, the affiliation between his own work and that of Charef that Begag points out does not lead to the formation of the same kind of network as in the case of Ernaux, Eribon and Louis, nor do they have a reference figure of Bourdieu's calibre in the academic establishment. Rather, the polemics around  *beur*  literature led younger authors to refuse to be associated with their predecessors or even with the term  *beur* , as Laura Reeck explains: “[t]he collective of authors rejects the notion that they are  *Beur*  authors [...] and balk at having what they write tagged along any ethnic lines” (Reeck 13). As well as feeling unwelcome and unrepresented in the canonical literature they read in school, the lack of a network or of strong references in the academic establishment leaves them stranded on the threshold of “la république mondiale des lettres” (Casanova).

## **Conclusion**

Looking at the different reception of texts by  *beur*  authors in the 1980s and 90s as compared to the stars of the auto-sociobiographies today, the wide international success of the latter seems to be largely due to their unquestioned status as White writers. Although the uneasiness with the category of  *race*  where it concerns French literature and French social reality seems to be less pronounced in recent years, it is still strong enough to make a difference in the treatment of texts addressing the issue – Kaoutar Harchi's otherwise excellent autosociography  *Comme nous existons*  and its reception may bear witness to this.

Moreover, under the impression of the terrorist attacks on French soil, it seems that the categories have shifted again, from  *race*  to  *religion* : authors like Fatima Daas are presented as

lesbian and Muslim, as if the shift towards religion were still less problematic than the reference to *race*.

Thus, a literary phenomenon that can be traced back to the first texts of North African literature in French and was prolonged by *beur* authors is appropriated and critically ennobled only when it is adopted by White authors who do not question universalism and rather herald the more classically French concern about the “fracture sociale.”

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<sup>i</sup> Gallimard for Ernaux, Seuil for Louis, Fayard for Eribon; in Germany, Eribon is published by Suhrkamp, the publisher who also published Pierre Bourdieu (see Jurt 23), Louis by the equally prestigious S. Fischer Verlag; as for Ernaux, the transformed attitude towards her work is best expressed by the three publishers she has had in Germany: *La Place* was first published by Bertelsmann in 1987, then several of her books were published by Goldmann, “maison d’édition qui ne se distingue pas nécessairement par la qualité littéraire, parfois avec des sous-titres destinés à un public de masse”; she, too, is now published by Suhrkamp (Jurt 24).

<sup>ii</sup> There are, of course, further categories, such as gender, religion, sexuality, disability, weight, and the like, but in the context of this article, these three are the most relevant.

<sup>iii</sup> In a wider perspective, one could add Camara Laye and his first novel *L’enfant noir*, published in 1953, to the picture.

<sup>iv</sup> It is significant that *La Haine* (1995) by white director Matthieu Kassovitz was immediately perceived not only as a “new type of film” (Konstantarakos 160), but also as going beyond the protagonists’ personal stories, as depicting a social reality that had to be dealt with: “The film’s specificities, its very forceful portrayal of contemporary social problems, are perhaps best revealed by the response of government ministers who, after its release, organized a special screening of the film in an attempt to gain a clearer understanding of the predicament

it revealed” (Mazdon 3; Ruhe 2006: 108).

<sup>v</sup> However, while Eribon’s scientific warrantor is Bourdieu, who by the time Eribon published was not only a household name, but a classic of sociology, Begag relied on his own sociological work and on that of the sociologist of migration (and friend of Bourdieu) Abdelmalek Sayad, who “has long remained in the shadow of his peers”, and whose “intellectual project” can be considered, according to Benjamin Boudou “ambitious but partially ignored” (401). For Kaoutar Harchi, who writes 35 years after Begag, it is Sayad who becomes not only the reason she decides to study sociology, but also the prism through which she is able to better understand her family and herself (Harchi pos. 924).

<sup>vi</sup> It could certainly be argued that being a woman, Annie Ernaux’s position is not quite as neutral and invisible as that of Eribon and Louis. Although she published her first book *Les armoires vides* in 1974, her work remained known only to insiders until the beginning of the millennium, while a great deal of scholarly work on her *œuvre* has been produced since then and especially since the publication of *Les Années* in 2008. The reasons are not immediately obvious, but here, too, there could be a connection to the paradigm shift in literary studies mentioned above.

The fact that as a female author, she is treated differently from her male colleagues was impressively demonstrated after she received the Nobel Prize for Literature: German critic Dennis Scheck commented in the central German news programme “Ernaux is a small, fragile woman, but one who has a wonderful mischievousness and even at her age, definitely an erotic flair about her, who has a humorous flash, a twinkle in her eye, and who is not afraid of anything or anyone. In other words, meeting Annie Ernaux is like being allowed to meet Pippi Longstocking – I spontaneously fell in love with her” (“Ein literarischer Leitstern”). There are no similar remarks concerning Patrick Modiano, Jean-Marie Le Clézio or Abdulrazak Gurnah.

<sup>vii</sup> In light of Sartre’s (Marxist) position on *race* as only a ‘secondary contradiction’, while *class* is a primary one, his prominent position on the reading lists of both Eribon and Louis appears to be significant.