Constructing Muslims in France

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Housing

The Banlieues as a Geographic and Socially Constructed Place

Since the beginning of the 1990s, [there has been] a stigmatization of youth from working class suburbs that makes them look like foreigners to French society. . . . [F]irst they were likened to thieves; then, with the gang-rape issue, to rapists; then, with the headscarf affair, to “veilers”; and finally, [they were likened] to dirt that gets washed out with a hose.¹

—Éric Macé, sociologist at the Université de Bordeaux, quoted in “Banlieues” 2005

In 2002, seventeen-year-old Sohane Benziane was murdered by a fellow resident of her banlieue. The circumstances are deeply troubling: Jamal Derrar, a local gang leader, had forbidden Benziane from visiting his apartment complex after he had a disagreement with her boyfriend. When he found Benziane at the complex one day, he cornered her in a basement full of dumpsters. His friend Tony Rocca blocked the door. Derrar then threw gasoline on Benziane, lit a match, and set her on fire. When Derrar was brought back to the building to show police what had happened, cheers of support—for Derrar—erupted from the apartment building (Crumley 2004; Rotman 2006).

This incident, along with the publication of Dans l’enfer des tournantes (2003 [To Hell and Back in the English translation]),² Samira Bellil’s book about her experience of gang rape while growing up in a banlieue (discussed later in this chapter), spurred Fadéla Amara to start the feminist activist organization NPNS. When Amara speaks of banlieues and the cramped housing projects there, she identifies the problem this way: the paternalist cultures that immigrants brought with them have been perverted, leading to unchecked violence against women—particularly women who are the children of immigrants. “Today, fathers are absent, a fact that emerges clearly from debates on suburban discontent . . . now the eldest son decides conflicts within the family. He has assumed responsibility for teaching family values to younger sisters and for policing their conduct outside the home to ensure that they behave” (Amara 2006, p. 63).

When it comes to Muslims and housing in France, elite discourse typically focuses the sexism and violence of young Muslim men in the banlieues.
The conversation is often framed in terms of security: the threatened security either of women or of the republic. Laurent Mucchielli, a French sociologist and criminologist, contests that this frame of insecurity in the banlieues has existed since the 1990s. The main change has been to move from a condemnation of immigrant youths in general to a condemnation of Islam and Muslims. “Little by little, a frightening, reductionist equation appeared: Maghrebian Islam = non-integration + violence + anti-Semitism + the oppression of women” (Mucchielli 2005, p. 90). In short, today’s elite discourse on the subject of Muslims and housing focuses on the failed integration of French Muslims living in the banlieues, especially young Muslim men, who are viewed as intolerant, “macho,” and violent.

In analyzing media discourse surrounding the riots that spread throughout French suburbs in 2005 (more on this below), Caitlin Killian also found a tendency in the media to present male Muslim and Arab youths as dangerous and hypermasculine. Furthermore, Killian (2007, p. 76) argues that in response to gang rapes in the suburbs of France, some feminists, including members of the NPNS and Élisabeth Badinter, have presented an oversimplified view of Muslim and Arab men as aggressors who threaten young Muslim women, who are depicted as better integrated than, yet in need of protection from, their male counterparts.

Muslims themselves, however, speak about a whole host of different challenges they and sometimes other banlieusards (inhabitants of the banlieues) face in regard to housing. While many recognize to varying degrees the phenomenon Amara discusses, few place as much emphasis on it as a key issue to improving the situation of Muslims in France (or the situation of the banlieues, for that matter). When Muslims talk about housing, they often speak about remote banlieues as municipal planning disasters, breeding unemployment and social marginalization; the isolation of immigrant mothers, of whom much is expected but for whom little support is provided; discrimination in housing rentals; inadequate government housing that is crumbling, too small, or too difficult to obtain; and ill treatment by the police. These varied concerns are not typically reflected in the elite discourse on housing and Muslims in France.

Before moving on to a discussion of the disconnection between these two discourses, it is important to consider the role the banlieues play in the story of Sohane Benziane’s murder. This chapter is titled “Housing,” but as the story demonstrates, it addresses more topics than bricks and mortar (though they matter as well). This chapter, in fact, has more to do with “place,” a term that human geographers use when describing how humans bring meaning, in various ways, to their environment. Tim Cresswell (2004, p. 7) outlines John Agnew’s famous tripartite definition of “place” as location, locale, and sense of place, where location is the set of coordinates on a map, locale is the physicality of a location, and sense of place is the meaning people attribute to a location. The third of these, the “sense of place,” implies such constructs as social hierarchy and normative behavior.
This chapter examines where many Muslims live and dwell in France, what meanings are attributed to these places, and how this affects the experience of being Muslim in France. The chapter often focuses on the banlieues and debates surrounding them, as (for historical reasons that are explained later) many of France’s Muslims live in these modest suburbs. It is important to remember, however, that not all Muslims live in France’s suburbs, and not all suburban dwellers are Muslim. Furthermore, some suburbs, such as Neuilly-sur-Seine (of which Nicolas Sarkozy once was the mayor), are quite affluent. Nevertheless, even those Muslim men who do not live in the banlieues share an experience with those who do and, more broadly, with men of color: police identity checks in public spaces.

Having said all of this, I have retained the word “housing” in the chapter title because of the important role housing has played in the recent (post–World War II) history of Muslim immigration to France and because it is the term that has the most currency when discussing issues of place and Muslims in France today. For example, as is shown later in the chapter, newspaper articles addressing Muslims and the larger concept of “living conditions” in France, as opposed to housing, are far fewer in number and have an even less meaningful connection to the subject of Muslims in France.

Let us now examine the question of Muslims and housing in France in historical perspective.

**Muslims and Housing in Historical Perspective**

Housing has been a perennial issue for Muslims in France, but the reasons for this and the way it has been understood have changed over time. During the Trente Glorieuses, there was not enough low-cost housing for North African immigrant workers (many of whom were Muslim). While some North African workers were able to find housing, many ended up in bidonvilles, shantytowns that cropped up in the 1950s. Translated as “can towns” or “tin towns,” referring to the cans that were cut and hammered flat to create shingles for shelters made from wood and other scrap material, bidonvilles existed on the outskirts of major cities, without electricity or running water, sometimes unknown and often unacknowledged by those (including the authorities) within the cities. These shantytowns were not an exceptional experience for North Africans in France at the time: 43 percent of Algerians, for example, lived in some kind of bidonville in 1963 (Centre National de Documentation Pédagogique 2001).

The primary effort to house immigrants in the 1950s was the construction of habitation à loyer modéré (HLM [low-rent housing]), essentially rent-controlled apartment units. Famous for their unattractiveness and eerie resemblance to the modern prison complex, many HLM apartments initially did not have toilets or showers. Perhaps more problematic than the inside of the HLM were policies about the placement of its inhabitants and the buildings
themselves. Ariane Chebel d’Appolonia (2009, pp. 272–273) highlights the inconsistency of France’s “assimilationist” tradition by reminding us that in the aftermath of World War II, numerous initiatives intended to maintain the distinctive cultural traditions of minority groups were undertaken. State agencies in charge of housing, education and access to social benefits based their activities on ethnic quotas. For example, HLM (public housing) authorities were asked to relocate immigrants on the basis of their national origin in particular urban areas. As a result, the percentage of immigrants in these areas increased from 15 percent in 1975 to 24 percent in 1982, and 28 percent in 1990.

The upshot of this ethnic grouping, according to Chebel d’Appolonia (2009, p. 273), was “ethnic differentiation [that] turned into ethnic segregation and discrimination.” For HLMs located on the outskirts of cities and in suburbs, this also meant a kind of geographical isolation that separated the immigrants and their children from the population centers of France.

In the 1960s and 1970s, North African temporary workers began pursuing permanent stays in France in increasing numbers. Deteriorating political situations in North Africa combined with the French decision to close the door on family reunification presented a “now or never” scenario, and more and more North African workers brought their families to begin a permanent life in France. The housing situation arguably went from bad to worse. In the crowded rooms where single men had once lived entire families were now cramped.

The HLMs continued to be built to respond to these housing needs, increasingly with full sanitary facilities, but new problems appeared. In the late 1970s, the Trente Glorieuses came to an end. Policies spearheaded by the secretary of state for foreign workers, a post created in 1974, aimed to ameliorate the lot of immigrants in France, but as Jane Freedman (2004, p. 35) states, “The rhetoric of integration and of improving the lives of immigrant workers proved to be far removed from reality, particularly once the issue of the cost of these steps to integration emerged as a major theme of discussion.” Such policies can be hard to implement in the most financially prosperous times. France, squeezed by the economic crises of the 1970s, made its priorities clear. As Freedman points out, the resignation of the first secretary of state for foreign workers, André Postel-Vinay, after only six weeks in the job suggests a frustrating mismatch between rhetoric and reality.

While unemployment rose in the 1970s, it did not do so evenly throughout the country. Growing unemployment and crime became associated with not just these low-rent units but also with the suburbs, or banlieues, in which they were often located. Many banlieues were isolated bedroom communities with few local employment opportunities and inadequate public transportation to the closest major cities. The quality of schools, as discussed in Chapter 4,
was also markedly different from that in the rest of France. The construction and maintenance of HLMs slowed. The issue of housing for many French Muslims—increasingly French citizens born in France or even “ethnic French” converts—became more complex. The marginalization that accompanied the housing situation of many Muslims in France had long been geographic and economic, but now it also included social labels of “joblessness” and “deviance.”

Starting in the 1980s, youth unrest—street fighting and the burning of cars—began to surface in various banlieues. First officially recognized in 1981 with the “Minguettes Rodeos,” these “youthful provocations” were directed at the police (Mucchielli 2009, p. 732). The term “riot,” however, was not used until the early 1990s. While the actors and some of the techniques of the riots of the 1990s seemed similar to those of the previous decade—suburban youths, often the children of immigrants, who were angry at the police and burning cars—the scenario was nevertheless very different. These riots typically started following the deaths of suburban youths in complicated situations that involved the police and yielded burned buildings, plundered stores, and fights sometimes involving hundreds of people that resulted in injuries (Mucchielli 2009, p. 732). French leaders continued to struggle with these youth riots through the 1990s and early 2000s, leading up to the much publicized events of 2005. The electrocution of three and death of two young men, all children of immigrants, in a Parisian banlieue while the police appeared to be standing by led to riots in several cities across the country, with approximately ten thousand cars and thirty thousand dumpsters burned (Mucchielli 2009, p. 733).

Parallel to this development, the rise of fundamentalist Islam and the discovery that some Muslims in France supported the movement to varying degrees, increased the stigma associated with the banlieues. In fact, during the riots of 2005, Nicolas Sarkozy, then the interior minister, suggested a connection between “extremists” (Islamic religious extremists) and the rioters (Mucchielli 2009). The RG felt compelled to indicate in its report on the riots that it did not include radical Muslim organizations (Mucchielli 2009, p. 738). Nevertheless, the connection between young Muslim men and suburban violence can be found elsewhere, particularly in the anti-machisme (anti-machismo) discourse of some French politicians, intellectuals, and media.

As I show through an analysis of two focusing events, elite discourse today frames the issue of housing and Muslims in terms of the threat posed by violent and intolerant young men in the banlieues—a problem often attributed to Islam and “cultures of origin.” To hark back to Cresswell (2004, p. 7), the “sense of place” often associated with the banlieues is one of radicalized, ethnic, and religious danger.

The response of many elites to these two focusing events, which concern the perceived rise of gang rape and of anti-Semitic violence, resembles what Stanley Cohen has described as “moral panics.” According to Cohen (1987, p. 9), in moments of moral panic, “a condition, episode, person or group of persons emerges to become defined as a threat to societal values and interests; its
nature is presented in a stylized and stereotypical fashion by the mass media.” This exaggerated image, and the threat it is believed to pose, is then diagnosed and treated by politicians and thinkers, sometimes yielding important changes in law and policy, or even changes in “the way society conceives itself” (Cohen 1987, p. 9). In the two focusing events under examination here, elite discourse produced stereotypical images of African and Islamic culture and attributed complex social problems (pertaining to class, race, educational inequality, unemployment, geographic marginalization, and so forth) to supposedly cultural tendencies toward violence and hypermasculinity. Because these supposedly cultural tendencies are depicted as foreign or religious, elite discussion of the two focusing events has a very “us-versus-them” quality, focusing on the dangerous “other” or outsider. This has the effect of disregarding the presence of these crimes among the rest of the French and downplaying local factors that may contribute to such acts of violence.

Without going deeper into the theory on moral panics, which covers topics such as the relationship between policing and deviance and the compatibility of moral panics with authoritarian shifts (see Hall et al. 1978; Cohen 1987), we can still appreciate how moral panics create a public identity that merits policing and becomes suspicious in the public eye. The elite discourse surrounding these two focusing events in France works in a similar way, depicting young Muslim (sometimes along with Arab and black) men as violent, macho, and intolerant. Young Muslim women in this discourse are often depicted as victims of their male relatives and in need of the help of France. Bans on clothing worn by some Muslim women are examples of legal efforts to protect Muslim women from the perceived violence and sexism of Islamic and African cultures. While this discourse casts young Muslim men and women in very different roles, both are portrayed in these discussions as unfit or problematic citizens.

How Elites Discuss Muslims and Housing

The Socialist Party member and former Secretary of State for Urban Policy Fadéla Amara has been an important elite voice on the subject of Muslims and housing in France. While much of what Amara says is true, she occasionally speaks in absolutes that make it possible to read into her discourse an overwhelmingly negative depiction of the banlieues and a criticism of Islam as misogynist. For example, when speaking about young men of immigrant descent in the banlieues in her book Breaking the Silence: French Women’s Voices from the Ghetto, a sort of manifesto for the NPNS, Amara (2006, p. 65) states, “The change in boys’ behavior toward girls was slow but absolute. The more time passed, the more the government neglected the housing projects, the more young men became radicalized.” A careful reader will be quick to note that Amara does not qualify this statement: all boys began to treat all girls differently, and not just differently, but “absolutely” so. Amara’s language suggests a 180 degree turn from the supposedly tolerant banlieues of her teen years in
the 1980s to an oppressive, patriarchal trap for all young women of immigrant origin. Furthermore, Amara’s use of the term “radicalized” is unclear. Does she intend for the reader to make the connection to radical Islam? She offers no explanation for how this term should be understood. In his introduction to To Hell and Back, Alec Hargreaves (2008, p. xvii) states that both Bellil and Amara have been “accused of playing into the hands of reactionaries and Islamophobes because of [their] public denunciation of violence inflicted on women in the banlieues.” One can see how Amara’s discourse could easily be taken up by those who seek to criticize Islam.

Another example from Breaking the Silence introduces the concept of the macho men of the banlieues: “Even though only a minority of boys exhibits such extremely violent behavior, a large majority of guys in the projects have adopted this hypervirility. Respect for others and solidarity no longer mean anything; only the law of the strongest and the affirmation of their manhood remain. To exist, ‘they put their balls on the line.’ The only way for them to be recognized both outside and inside the projects is to act macho and violent” (Amara 2006, p. 66). Unlike the earlier citation, Amara qualifies her statement here: only a minority of the young men in the banlieues whose families come from paternalistic immigrant cultures are “extremely violent.” Nevertheless, “a large majority” are macho. These young men are more than masculine, even more than virile: they are “hypervirile” and wholly without respect.

Some young Muslim women and women of immigrant origin in the banlieues are subject to violence or murder. Some face pressure to perform submissively. Some are raped, sometimes even gang-raped, and some are forced into marriages or sent to “home countries” they have never known and are not heard from again (Keaton 2006, pp. 56–57). But this does not happen to all young women in the banlieues, and is it not directly caused by the banlieues. Nor are such tragedies unique to Muslim or immigrant women (something that both Bellil and Amara have pointed out). It is true that the murder of Sohane Benziane tells an important story about the violence and misogyny that exist in those suburbs of France where, as the journalist Patrice De Beer puts it, even police sometimes dare not go (“Muslim women rebel in France” 2004). All of the Muslims interviewed for this study agreed that these problems do exist in France and need to be addressed. But (as some of the interviewees also pointed out) it would be a mistake to assume that misogynistic violence is a problem peculiar to the suburbs or to Muslim men.

As a non-Muslim leader of the NPNS was careful to note, violence against women is a world problem: “Marital violence has nothing to do with that [social milieu]. You find it everywhere. All other kinds of violence—even gang rapes and honor crimes—do not only happen in the quartier. A month ago, a young woman was burned by her husband. She did not come from a culture that practices honor crimes. Her husband came home drunk, poured gasoline on her, and lit a match.” This woman’s response was part of her larger denial of the claim that violence is endemic to the suburbs and immigrants. Such simple
associations, she said, would lead one to neglect violence against women that happens outside the suburbs and among the “ethnic French.” She was arguing that some in the suburbs have “misunderstood” the mission of the NPNS as being “Islamophobic.”

But it is difficult to say that those in the banlieues were simply mistaken in connecting Amara, the NPNS, and Islamophobia. Amara, a Muslim woman who grew up in a banlieue, has a great deal of respect for Islam and the youths of the banlieues. In her role as secretary for urban policy, Amara’s goal was to improve the lives of these youths. Amara’s interviews and writing, not to mention an interview with her special adviser that was conducted for this research, suggest that she understands the complexity of the banlieues and the diversity of life experiences among young Muslim men and women. But the absolutist language she sometimes employs when talking about the banlieues and the strict dichotomies she sometimes advances (in her book, one is either a fascist or a democrat; a woman who wears the hijab or the Phrygian [i.e., a republican]; a secularist or an extreme cultural relativist) belie a subtler understanding of the situation in the banlieues. Worse, such discourse suggesting that Islam is poisonous to the republic and that young Muslim men of the banlieues are misogynistic and macho, all from a “credible” source (as Amara is, herself, a Muslim), have entitled French elites to push these perhaps unintentional absolutes even further. Wendy Pojmann (2010, p. 230) observes that “the liberal, secular, republican state and civil society favors multiethnic associations that engage in acts to uphold the dominant public sphere,” and as such, “the women of the NPNS have become media darlings in France.”

Regardless of their original intentions, Amara and the NPNS have helped popularize a language used by politicians, the media, and some intellectuals (especially some feminists) when discussing Muslims and the banlieues. This language includes terms such as “macho,” “gang rape,” and “basement Islam” (a term used to describe makeshift prayer rooms; it often connotes secrecy and dangerous religious preaching). For example, the French “literary theorist and essayist Tzvetan Todorov said the riots [of 2005] were caused by the dysfunctional sexuality of Muslim youths obsessed with behaving in a ‘macho’ way” (Hargreaves 2005, para. 2). Hélène Carrère d’Encausse, a graduate of the Institut d’Études Politiques, France’s preeminent political studies institution, and member of the Académie Française, France’s authoritative body on the French language and a deeply symbolic institution of French intellectualism dating back to the 1600s, provided an equally puzzling explanation: she blamed the “polygamous marital practices of Muslim immigrants from West Africa” (quoted in Hargreaves 2005, para. 2). This is “puzzling” because arrest records for the 2005 riots included “many non-Muslim Africans as well as people with French, Spanish, or Portuguese names” (Roy 2005, para. 4). The French essayist Alain Finkielkraut pointedly described the 2005 riots as the “fruit of an ethno-religious uprising” (quoted in Tiberj 2008, pp. 17–18).
In short, elite discussions of Muslims and housing in France mainly concern the subject of violence in the suburbs. Often the violence is depicted as that of angry, young Muslim men against women or of Muslims against Jews. Analysis of the two focusing events about Muslims and housing in France illustrate these frames, showing a deep concern with what is perceived as uniquely Muslim misogynistic and anti-Semitic violence.

**Tournantes: Is Gang Rape on the Rise?**

In 2000, *La Squale (The Tearaway)*, a film conceived and directed by two French schoolteachers, raised interest in the issue of gang rape in France. The award-winning film, which focuses on the difficult lives of French suburban youths, begins with a scene of gang rape. A year and a half after the film’s release, Bellil’s autobiographical *L’enfer des tournantes* was published. Laurent Mucchielli has compared media coverage of gang rape in France to judicial statistics and concludes that much of the media coverage serves to vilify Islam and Muslims in the *banlieues*—to an extent that does not match their involvement with these crimes.

Mucchielli (2005, p. 12) notes that it is odd that the initial reviews of *La Squale* were published not in the section of the newspaper that regularly covers films but in the society pages. Indeed, *La Squale* and *L’enfer des tournantes* ignited discussion in the media and among politicians and some intellectuals on the issue of gang rape as a social problem of the *banlieues*. *Le Monde* described *La Squale* as a “testimonial film, between fiction and documentary” (quoted in Mucchielli 2005, p. 13). In a *Le Point* article titled “Group Rape: The Great Fear of the Cité,” the author writes, “Shocked by the behavior and language of his young students, Fabrice Genestal . . . directed a film that includes the sexual barbarism of gangs in the cité. *Le Point* confirms these frightening testimonials” (quoted in Mucchielli 2005, p. 13). These and other articles on gang rape focused on its newness, its frequency, its impunity, and its shadowy nature (Mucchielli 2005, p. 13). In Mucchielli’s analysis of media coverage of gang rapes, he indicates that the articles all target a common *place* and *population*: the *banlieues*, especially those around Paris, and youths with an immigrant background (Mucchielli 2005, p. 24).

But more than targeting youths with an immigrant background, the media also began to target Islam on the question of gang rape. Concerning Bellil’s book, an article in *Libération* explained, “It is a story of group rape, of *tournantes,*” whose causes are “an archaic and miserable collective folly, founded on machismo, Islam, immigration, and disoriented and disorienting parents” (Le Vaillant 2002). But as Mucchielli (2005, p. 26) points out, “Nothing in Samira Bellil’s book concerns Islam.” Mucchielli also notes an odd article in *Le Monde* that appeared around this time, highlighting how a young woman in Pakistan was condemned to group rape by a tribal court in her village. The article problematically omitted parts of the story that clarify that the trial and verdict were particular to this tribal court, not a normal judicial happening that represents
Pakistani justice or the influence of Islamic law on the Pakistani judicial system. The article also neglected to clarify that the verdict, however horrifying, reflects more on that tribe’s system of honor and vendetta than on the religion of Islam in general (Mucchielli 2005, pp. 26–28). The presentation of the story in the article leaves one with the impression that Islam condones group rape and that Muslims are misogynists (Mucchielli 2005, pp. 26–27). The timing of that article suggests that a similar connection between Islam and group rape might be present in France, as well.

Those who have immigrant backgrounds are not only associated with the perpetrators of gang rapes. They are also typically represented as the victims in these articles: “The victims are primarily young Maghrebian women punished for their liberal morals” (Mucchielli 2005, p. 32).

The media’s story—that gang rape is a problem of the banlieues; that it is a new phenomenon; that incidents of it are increasing; that it is committed by young men with immigrant, perhaps Muslim, backgrounds; that the victims are young women with immigrant backgrounds—does not perfectly match up with judicial and social research. Gang rape is not a new phenomenon. France was recording statistics on gang rape in the mid-nineteenth century. Georges Vigarello (2001, p. 150) claims that “such rapes were common and committed with relative impunity” at that time. More recently, a gang of “ethnic French” youths called the blousons noirs (lit. black leather jackets; the term refers to a French youth subculture of the 1950s and 1960s) are known to have committed gang rapes in the 1960s (Mucchielli 2005, pp. 38–39). The discourse surrounding that situation was eerily similar to that of today: the rapes were described as new, an epidemic, and confounding to judges (Mucchielli 2005, p. 34). And as Bellil herself notes (contrary to Amara’s impression), gang rape was more prevalent in her community in the 1980s than in 2002 (Mucchielli 2005, p. 20). Judicial statistics indicate that the gang-rape rate has been stable in the past twenty years (Mucchielli 2005, p. 47). In short, gang rape is not new to France, and it is not increasing.

Furthermore, a judicial study on gang rape that explored the cases of fifty-two perpetrators found that, while many of the perpetrators indeed had immigrant backgrounds, the true commonality among them was a social milieu of poverty and difficulties or failure in school (Mucchielli 2005, p. 50). Also, none of the men in the study claimed any affiliation to Islam (Mucchielli 2005, p. 53). The same study indicates that victims of gang rape share that kind of social background, but contrary to elite discourse, they are for the most part white (Mucchielli 2005, p. 52).

The fact that gang rapes are more likely to happen in the banlieues, then, indicates less a problem with the banlieues as such, or immigrants and Muslims, than with the poverty and social and educational marginalization that are so common in these suburbs. As for rape in general, as the leader of the NPNS quoted above reminds us, it unfortunately happens across social milieus. Gang rapes specifically, or tournantes, are not caused by Muslims or by a macho
culture that feeds off basement Islam. The gang rapes of today result from poverty, unemployment, social marginalization, school failures, and men seeking some kind of group solidarity through the victimization of women. Religion and “immigrant culture” were not needed to make gang rape happen, and judging from the steady rate of gang rape, they have not increased the problem, either.

Incident on the RER D: Is Anti-Semitism on the Rise?

In 2004, a woman (known only to the public as “Marie L.”) went to the police stating that she had been attacked by six African and Maghrebian youths armed with knives who overturned her child’s stroller, ripped her clothes, chopped off a lock of her hair, and drew three swastikas on her stomach with a marker pen, all while she was waiting in a Parisian RER D station (Smolar 2004b). The location is significant for two reasons. First, unlike the Métro system, the RER is a train that connects Paris with more distant banlieues. That this incident occurred on the RER suggests that the violence so commonly associated by the media and politicians with the banlieues is literally coming into Paris. Second, in 1995, the GIA sought to extend the Algerian Civil War to France via a series of civilian bombings. The group wanted to replace the Algerian government with an Islamic state, and GIA militants set off bombs in various places in Paris. The deadliest explosion happened along the RER B line, where eight people were killed and eighty were wounded (“Algerians get life for Paris bombing” 2002). The RER has therefore been associated in the past with Islamist violence and terrorism.

Within hours, the media and politicians had developed an interpretation of the event. In an article for Le Monde, Piotr Smolar (2004b) wrote, “Anti-Semitic or racist and xenophobic actions are resurfacing in France, and have multiplied since the beginning of the year.” Alain-Gérard Slama claimed in Le Figaro that this was “anti-French racism, a Francophobia that, like that of the Nazis, has become nearly inseparable from Judeophobia. . . . [They are] fanatics who believe they can bring jihad on [French] soil”; Georges Suffert wrote in Le Monde that the incident marked “the breakdown of the civic spirit and French integration” (although he notes that France could work to achieve the “restoration of the values of the Republic”); and Jean-Michel Thénard wrote in Libération that it was “a monstrous news item because it confirms the gangrene that is spreading throughout French society,” also drawing comparisons to Nazism in the 1930s (all quoted in Mucchielli 2005, pp. 92–93). Interior Minister Dominique de Villepin released a communiqué condemning “with the greatest of firmness” the “ignoble” act, which was “made more serious by these racist and anti-Semitic gestures” (quoted in Smolar 2004a). President Jacques Chirac also condemned the act as racist and anti-Semitic. Marie L. was attacked for being white, for being French, and for being Jewish. She was attacked by young men who were the products of failed French integration; they were Islamists and Nazi-like young men who hated France and Jews.

Marie L., it turns out, invented the entire story.
Seeking attention, Marie L. had drawn the swastikas on herself, torn her clothes, and cut her hair. There were no Arabs, no young black men, no knives. She strategically chose a story that she knew would draw attention—and she chose wisely. Strangely, the reaction of the press and politicians to the revelation that Marie L. had lied did not, for the most part, change their general tune of anti-Semitism among youths with an immigrant background. One article in *Le Monde* claimed that the incident “revealed a society obsessed by victims” (Prieur 2004). The general conclusion that the journalist drew from the incident was that a “cult of victimhood” exists in France—not that hasty assumptions exist about the supposed criminality and anti-Semitism of blacks, Muslims, and youths with immigrant backgrounds. As Dominique Strauss-Kahn, a French socialist and former managing director of the International Monetary Fund, unapologetically stated, “There are other [crimes] of the same genre every day” (quoted in Mucchielli 2005, p. 93).

But are there? Is anti-Semitism on the rise in France, and does it have to do with French Muslims? There is no question that France has today, and has long had, a problem with anti-Semitism. But in 2005, Laurent Mucchielli (p. 96) wrote that “anti-Semitic opinions have not ceased to diminish since World War II (including in these last few years) and only remain stable among the extreme right.” As France’s Commission Nationale Consultative des Droits de l’Homme (CNCDH [National Consulting Committee for Human Rights] 2008, p. 13) noted in 2008, “Anti-Semitic violence and threats are in marked decline.” The media and political responses to the Marie L incident did not reflect data on anti-Semitism contemporary with that period.

That said, more recent data from the CNCDH indicate that anti-Semitic violence *did* suddenly increase in 2009, and it has not returned to the lower levels of the 1990s. The same is true, however, for racist and anti-immigrant violence. Anti-immigrant violence for the most part has targeted people of Maghrebian origin, accounting for 69 percent of all racist violence in France (CNCDH 2008, p. 35). It should be noted that some of the attacks on people of Maghrebian origin might also involve Islamophobia. Fourteen of the forty-two acts committed in 2007 against people of Maghrebian origin that the CNCDH (2008, p. 35) classifies as “racist” include “a specifically Islamophobic character, targeting places of worship and remembrance,” and targeting individuals for being Muslim. In addition to this, since the CNCDH started collecting data on Islamophobic violence in 2010, the number of reported incidents has only increased. It seems that France is grappling with a problem of intolerance writ large, not just anti-Semitism (see Figure 6.1).

Furthermore, when describing public opinion, the CNCDH maintains that while there may be a “larger acceptance of minorities” today, this is not the case for Islam and Muslims (CNCDH 2008, p. 76):

Islam only evokes something positive for 28 percent of people interviewed (+7 percent compared to the 2006 report). Of all the
religions, it is the one that gives rise to the most negative images, with a positive opinion level that is 11 percent lower than that of the Jewish religion and 22 percent lower than that of the Catholic religion. . . . While 84 percent of people interviewed believe that Jewish French people are French like everyone else, the proportion of people who believe that Muslim French people are French like everyone else is only 69 percent.

Thus, the elite rhetoric suggesting that the Jewish population in France is being increasingly targeted for violence misses the broader context of a troubling overall increase in racial, ethnic, and religiously motivated violence in France. Furthermore, the fact that Marie L. could depend on the eagerness of elites to assume that Arabs are Muslim, and that Muslims and blacks would want to attack a Jew, points to the prevalence of these assumptions.

**General Media Presence of Muslims in Articles about Housing**

The conclusions drawn from the focusing events are supported by the media analysis presented in Chapter 2. When the analysis of depictions of Muslims in
one hundred randomly selected articles published in *Le Monde* between 1990 and 2008 is cross-tabulated for housing. 35 percent of the ninety-seven references to Muslims broadly depict them as problematic citizens or as citizens who have failed to integrate. The specific depictions behind this negative view of their citizenship include direct mention of Muslims as failing to integrate (four references); Muslims as religious extremists (eight references); Muslims associated with violence, criminal behavior, or disorder (one reference); Muslims as disorganized (two references); and Muslims as intolerant (two references). Similar accusations of violence, religious extremism, and un-French norms and values among Muslims are apparent in the discourse that surrounded both focusing events.

Finally, it is important to note that the frame of intolerance and violence that is used by elites when discussing Muslims and housing in France exists alongside the relative absence of discussion about Muslims and housing. Of the 3,739 articles on housing in *Le Monde* between 1990 and 2008, a mere 34 mentioned “Muslim” at least once in the article (see Figure 6.2). Discussion of Muslims in France is more readily found in articles about the related subject of “living conditions” than about “housing,” but not by much (and there are fewer of these articles overall compared with those about housing). When we use all the same parameters to examine *Le Monde* articles about *conditions de vie* (living conditions), we find that of the 397 articles between 1990 and 2008 that mention living conditions in the headline or lead paragraph, only 7 mention
Muslims. While this means it is more likely that an article on living conditions will mention Muslims than an article on housing will, it must be noted that these references to Muslims in articles on living conditions were either not about the Muslim population in France today or were concerned with Muslims as Islamic radicals.\textsuperscript{10}

This absence of a discussion is just as meaningful as the framing of focusing events such as the releases of \textit{La Squale} and \textit{L’enfer des tournantes} and the RER D incident. When Muslims are not being criticized for their violence and intolerance in the \textit{banlieues}, they simply do not appear in media coverage about housing in France. Furthermore, Muslims have an extremely marginal presence in coverage of living conditions. This is surprising, given the history of serious housing challenges that the Muslim community has faced in France since the 1950s. More important, this inattention does not reflect the discussions by Muslims in France, who often express concerns about the quality, availability, and social marginalization of housing. One could argue that this absence of references to Muslims in articles about housing reflects the French commitment to difference-blind republican neutrality. But, then, why discuss Muslims at length when considering gang rape and anti-Semitism? It seems that republican neutrality is somewhat selective.

It should be acknowledged that the American media coverage of the riots in 2005 also sometimes confounded the rioters—marginalized youths of the \textit{banlieues}, often the children of immigrants, but not always of Arab immigrants—with Muslims. As Jocelyne Cesari (2005, para. 16) notes, “The American media have had no qualms in using terms such as ‘Intifada’ or ‘jihad’ to describe the recent riots.” An article in the \textit{Washington Post} boldly claimed, “Most of the rioters are the French-born children of immigrants from Arab and African countries. A large percentage are Muslim” (M. Moore 2005). As Cesari (2005, para. 16) remarked, this is unlikely, as leaders of the Union des Organisations Islamiques de France (UOIF [Union of Islamic Organizations of France]), a prominent Muslim organization, had called for an end to the rioting. If these rioters were Muslim and just ignoring the pleas of the UOIF, then clearly religion was \textit{not}, as stated above, a “motivating factor.” There are even more blatant examples of American media confounding “violent youths in the \textit{banlieues}” with “Muslims,” such as the lead from an article distributed by the Associated Press: “Aubervilliers, France—Marauding bands of Muslim youth set fire to cars and warehouses and pelted rescuers with rocks early Saturday, as the worst rioting in a decade spread from Paris to other French cities” (“Paris rioters set woman afire as violence spreads” 2005).

\section*{How Muslims Discuss Housing in France}

Because it is illegal to conduct surveys in France that examine what North American political science largely refers to as “identity markers,” such as race and religion, it is difficult to conduct the kind of large-scale surveys that allow
comparisons between Muslim and non-Muslim French people on policy issues. A rough approximation is to survey those with a North African or Turkish immigrant background, as Islam has long been the dominant religion of these regions. Not everyone with this immigrant background claims to be Muslim, however, so one must consider this replacement indicator an imperfect substitute that may point to general trends that must later be qualified with in-depth interview research.

Starting with the big picture: what might a general claim about housing among the population of French people who statistically are the most likely to be Muslim—those with North African and Turkish immigrant backgrounds—look like? When asked to evaluate the performance of their government, French immigrants of North African and Turkish origin generally report more favorably than the rest of the French population (Brouard and Tiberj 2005, p. 51). The largest exception to this, however, is on the question of housing. While 19 percent of the French with a North African or Turkish immigrant background describe housing as one of the main problems in France today, only 9 percent of the rest of the French agree. For those French people most likely to be Muslim, housing seems to be a more salient issue (Brouard and Tiberj 2005, p. 51). Would those whom we know for sure describe themselves as Muslims agree? And if so, why do they see housing as a serious problem in France? Do the reasons they give match with those of French elites?

Throughout the interviews with Muslims conducted for this book (including with those Muslims who describe being Muslim as an identity and those who describe it as a private practice), housing was often depicted as a serious issue in France, especially for fellow Muslims. Regardless of whether I introduced the subject of housing, it came up in every interview and sometimes re-surfaced when discussing separate issues, such as employment, education, and the gendered nature of challenges immigrants face. Diverse reasons were given for its “problem” status, as well. While violence in the banlieues, machismo, and intolerance were recognized as real challenges, they were never described as the sole problem faced by Muslims when it comes to housing in France. Overall, the diverse and nuanced comments of the interviewees suggest that elite French discourse on Muslims and housing is reductionist.

Five broad themes about housing appeared repeatedly in interviews with Muslims. These themes were also widely discussed among the respondents, whether they were students, politicians, or professionals.

Muslims on the Isolation of the Banlieues

First, Muslims often spoke about the banlieues as isolated from the rest of France both geographically and socially. In their view, banlieues were a municipal planning mistake that continues to make life difficult for all of their inhabitants, including Muslims. Originally designed as little more than bedroom communities, banlieues have few businesses that provide work opportunities.
Unemployment thus remains very high. While industrious residents may look outside the community for more employment opportunities, this is not easy to do so. Seine-Saint-Denis is on Paris’s Métro and RER lines, and Cénon is on Bordeaux’s tramway line. Other banlieues, however, such as Clichy-sous-bois and Monfermeil, are poorly connected to major cities by public transportation. Multiple trains or buses may be required, creating a lengthy commute.

Not only are there few jobs; there are also few leisure activities in the banlieues. As interviewees pointed out, state efforts to provide more for people living in the banlieues have created further incentives to remain there. In establishing local bureaus for state agencies (such as Social Security or the Caisse d’Allocation Familial, the organization that distributes state aid for housing), France has made it possible for someone to live her entire life in an isolated banlieue, without ever leaving or even visiting nearby cities. It is important to consider that these issues affect all inhabitants of the banlieues, not just Muslims. Many of the Muslim respondents discussed banlieues in terms that bespoke a class-conscious evaluation of life in France. A political aide who works in city politics with Fadéla Amara discussed these connectivity problems: “There are cities, for example around Paris, [that] do not have public transportation. There are problems in leaving and reentering the town. When you have a car it is fine, but when you don’t have a car and depend on the bus. . . . We want to increase the bus routes, promote public transportation, so that the people can move very easily.” It is worth noting that in his view of housing problems, this interviewee (like Amara) mentioned violence and machismo: “The most difficult [challenge] it is to fight against violence, against the insecurity that reigns in the quartiers, against the . . . situation of women in the quartiers, and all that. It is the return of machismo.”

Few of the Muslim respondents would agree with the aide’s view that fighting violence, insecurity and machismo are “the most difficult” challenge in the banlieues. But this man was also a Muslim—one of those among the study’s respondents who viewed “Muslim” not as an identity marker but as a private practice meant to be kept at home. He did not see the need to struggle against negative stereotypes of Muslims; others needed only to look at how he was living his life to see that Muslims are not all terrorists, not all misogynists. This is important to keep in mind because it illustrates the diversity of opinion among Muslims in France. Other Muslim respondents did see “Muslim” as an aspect of their identity, and they wanted to mobilize politically, socially, and even legally as Muslims against ignorant stereotypes and discrimination.

The former representative of Dynamique Diversité I interviewed was keenly aware of the economic isolation of the banlieues. His organization had attempted to change that. “We support relationships between big businesses and the small businesses placed in the poor quartiers,” he said. “To diversify the buyer–seller networks . . . we created a tool of reference for small businesses, and we brought together the small and big businesses.”
A non-Muslim representative of the NPNS articulated a strong concern with machismo in the *banlieues*. But she also was concerned about the isolated nature of the *banlieues*:

The problem is that in France, we created dormitory towns. . . . During the *Trente Glorieuses*, we brought immigrants in to work. The problem is, at the beginning, France thought they would leave. But after family reunification, we built in haste, without really thinking about urban organization. That means we did not think to construct bars, cinemas, stores, places to go out—no, just places to sleep. . . . You arrive in an RER station, take two busses, walk around in the middle of nowhere. It is hard to move around.

**Muslims on the Adequacy of Banlieues and State-Subsidized Housing**

Similar to the issue of the isolation of *banlieues* is the problem of their disrepair. France recognized this in 2003, creating the Jean-Louis Borloo program to renew the *banlieues*. In a report delivered in 2008, however, the Agence Nationale pour la Renovation Urbaine (ANRU [National Agency for Urban Renewal]) argued that the program was not succeeding, citing insufficient resources (Bronner 2008). Promises of repairs and construction have failed to be realized by their target date: of the 250,000 building demolitions and reconstructions promised, just over 45 percent of the demolitions and 42 percent of the reconstructions had been accomplished by 2008.12 Restoration of existing buildings and relocation of their inhabitants has also been slow: around 54 percent and roughly 62 percent accomplished, respectively (Bronner 2008).13 The goal to relocate those buildings that were demolished to improve social diversity also is not being met: buildings are being reconstructed on the very sites where their predecessors were demolished (Bronner 2008).

The NPNS representative was also critical of the poor condition of state-sponsored housing: “The buildings were built with materials of a deplorable quality. If you tap on them, they break—they are empty things. They were made quickly, to house all these people.” Not all agree, however, including Muslims. Two respondents with the EMF disagreed heatedly. “Student 1,” a young male Muslim immigrant from Algeria with an Algerian mother and Tunisian father, insisted that the state worked very hard to maintain the HLM. “Student 2,” a young female convert to Islam without any known family history of immigration, argued that the HLM were dreadful. The two debated about the situation of immigrants in France:

**Student 1**: They live well, they live with dignity.

**Student 2**: But what about the HLM?

**Student 1**: Listen, the HLM . . .

**Student 2**: (Interrupts.) They are in bad shape, destroyed . . .
Student 1: If they are in bad shape, it is because of them [the immigrants].
Student 2: But there are drug pushers around the buildings . . .
Student 1: (Interrupts.) But that is because of them!
Student 2: That is not because of them. . . .
Student 1: In general, the HLM apartments are big.
Student 2: No.
Student 1: They are large, the HLM [apartments]. And they [the immigrants] do not pay anything in rent.
Student 2: Look, the state does not do renovations!

At this point, a third Muslim EMF member entered the conversation. Also an immigrant to France from North Africa, she argued along with the man that the HLM apartments were not so bad:

Student 3: These immigrants are able to take one month off work to go to their home country on vacation.
Student 2: They have to sacrifice for that.
Student 3: No, I don’t think so. In my opinion, they live well, with dignity. From the outside, the HLM is not very beautiful, but the interior . . .
Student 1: It is dignified.
Student 3: Yes, it is very good. . . .
Student 1: In Algeria, we have collectives to do stuff when the state is not present. . . . So in Algeria there is a collective of people in the quartiers who buy paint, cement, and do it all themselves. They fix their buildings. . . . Here in France, you do not find that; here they think that all is owed to them. . . . I say it is true that there are difficulties, there is racism, but if one looks at their [the immigrants’] quality of life, it is good. . . . That is why they come to France. They come to France to live well. And the proof is there: they live well.

(Long pause.)
Student 2: That is maybe not what you were expecting to hear. (Pauses.) You did not hear the same discourse over there as you do here, did you?

The “over there” to which Student 2 was referring was an interview I had just conducted with members of the JMF, an organization that sometimes works with Muslim youths in France, especially in difficult neighborhoods. Its goal is to convince Muslim youths that they can succeed and that doing well in school is a key component to that success. Indeed, the head of the JMF, whom I had just interviewed, had spoken about the deplorable condition of housing that many Muslims inhabit in France. He was also an immigrant, like Students 1 and 3 at the EMF. Therefore, it is hasty to say that immigrants simply “expect less” and that those born in France, as the male EMF respondent suggested,
“think that all is owed to them.” But it is accurate to say that there is disagree-
ment among Muslims in France about their rights and protections—what is
“owed to them.” I consistently found that those born in France, or who have
lived most of their lives in France, expect more from the state, but a definiti-
ve statement to that effect would require a large-n representative sample of Mus-
lim opinion that is beyond the scope of this study.

Some respondents also expressed concern that government-subsidized
housing in the banlieues is sometimes too small for the families who live in
it. Some Muslim respondents grew up in the older housing units that were
initially built during the first influx of North African workers, which did not
have washroom facilities in each unit. Some lived with their families in sin-
gle-bedroom apartments. Again, a sensitivity to class emerged during the respon-
dents’ discussion of these concerns.

Social Workers on the Isolation of Immigrant Women in the Banlieues

As some Muslim respondents pointed out, immigrant women face additional
challenges that make their lives even more difficult. Many of the immigrants in
the banlieues are Muslim women from North African cultures. The extended
support networks of their countries of origin have no equivalent in France, and
these women often become stranded in a strange land they cannot navigate on
their own, whether for cultural or linguistic reasons. This, of course, is in addi-
tion to the everyday challenges all new arrivals face in a new country. Tradition-
ally, if a married couple from North Africa moves to France, the man goes out
to work and the woman is left at home to take care of domestic life and, in many
cases, children. This division of labor reinforces the isolation of these women.
Some of them eventually find that they can no longer communicate with their
children, who speak French and adopt French culture and lifestyles and may
rebel against the religion and culture of their immigrant parents.

Social workers who work in communities that include Muslims acknowl-
dge this. Femmes Relais is an organization of female mediators in the banlieues
surrounding Paris. Of the five members interviewed, two had immigrated to
France from Africa. One of the women, who came to France from Algeria, in-
sisted that the challenges female immigrants face in France are unique in na-
ture and difficult to face alone. The others agreed:

For me, the mission of the association, all our missions are directed to-
ward and are for women. All of our activities are for the emancipa-
tion of women. It is true that these women who come from foreign
countries, who do not speak the language—in general, the men
work, and what they do is delegate to their wives all that is part of
daily life.  
But that is a lot of work, no?
(Noisy agreement from the other Femmes Relais mediators at the table.)
Of course! When you see a woman in front of you who does not speak French, who does not understand anything—how to fill out the forms when she takes the kids to the doctor. . . . That is why our mission is to help women become more autonomous, to have a dialogue with their children who are born in France, who speak French and do not necessarily speak the language of their parents. They go out with their friends, speak only French—the mother finds herself isolated.

*So she cannot speak to her children?*

She speaks to them, but they do not understand what she’s saying. Or they do not want to. . . . We have, even now, mothers who do not know how to speak French. Some do not know how to take public transportation . . . and they have been in France for twenty or thirty years.

Not all immigrants who live in France’s *banlieues* are Muslim, but many are. This is yet another issue that implicates Muslims but involves the nexus of immigration and class. As seen above, elite discourse on Muslims in France rarely takes these intersections of identity into account the way Muslim respondents, and these activists who work closely with Muslims, do.

**Muslims on Housing Discrimination**

An additional concern that disproportionately affects Muslims is discrimination in housing and apartment rentals. While this is illegal, it is not uncommon, and special terms are used on the housing market to more or less discreetly discourage Muslims or Arabs from applying or to reassure others that Muslims or Arabs will not be admitted into a unit. This also includes the kind of barely visible discrimination that respondents repeatedly described as “something you just feel, you just know.” Not all housing discrimination can be traced with evidence. Some of it consists of mysteriously rescinded offers, hostile glances, awkward excuses.

Two Muslims at the JMF, one an engineer and one a philosophy student, spoke about the search for housing as a Muslim in France. Interestingly, their conversation shows a keen awareness of rights and protections provided to them as French citizens, as well as a nuanced evaluation of the impotence of the law and its agents to help in situations such as housing discrimination. Discrimination is described as difficult to counter in court, as trails of evidence are not obtainable in the way they are after, say, a violent crime. Notably, police are seen as antagonists in a race-conscious statement:

**Engineer:** It is never things that are said clearly. I went looking for an apartment—went to an agency. There was an interesting apartment, so I asked about it. When I entered, the agent said, “No point asking,” and she ignored me. I pointed to the advertisement in the
window. Then she said, “Yeah, but the owner called us and said she decided she does not want to rent it out anymore.”

**Student:** Legally, they cannot do that.

**Engineer:** Well, yes, but you don’t want to pursue it like that. There are all sorts of things like that. . . .

*What if she clearly said, “No, it’s not for Muslims”? Would you then take it to court?*

**Engineer:** Then I would express my discontent, but court—that is a very heavy measure. . . . I would wonder about the effectiveness, because if I lose, it is not worth it.

*Does the legal system work?*

**Engineer:** Globally, the judicial system works. But on questions like that—everywhere, not just in France—it is hard. These procedures are too bulky.

**Student:** The legal system, the police, they can put you in prison. So Arabs are really leery of that. We see them as always being against us. We do not often think that these people will be *for* us, could *help* us.

**Engineer:** But when you’re in court, you see that it’s supposed to be equitable.

**Student:** Using the court for a problem with the telephone company or a car accident—people go to court no problem. But for something like discrimination, it is more difficult.

These respondents thus viewed the legal system as potentially neutral but ostensibly biased against Arabs and Muslims. I asked them to further discuss the usefulness of court action when pursuing a right:

**Engineer:** Well, there you are talking more about rights claiming. There are multiple ways to do this. You do not need to do it through a court. My dad went to court because of an accident at work. He hurt himself with a pickax. He found himself in an impossible, horrible situation, so he had to go to court. It took five years. We are not like Americans who ask for lots of things from the court, who go all the time. But maybe [the U.S.] judicial system permits cases to go through more easily.

**Student:** In France, it is just not practical. In some cases, you cannot even access the courts.

*Like with school issues?*

**Student:** Exactly. These administrative courts—they are another sphere. This accentuates it.

**Engineer:** Even if you win, the time and money you spend . . . five years for a discrimination case, no one is going to do it. Going to court is just for when you really need it.
Student: It is traumatizing.

Engineer: For example, I had a problem with a car rental agency. But I treated it at the agency. I went to the claims service, and it was handled at that level.

So you can claim your rights without always going to court?

Engineer: Yes.

Some American researchers think that the French do not talk about justice or rights.

Student: We are always talking about justice. (Laughs.) But it is more about social things. Court, that is for penal things.

Engineer: For serious violence.

Another interviewee, a man who worked for a diversity-oriented organization, complained that passing a law is easy, but without examples to hold up for public condemnation, people cannot internalize lessons about how it is wrong to discriminate when it comes to housing. “In England [if there were a housing discrimination lawsuit], there would be a lot of media coverage,” he complained, noting that in France that simply is not the case.

**Muslims on Police Discrimination**

Finally, many respondents spoke about a second kind of discrimination that targeted Muslims or those presumed to be Muslim (such as people with darker skin): police harassment. Similar to the concern with class, comments about police discrimination by Muslim respondents reveal an awareness of the role race plays in the lives of many Muslims in France.

There is no obvious connection between housing and police discrimination. The connection became apparent after multiple interviewees claimed that police were more hostile toward Arabs and blacks in the poorer neighborhoods and cities of France. One respondent, a young, male Muslim journalist, complained, “In certain quartiers, people are stopped three times a day by the same police officer.” This kind of police behavior equates to racial profiling that leads to a largely disproportionate number of interpellated Arabs and blacks (Open Society Justice Initiative 2009). Yet again, it is important to remember that not all Arabs are Muslims. There is considerable overlap, however, and the Muslim respondents seemed to be very sensitive to the intersections of race and religion, as well as of religion and class.

Cathy Lisa Schneider (2008, p. 135) describes the police actions that led up to the riots of 2005 as predatory and callous: after chasing down a group of young boys who had run out of nervousness when they were asked for their papers (which they had left at home), the police did nothing when three of the boys accidentally stumbled into an electrical substation. The three boys wandered lost in the substation, and two of them died when they accidentally touched a transformer. Shortly thereafter, police officers thought nothing of
throwing tear gas into a mosque, “asphyxiating hundreds of families attending a sermon,” when they were not immediately allowed in to continue their pursuit of youths who had ducked inside (C. L. Schneider 2008, p. 136).

These events are only part of what Cathy Lisa Schneider (2008, p. 138) describes as “police brutality (and impunity)” in France. Muslim complaints about police hostility were presented with indignation. Why, they asked, should a French person be constantly asked to display legal artifacts of his or her citizenship? Moreover, why should Muslims, Arabs, and blacks be stopped by the police more often than other French citizens? For Muslims, along with Arabs and blacks, repeated identity checks are a visceral reminder of one’s “suspect status.” Furthermore, these identity checks often happen in crowded public spaces, such as on public transportation. A lawyer representing clients suing the state for race-based profiling explained that such identity checks may include “humiliating public body pat downs” (“Fifteen French file lawsuit accusing state of racial profiling in ID checks” 2012). Indeed, the visibility of the identity check may compound the sense of “otherness,” as the stopped individual watches those who “look French” continue to walk by—some perhaps ignoring his or her existence or staring just long enough to make him or her feel on display. Human Rights Watch (2012, p. 22) even suggests that police may reinforce this sense of “outsider-ness” during identity checks by using offensive race-based slurs.

**Conclusion**

When we think about the “place” Muslims inhabit in France, we can reflect on various geographic coordinates where Muslims live and dwell, the physical condition of these various locations, and the meanings people in France have given to these locations. What we have found in this chapter is that the discourse of French elites tends to depict the places Muslims inhabit as dangerous and un-French, pockets of foreignness on the soil of France that endanger the republic and women.

Susan Terrio (2009, p. 75) is careful to note that this concern is not completely unfounded. As she points out, Prime Minister Alain Juppé’s move in 1995 to address security in particularly impoverished banlieues was a response to violent Islamic fundamentalists preying on poor youths there. What Terrio (2009, pp. 89–90) questions is the growing association she finds among politicians, courts, and sociologists of an unspecified “immigrant culture” (which carries if not specifically Islamic, then masculinist connotations) with “delinquency.” This association, she argues, is what made it possible for inaccurate reporting of the 2005 riots to spread throughout the news (incorrectly linking them to Islam, organized gangs, and immigration), and for politicians to engage in alarmist rhetoric about the situation (Terrio 2009, pp. 11–12). In other words, exaggeration begot distortion.

When it comes to Muslims and housing (or “place” more generally) in France, what is accurate and what is exaggeration? Interestingly, French
Muslims themselves provide different answers. For example, they disagree on the centrality of patriarchal culture in the problems of France’s banlieues. While none deny its existence, there can be tension between those Muslims who focus on the danger of machismo and those who worry about stereotyping Muslim (and Arab and black) men in a way that demonizes them and casts doubt on the strength and independence of Muslim women. As we can see, the meaning of this place, the banlieues, is highly contested. Different images of the banlieues appeared among Muslim respondents. Are the banlieues home to gender and racial violence or the kind of laudable, albeit not effortless, mixité the rest of France claims to value but turns its back on? Are the banlieues home to crumbling ghettos and drug dealers or to immigrants who have found a better life and more lucrative employment? Are they the home of submissive women or of immigrant mothers who are primarily held back not by husbands but by the challenges and even trauma of the immigrant experience?

For some Muslims in France, the banlieues are a place to fear the authority of a father or brother—but not for all. For some Muslims in France, particularly bareheaded women, the train station or neighborhood streets are places of passage. For others, they are places that can turn hostile in the blink of an eye with (for women wearing a hijab) a snide comment or (for young men) a police identity check. This chapter cannot provide a perfect depiction of the places Muslims inhabit, in all of their complexity. What it does demonstrate, however, is that the issue of Muslims and housing in France is far more complex than elite French discourse generally acknowledges.