

# THE NANOVIC INSTITUTE FOR EUROPEAN STUDIES



## LECTURE PAPER 15

### IDENTITY AND SELF-CONSTRUCTION AMONG THE CHILDREN OF MAGHREBIAN IMMIGRANTS IN FRANCE

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UNIVERSITY OF  
NOTRE DAME







# The Nanovic Institute Lecture Papers

A. James McAdams, Series Editor

Lecture Paper 15

*Identity and Self-Construction Among the Children of  
Maghrebian Immigrants in France*



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Keynote Address, *The Place of Islam in Contemporary European Literature*

The Nanovic Institute for European Studies



UNIVERSITY OF  
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*Identity and Self-Construction Among the Children  
of Maghrebian Immigrants in France*

Azouz Begag

One day, in a middle-school class in the suburbs where I had been invited to speak, a student of African descent asks me: "Sir, what is your profession?" I respond that I am a sociologist. He focuses on my lips, rolls his eyes, and appears to meditate for several seconds before he throws back at me: "You are a *sorciologist*? You do magic?" After a great laugh, I tell him that indeed, I am a sorcerer of ideas, a magician of words. His classmates are all hanging on my every word. "Show me!" he challenges. So I grab an eraser in front of me, throw it up in the air and make it disappear. My young African is stupefied. He smiles reluctantly and, all excited, he gets up from his desk, comes up to me, and begs me to do it again. He is so blown away that he confesses to me that he would now like to become a *sorciologist* himself: he already loves this profession, "big time." This may be the case, but while we wait to meet up with his orientation counselor, I propose that he return to his place, because his classmates are already moving towards me, a revolution is brewing. Once order is restored, I explain that a *sorciologist* is someone who has acquired certain knowledge and knows how to use it, but who sometimes abuses it, so watch out! Alas, the students are only listening with one ear now, since their eyes are continuing to explore the space around me in search of the vanished eraser, all while I'm trying to tell them to be wary of me. Imperturbable, I continue with my pedagogy, employing accessible words, images and anecdotes to present the profession of researcher-writer as well as that of the informed citizen.

It was the umpteenth time I was invited to talk in underprivileged districts. It was now a generation ago that I acquired experience in the sociology of the housing projects and I have always held on to the desire to share my knowledge with the poorest. I have therefore always forced myself to find metaphors and adequate formulations to clear a path between social universes, between religions, to provide children from the shantytowns with access to school, the world of abstraction and questions. I never feared exploring the fields of knowledge, bringing together the rotundity of the earth and humor, religious faith and democracy, erudition and intolerance, in these interstices where reason and feelings, reflection and action, science and belief mix.

I am a writer, the son of peasants: Algerian, Muslim, illiterate, poor immigrants who never learned French in the fifty years they spent in France. They were overwhelmed by the speed with which time passed and the mythic possibility of a return to Algeria. What use would it be to them to learn the language of exile, since they were going to go back home, they thought? One day.

I was born in a shantytown in Lyons, in the middle of the Algerian War. Very early, I knew the resonance of the words National Liberation Front, colonization, independence, assassination, bombs. In the nights of my childhood, between the poorly tied planks of our shacks, I saw weapons pass from one set of hands to another, as well as suitcases of money collected in the dark for the Revolution. I heard people talk about the Frenchmen and women who carried suitcases for the National Liberation Front, the FLN, who were fiercely engaged against colonization, willing to risk their lives. I knew the names of the Frenchmen and women who were tortured by parachutists, the names of philosophers organizing the collection of funds for the revolution, and I also knew that young people called to serve in the armed forces tied themselves to the rails of train tracks to refuse the war against Algerians who had never done anything to them. Being born in the middle of a war inevitably leads to a childhood of fear and violence. Being born in the middle of the Algerian War forever engraves in the memory of a child the power of the words “courage” and “freedom.”

I loved to hear the word *self-determination*. It means being responsible for your own destiny, as the Algerian people desired. In France, my father the mason complained that he was considered solely to be a part of the workforce, and that each month his fate was hanging on his pay stub. In France, my father was a “*une main d’œuvre*,” arms, muscles. In short, he was nobody: *personne*. A fan of self-determination, I became somebody: *une personne*. This is my way of saying that I was certainly a member of a family, a peasant community, and a religious community, but that I earned my emancipation thanks to a Republican school and the acquisition of a critical mind.<sup>1</sup> That’s why I add that I didn’t just succeed in my life, but I succeeded myself (*je me suis réussi*); in French I conjugate success with the auxiliary “*être*” and not “*avoir*.” I became an individual. My “I” was formed along with all my studies, my readings, and my travels. I had the good fortune not to become a worker, a mason like my father, with all the respect that I owe the workers of this

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1. Azouz Begag, *Shantytown Kid*. Trans. Naïma Wolf and Alec Hargreaves. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2007. [*Le Gone du Chaâba*. Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1986.]

profession. I do not wish to denigrate this honorable craft in any way; I only want to say that I managed to escape social determinism.

I tore myself away from the “communitarian we” that often is the foundation of the social connection among immigrant families and that sinks any individual attempt to become autonomous. This exists elsewhere as well, not only in immigrant families. At elementary school, not very far from my shantytown, my teacher taught me one beautiful morning that the earth was round and turned on its own axis all while gravitating around the sun. The teacher, Mister Savior, had brought to class a plastic earth on which we were able to locate France, Algeria, the oceans, the seas, and the mountains, and I was literally fascinated by this discovery: we were living on moving soil! This gave me a sensation of dizziness. All the students began looking at their feet in an effort to catch themselves moving on the treadmill that had established itself in their mental geography. That very night, after school, I ran to our shacks and went straight toward my illiterate father to announce to him that the earth was round and revolved around the sun all day long! At first, he pretended he didn’t hear me. He was just getting back from work and, exhausted by a long day of masonry, he was removing the newspaper pages he had flattened against his chest to protect himself from the cold on his moped. He told me to turn just like the earth. I immediately did so. Suddenly, he gave me a kick in the rear and grumbled, “How could I tell him such tall stories? What was the use of going to school to learn this nonsense? The earth round, swirling around the sun? And what else?”

My hands holding my posterior, I felt sheepish. I didn’t know what to say in response to this acerbic critique, other than the fact that it was the knowledgeable teacher who had confided in me and that I couldn’t personally provide supplementary arguments in support of this thesis. That night, I went to bed without dinner. My father was red with anger. I had never seen him in such a state. But I could feel why. At the French school, his son was in bad hands, on a downward slope, an erroneous path. The next day he woke me at dawn and together we went to the window to witness an incredible natural phenomenon: sunrise. It was the month of April 1968. The sky was perfectly clear. Not the slightest bit of fog disturbed our field of vision. Throughout the entire day, my father and I followed the course of the sun in the sky. Hours passed and we did nothing but watch the slow trip of this fireball in the blue vastness. My mother supplied us with water and sandwiches without bothering us. We were in the process of conducting live scientific observation; we were concentrated to the extreme. Our shack made of wooden planks and sheet metal had become a laboratory for physics experiments. Two eminent

scholars were making headway. In the evening, around ten o'clock, the scarlet ball went to hide itself, setting at the other side of the world, in the West. So, once night had fallen, my father declared the observation complete, turned on the light, and asked me the fatal question:

So, what had my eyes seen?

"The sun."

"And?"

I thought for a minute. . . "It moved all day long!"

"Good, and?"

I pushed my reflection even further, in vain. I didn't know what else to say. He helped me:

"What did the teacher say in class?"

"Ah yes! The sun doesn't move and the earth turns around it."

"Good, and so?"

"The sun moves!"

"Good, and so?"

"Mister Savior is a liar!"

"Good. And why is he a liar?"

At that, I didn't have any idea what to say. I didn't see at all why Mister Savior who was very kind with me could teach me things that went against reality. I thought some more. Once again, in vain. My tongue was tied. So my father explained that it was because we were Arabs, Muslims, immigrants! The teacher didn't want to teach us the truth about the world, about pure physical science, because he and the Minister of National Education in France sought to keep us in a state of ignorance. They didn't want to run the risk of seeing us become more intelligent than them some day, because knowledge was the key to power!

The Algerian War was barely over and colonization had left its imprint on their minds. Worse than that: The French may be under the impression that the earth is moving under their feet because they have been drinking too much alcohol and that makes them lose their balance (hence the French expression "*être rond*," "to be round," meaning drunk). The earth was indeed turning under their feet. My father had many opportunities to verify this on the construction site where he worked with Italians, Portuguese, Spanish, and Polish. No need to go looking any further for the truth. For this sober man, there was only one line of conduct to follow: learn to look, observe, reflect, and create his own truth. You should only believe what you see. And what had our eyes seen? The sun advance across the sky. So the sun turned around

the earth, around us, and when it was over our heads, it was day, we worked, and when it passed under our feet, it was night, and we had to sleep to get back our strength for work. How could I have believed that the earth had its own revolution? Hadn't Allah given me a brain so that I could think with my own wings? Of course I should have asked myself the right questions, imagine myself in this case, and ask myself how we could stay balanced on a huge soccer ball that turned? How could I explain that the water of the seas and the oceans always remained in place when the container was turning over on itself? Hey, take an empty glass, pour water in it and turn it over. What happens? Water falls to the ground. If the earth turned, the same phenomenon would take place in identical fashion, wouldn't it? There would be no more water in the Mediterranean and we couldn't return to Algeria for summer vacation and all the fish would be up a creek. This brilliant lesson was based on facts found in practical reality, observable for the man in the street, the man from the construction site for public works. The schoolmaster could go back where he came from! He was far from being a savior. It was evident for me that the earth was flat in 1968.

Not far from the shantytown, on the other hand, in the center of Lyons, there was a revolution in the air. We had heard about the one created by students who wanted to transform society by putting a different society in its place. I didn't understand anything about the blood transfusions or ideological transfusions they aspired to. There were confrontations between the youth and the police, according to the newspapers and radio updates. But as far as the revolution of the earth, there was no question about this for us. Poverty had its limits! My father gave me my epistemological education. My whole life, I have been grateful to him. In April of this same year, I also learned through the newspapers that a great man of peace had been assassinated in America. He was named Martin Luther King. With the distance of time, I realize that this year was a pivotal year in the meanderings of my life as the advocate of the poor, the oppressed, and of freedom of expression.

For years now, in the shadow of the high-rise buildings of the housing projects, in the classes where the children of immigrants are overrepresented, my argument that the earth is flat and that we are the victims of an immense hoax carried out by "French" teachers from National Education (*them*) has created a number of disciples. Indeed, almost all students are convinced that something isn't quite right [*ne tourne pas rond*] in the analysis of the terrestrial globe gravitating around the sun, when our eyes see the latter pass over our heads. I confirm that they were wrong. Sometimes, in a classroom where I plant my subversive seed, a student who doubts my object lesson

raises his hand and claims with authority that it is thanks to the universal gravitational force that the earth can turn around itself and that we remain stuck to its surface, along with our houses, and the water of the seas and the oceans. When they encounter this abstract insolence, the other students are attentive, their eyes riveted on the speaker's lips. They turn back to me to watch for my reaction. I shrug my eyebrows: "Force of universal gravitation? What is that?" I pose the question with a raised voice in order to back the student into a corner. He says that it's an invisible force, that can't be seen, but he has heard that it exists. I rub it in, adopting an ironic tone: "It can't be seen? But shouldn't we only believe what we can. . . ?" The other students finish my sentence: "See!" Thank you. And there, the game is over. The *sociologists* use and abuse their knowledge, I had warned them. What's more, the audacious student of Galileo who spoke admitted to spreading rumors, since he recognizes that he had only heard about. . . He didn't take the time to establish some distance with respect to this hearsay. And everyone knows that gossip has the unique characteristic of circulating without confirmation. Obviously, it is my position that allows me to shake up received ideas that are poorly packaged. Am I not a writer, a researcher, the one who knows and who has the power to take up words [*prendre la parole*] and write them down [*la fixer*]? My students have all, over the years, accumulated knowledge with respect to which they have never really taken any sort of personal position. Have their eyes already seen and noticed, with their own pupils, that the earth was round? No. So why do they believe it? They shrug their shoulders in response. At the end of the class period, the rash students come to beg me to admit the truth because they had seen the round earth on television and because the Americans had sent a rocket ship to the moon in July 1969, hadn't they? Hadn't they seen from up there that the earth was round? "The Americans?!" As I repeat their words, I raise the tone of my voice and turn sarcastic. "They didn't *see* it, they *gave it to us to see*, through television screens. That means that they made us consumers of the idea that from the moon, one can prove that the earth is rotund. But you should never believe these Americans! Recently, they pressured the entire world to wage war in Iraq, supposedly because their president had weapons of mass destruction that threatened the democratic world. It was false. A pretext to wage war and seize the Arabs' oil. So you shouldn't believe that they sent men to the moon. As long as it is they who hold the television cameras to deliver images to the world, you shouldn't believe the truths that they diffuse to the world and to the Reunited Nations. At first sight, you should almost, out of principle,

disbelieve them. You mustn't forget that Hollywood is located in California and California in America.

I love to take advantage of this subversive pedagogy to inculcate doubt, or epistemological prudence in my students. With down-to-earth questions, far from the moon, I teach them the art of doubting and taking the time to reflect. Students still hesitate, revived this time by their instructor who whispers clues in their ears. They pose once again the intriguing question: "Sir, come on, is it round or flat?" I don't answer. I put on my jacket, ready to leave. "Sir, please!" I open the door, followed by their frustrated gazes. Spinning around, I throw out from the half-open door that in the end, I don't know if it is round or flat, and that knowing doesn't even really interest me. The most important thing is to ask the question. To ask it to oneself. It is only then that things begin to become enriching because students discover what critical rationalism is. I tell them that there are libraries, books where you can find an answer to this fundamental question. You have to go to them, search, search for yourself [*se chercher*], even if you don't find an answer, even if you don't find yourself [*s'y retrouve pas*]. And I shut the door behind me. I take off. I leave them wanting more. I think that I have won. I win every time. My students are freer than these children from religious schools holding a sacred book in their hands and striking their faces with its content in order to better graft it onto their brain. My students are freer because I teach them suspicion, subversion, methodological prudence to elude the vice of received ideas, of epistemological obstacles. My students maintain their book at a distance from their face and their brain. They are peripatetic. It is in the "meantime" that they forge their personality. They are in motion.

In the history of humanity, nothing acquired is forever, especially not the progress of scientific knowledge. Today, my numerous speaking engagements in sensitive districts have brought me to think that we must incessantly come back to Erasmus, Galileo, and Kepler, with images, with questions, and with pleasure. We must come back to the beginning, turning the essential questions into the daily moral lesson in class, and learning to discuss, develop arguments, and construct personal ideas. My small anecdote about the round earth is a good illustration of the urgency of taking up again with young people the history of thought, of ideas, and of democracy in its most elementary and attractive form. We have to recount to children not that the earth is round, flat, or oval, but why it is worthwhile to pose questions and to know. What seems to me to be important to teach them is tied to the method of investigation: young citizens of the world need to be capable, when observing with their own eyes the course of the sun in the sky,

of arriving at the conclusion that “what I see may be false,” what my *own* eyes really see may be the opposite of the truth. In other words, my eyes can betray the truth; they may be impostors, the victims of hallucination. The point of this exercise is teaching them to enjoy it. It consists of a major intellectual operation, a translation that involves changing one’s “point of view.” I explain that adopting a critical posture means being able to step outside of yourself, to place yourself in the location of the sun and think that “it may be I and my eyes that are turning.” To go to the balcony to better watch yourself walking in the street. All these fundamental questions have what it takes to provoke a stiff neck because it is a question of tearing oneself away from certainty, from sensory organs as eyes that allow us to see the world, and putting them into doubt. Revoking them, rejecting them, renouncing them.

In the torment of complex and unusual thoughts, certain students inevitably wind up telling me that I’m “making their head spin” [*prends la tête*] I love their linguistic realism. I understand their language. It was mine in the neighborhoods of my adolescence. They mean that I flip their intellectual organization and they would like to sit back and rest on what they have already acquired. They say, all in all: “You have to know, is it true or false? What turns around what?” They demand that we make an arrangement among us—possessors, professors, prophets of knowledge—that will save them time and spare them from being taken for buffoons, because humor isn’t their cup of tea. I defend myself by claiming that it is true and false at the same time, that the world isn’t binary, that there isn’t good on one side and evil on the other, as George W. Bush would say, that the two go together, that there isn’t life on one side and death on the other, that the two are linked up in being. I am a strong opponent of the simplification of the world, society, and the individual. Unfortunately, my arguments in favor of complexity fall flat, victims of the universal gravitation of political thought that pulls democracy downward and wears out the springs of humanism. With students who are practicing Muslims, for example, I say that the subjectivity of the reader is important in his or her understanding of the sacred text. I say that between a Muslim from Indonesia, China, Saudi Arabia, or France, there is at bottom not much in common and that one can have more affinities with a friend with whom one grew up in the projects in France, even if you’re not of the same religion. I claim that in my identity core, the religion my parents passed on to me only occupies one seat, not the entire rentable space. Numerous other satellite regions in my mind are open, accessible, and free to change. That is where tolerance should nest, along with respect for everything that is not like me, that goes against my way of thinking. My identity is a concept in

revolution as well, in perpetual motion, permanently changing. It *nomadizes*. It flits about, forming itself according to my identifications, my encounters. It is the journey in its diversity that enriches me. And we, human beings, contrary to plants, dispose of this fascinating capacity for movement in space, a propensity to invent our own points of reference.

Isn't the greatest of frustrations to be deprived of mobility? That is why we call prisons "houses of arrest" [*des maisons d'arrêt*]. On this subject, one day, invited to a women's prison, while I was developing my theory on the flat earth, a detainee rebuffed me by affirming that what mattered in a consumer society was not knowing the form of the earth because you couldn't pay for your rent with these "stupidities," but possessing the one and only ticket: the money to consume, to buy freedom with the key of integration in the merchant world. Thanks to this general idea, she had created membership among a good number of the other detainees around me. Complicated thoughts had, in their eyes, the allure of sleeping pills for the poor. The world was much simpler than I had wanted to present it, and I was a Professor Sunflower to them. I needed to put a little reality oil on my obsolete machine. I was looking for a reply. Since I had learned that she had a young daughter, I told her that if one day she asked if the earth was round or flat, it would be better to know how to respond, right? That would help her children to save some time. I made reference to passing on, to the social heritage, wanting to place her in a continuum, a long-term history. She seemed to admit this, coming back nonetheless to God, for it was He who held the master key. If she was in prison today, it was because He had decided it should be this way. She closed her eyes at the end of her sentence, as if she were praying.

Her closed eyes inspired another idea in me. By questioning what we receive through sensorial antennae, by criticizing and refuting what is given, we learn the paradoxical necessity of closing our eyes to better see the invisible springs that hold up the visible world. It is a funny paradox indeed: close your eyes to gain access to the light and to better visit the world of abstraction. It is a way of thinking that children, and the young in general, love to discover, the distancing of self with respect to the environment that surrounds us. Many youth in underprivileged districts—and not only the youth, and not only in these places of exclusion—do not manage to find points of reference in a consumer society because they are victims of the tyranny of the present and social atomization. They hardly have the means to put themselves at a distance, to self-evaluate, or to situate themselves in the system in which they live. Self-extraction means to climb up on your own shoulders and look at yourself looking toward the future.

One day, one of these young Maghrebians from the suburbs asked me the following question when we were speaking about the importance of memory for the individual as well as for society: “Sir, but what is the purpose of having a memory when you don’t have a future?” After a moment of hesitation, I answered that memory is precisely what allows us to have a future. Learning to see oneself from a certain distance means learning about distance, distances, and time. When it comes to thought, it is the art of learning how to learn.<sup>2</sup> The observation of an object or a situation from different angles, and listening to the critiques of others, integrating them, tolerating them.

When it comes to distance and belief, humor plays an interesting role, particularly in the analysis of intercultural relations. Derision is both comforting and socializing thanks to its capacity to play with distance, transgress borders, and constitute an effective social connection. People often say that a humorless person is “uptight,” that he refuses to budge from his point of view. If you are careful, you can analyze the absence of humor as the reflection of a certain social poverty, a situation in which individuals are incapable of imagining themselves from a distance. In support of this thesis, I cite an illustration that really struck me one day. In an underprivileged neighborhood, I was in charge of an integration internship for youth under the age of twenty and I evoked with great emphasis the important inventions in the history of mankind to show to what extent knowledge created continuity for humanity, when a student raised his hand. He stood up and affirmed in a solemn voice that he knew the name of the inventor of the blade for cutting “butter” [*le beurre*]. Nothing less. This question put the cat among the pigeons. I immediately sought in his gaze the sign of a joke that he had concocted this just for me, based perhaps on my Maghrebian origin, but his serious face showed no indication of humor. I carried on by throwing out:

“The blade for cutting the Arab [*le Beur*]? Ah, I know, it’s Le Pen!”

Without blinking, the young man looked at me in a detached manner and responded that no, no, that wasn’t the right name. He then cited another, completely anonymous to my ears. I was flabbergasted. Suddenly, I found myself in a strange position, explaining to this young man that I had just used humor, that I had purposely likened butter [*le beurre*] to second-generation Maghrebian immigrants [*les Beurs*] and that, Jean-Marie Le Pen being the enemy of the latter, I . . . But the more I spoke, the more I felt the widening of the gap of incomprehension that separated us. The conclusion was

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2. Bachelard, Gaston. *La formation de l’esprit scientifique*. Paris: Librairie philosophique J. Vrin, 1977.

striking: the intern couldn't decode my joke because he couldn't appreciate the underlying meaning. He only deciphered the world literally. He solely referred to what he saw, just like my old illiterate father. I observed that a play on words, which consists in modifying the order of things, could only appear to him to be an all-too-serious mathematical equation, an abstract form of organizing thought.

I never knew why the young man asked me this question. In addition, on many occasions, I noticed during my meetings with young people from difficult neighborhoods that humor did not suit the Muslim faith. You don't joke with Allah. You must fear the All-Powerful One. That did not stop me from responding with disguised humor to all of these students who asked me if I was Muslim that "I am a practicing non-believer!" I thus said the opposite of what they generally are: non-practicing believers. I love to reverse the order of things and when I am asked why I practice, given that I don't have faith, I retort that "it is in practicing that one becomes a believer," to play with one of Pascal's ideas. Then, faced with students who insist that I express myself with respect to Islam, I claim that in the end my faith is private, that it is a matter that only concerns God and me, and that at the last judgment there will be no one else but me and my conscience. Everyone is in agreement with this, and the dossier is closed.

Muslim faith is a serious subject when it comes to the thematic of social exclusion of French youth. In 1995, in the suburbs of Lyons, Khaled Kelkal, a presumed twenty-one-year-old terrorist from the Vaulx-en-Velin commune who was sought by all of the police forces in France, was located and killed by military men after a long hunt. The affair was the talk of the town. The young man had been a student in a middle school of his suburb, and then had attended high school in the center of Lyons for one year during which he learned the elementary principles of chemistry. From a rational point of view, this detail in his social itinerary appeared to be in complete contradiction with his destiny as a terrorist from the suburbs. He was not a homeless person who lacked culture and psychological structuring. Contrary to the aforementioned young intern, he was capable of reading the world on several levels. Nonetheless, this wealth had not played a role against the brainwashing he received during a stay in the Lyons prison. When the newspaper *Le Monde*<sup>3</sup> published a four-page interview with Kelkal that a German scholar had conducted by chance some time before the young man's death, the certainty

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3. "Moi Khaled Kelkal." *Le Monde*. 7 October 1995.

with which he explained his faith in Allah was surprising. In response to a question about what Islam means to him, he answers:

‘Frankly, it’s a great thing in life. Even here, I am thinking hard. I say, I have to be religious. I have to pray. Every three or four days, we check out a cassette that shows us the great minds of Islam, with Westerners, and they show the words of the Qur’an. One of the greatest professors of astronomy in Japan certified that the Qur’an is the voice of God.’ He added that ‘the greatest scientist at NASA certified it too.’ Hence the young man comes to the conclusion: ‘what is said there cannot be human. It can only be divine. Afterward, one cannot deny it. When the greatest scholars certify something, it can no longer be denied.’

I meditated for a long time on this philosophy of belief, certainty, and blindness. I had always told myself that this was a possible outcome when we forbid an individual to deny, to refute that which scientists—whether Japanese or from NASA, who explore the universe and are capable to see far and high—have scientifically demonstrated: that the Qur’an is something “true.” There is no doubt that the young man could only bow down before such truth, like my students when I did a magic trick.

This case is not banal. Two elements contributed to Khaled Kelkal’s psychological disorganization. The first is the passage from middle school to high school. The middle school was next to his home and the high school was “far away,” in the center of Lyons, in another world. It is this exile that made him say: “I’m an outsider” [*Je n’ai pas ma place*]. In this high school, he didn’t feel at home any longer. He found himself friendless, far from his own people, from those who were close to him. In addition, not having found a solution to his personal psychological problem, he couldn’t find his place among others and, venturing outside the limits of his commune, he got lost. Finally, one day, in prison, he met a Muslim chaplain who showed him another path, that of God, that he had lost. He threw himself into it wholeheartedly, with blind trust [*les yeux fermés*].

We find the same trajectory in the psychological and political formation of the African-American leader Malcolm X in the 1960s when, in prison, he met the creator of the movement called *The Nation of Islam*.<sup>4</sup> When people discover their path this way, without coming across that of other humans, they transform themselves into a bomb in an unequal democratic system. Khaled Kelkal was marked with the desire to destroy the rotten world in

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4. *Malcolm X, The Final Speeches*, February 1965. New York: Pathfinder, 1992.

which he didn't have a place, a status that would have allowed him to assure his existence, to gain social recognition.

The ultimate result of social exclusion is the atomization of the individual. It is translated by the impossibility of putting distance between oneself and others, the world, time, and by the absence of a critical mind. In Bush's America, we could see how the declaration of war against Iraq in March 2003 was falsely justified by the existence of weapons of mass destruction. This truth, inculcated on television stations, almost created unanimity among the American people in favor of armed intervention. At the most powerful moment of the war, we saw how it had become dangerous for those opposed to the war to express their peaceful point of view. But all the pages of the great book of humanity are made to be turned and allow men to break free from the errors of the past. Striving for hope and freedom.



*Azouz Begag*



Azouz Begag is the best known and most prolific author of post-colonial immigrant origin in France. The son of Algerian immigrants, he is the author of autobiographical and other narratives which are widely studied in North American and other anglophone countries as well as in France and elsewhere in the francophone world. His best known autobiographical narratives include *Le Gone du Chaâba* (1986) and *Béni ou le paradis privé* (1989), featuring a culturally hybrid blend of French, North African and anglophone elements fused in multi-levelled layers of irony and humor. Keenly attuned to the cultural and political dynamics of France, North Africa and the anglophone world, Begag has explored pressing issues of social justice and identity politics in novels such as *Quand on est mort, c'est pour toute la vie* (1995), *Les Chiens aussi* (1995), *Dis oualla!* (1997) and *Le Passeport* (2000). Alongside his work as an imaginative writer, Begag has published widely as a professional sociologist and political activist. He has also held visiting positions at Cornell University and Swarthmore College, as well as at Florida State University's Winthrop-King Institute for Contemporary French and Francophone Studies. A researcher with the Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique (CNRS) in France and frequent contributor to *Le Monde* and other media outlets, Begag has combined grass-roots contacts among minority ethnic groups with an unusual openness to British and American policy models, challenging French political élites with his original and often irreverent views. Frequently cited as an exemplar of the French model of 'integration', variously courted and criticized by activists from different parts of the political spectrum, Begag speaks with exceptional authority and clarity on the complexities and contradictions characterizing the debates over immigration, 'race' and ethnic relations in France.

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