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Introduction

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On June 2, 2005, Azouz Begag received a phone call from France's newly appointed prime minister, Dominique de Villepin, inviting him to join the government. Begag agreed to serve as minister for equal opportunities. A week later, for his first official ministerial visit, he traveled to the city of Lyon, where decades earlier his parents, immigrants from Algeria, had raised him and the rest of their family in a shantytown they called Le Chaâba. Their poverty and social marginalization were typical of the living conditions experienced by Algerians in France. Like most immigrants from North Africa, where they had lived under French colonial rule, Begag's parents were illiterate. At the Ecole Léo-Lagrange, a short walk from Le Chaâba, the young Begag learned to read and write. This unlocked the key to opportunities that had been denied to his parents, paving the way for what was to become a multifaceted career as a sociologist, novelist, screenwriter, and political commentator. When the newly appointed minister

returned to Lyon in 2005, it was to present awards to local children who had won the Savoir Lire [Learning to Write] prize, awarded by volunteer-staffed associations working to raise literacy levels. Begag told the young awardwinners that, when he was a child, one day his father gave him a book: “‘This book is a bird,’ my father told me. What he meant was: ‘If you want to become a minister, you must open this book and fly like a bird.’ Each Sunday I went to the flea market with my father to buy another book, and it’s because I took off and flew that I am here today.”¹

Begag’s best-selling autobiographical novel, *Le Gone du Chaâba*, first published in 1986, tells the story of his childhood in Lyon. The action is divided mainly between home and school, embodying two vastly different sociocultural spaces. Amid the shacks of Le Chaâba, where the residents have neither running water nor electricity, the young Begag is raised as an Arab child, learning an Algerian dialect of Arabic along with the moral codes of his Muslim parents. At the neighborhood public school he learns to read and write in French and is given lessons in correct behavior as understood by the majority ethnic French. In negotiating a path between the different cultural spaces that he encounters and the racial and ethnic tensions running between the majority and the minority ethnic populations, the young Begag experiences a series of confusing, often comic, and sometimes painful situations. The child’s experiences are recounted by his mature alter ego with an engaging blend of playfulness, verbal invention, and multilayered irony, reflecting the multi-

cultural melting pot that has become an increasingly important part of contemporary French society.

Lyon, the second largest city in France after Paris, is situated at the confluence of the Rhône and Saône rivers. The historic downtown core of the city spans the area where the two rivers run close together in a north-south direction. Most of the city's extensive suburbs lie to the east of the Rhône. They include relatively old, mainly working-class suburbs such as Villeurbanne, just across the Rhône from downtown Lyon, and, further out, low-cost high-rise housing projects built during the 1960s and 1970s in places such as Vaulx-en-Velin and Vénissieux. The main events in *Le Gone du Chaâba* take place in and around Le Châaba, a cluster of shacks thrown up on the Villeurbanne side of the Rhône, between the river and an urban expressway linking the suburban area to downtown Lyon. In the later stages of the narrative, the family moves to the old working-class neighborhood of La Croix-Rousse, built on a steep hillside between the two rivers, close to the historic heart of Lyon.

The story is set in the 1960s. Until then, migration from Algeria to France had been largely temporary and economic in nature. Since the early years of the twentieth century, impoverished Algerian laborers had traveled to France to take temporary unskilled jobs there. After a few years, they would return to their native land, where their families remained. Fathers were often replaced by sons or brothers in a rotation system that ensured that, while there was a more or less ongoing presence of Algerian workers in France, few of

them remained there for more than a few years.² In the 1950s, this began to change. Migrant workers began to bring in their families. Now, as economic migration grew in response to the labor shortages experienced by France during the postwar economic boom, so too did the number of permanently settled immigrant families from Algeria and the neighboring North African countries of Morocco and Tunisia. Later, amid the economic slowdown resulting from the oil shocks of the 1970s, the French government attempted to reverse migratory flows from North Africa (also known as the Maghreb), brandishing a mixture of carrots and sticks in the hope of repatriating as many North Africans as possible. But it was too late. By now, migrant families had put down roots in France, where growing numbers of children such as the young Begag had been born and educated. With the economic climate even more uncertain south of the Mediterranean compared with France, few Maghrebis could see any reason to return there.

Public awareness of this transition from temporary labor migration to permanent family settlement took place against a backdrop of sharply rising unemployment and economic insecurity. In the early 1980s, this combination of circumstances was successfully exploited for electoral purposes by the extreme right-wing Front National, under the leadership of Jean-Marie Le Pen, who blamed unemployment (and every other ill afflicting the nation) on “immigration,” by which he meant the presence of non-Europeans, especially North Africans, in France. Since then, the settlement of minorities originating in the Maghreb and other Third World

regions has been a key element in political, social, and cultural debates in France.³

Begag was part of the earliest wave of family settlement by Algerian migrants. His father, Bouzid, from the village of El-Ouricia near the city of Sétif, in northeastern Algeria, had first come to France as a construction worker in 1947. In 1954, Bouzid was joined in Lyon by his wife, Messaouda, and four children already born to them in Algeria. In Lyon, they had three more children. These included Azouz, born in 1957. As they were too poor to afford regular housing, like many other immigrant families from Algeria and other African countries, they lived in a *bidonville* (shantytown) thrown up on spare land with makeshift materials and none of the facilities (running water, electricity, sewers, etc.) that most French people took for granted. Begag started to attend school in 1962. *Le Gone du Chaâba* begins a year or two later (the exact chronology is unclear) and ends in the fall of 1968 with the family about to move from La Croix-Rousse to a new housing project in Vaulx-en-Velin, in the eastern suburbs of Lyon. Their move from this old, relatively central area of Lyon to a new housing project in a more outlying suburb was typical of the way in which many immigrant families were rehoused in similar developments during the 1960s and 1970s, producing dense concentrations of minority ethnic groups in socially disadvantaged high-rise neighborhoods that, in the 1980s and 1990s, became stigmatized as *les banlieues*. Until then, the word *banlieues* (lit. “suburbs”) had been a generic term for suburban areas as a whole. Today, in popular parlance it has come to

denote disadvantaged multiethnic urban spaces that are the French equivalents of “inner-city” areas in Britain and the United States.⁴

The events described in *Le Gone du Chaâba* take place well before these developments in the banlieues. But it should not be forgotten that the narrative was written during the 1980s, at precisely the time that immigration and the new urban geography of France were becoming major issues in public debate. The earliest drafts of *Le Gone du Chaâba* date from 1981. A complete version of the text was submitted in 1983 in a competition for young writers from immigrant backgrounds run by a small publisher in Lyon. The publisher went out of business before a winner could be chosen. Through a friend, Begag contacted the Seuil publishing company in Paris, which eventually published a much-revised version of the manuscript in 1986. By then, immigration was becoming a key talking point not only in French politics but also in the cultural life of the nation. An initially small but growing corpus of novels, films, and music by second-generation Maghrebis was beginning to attract attention. Hungry for new labels, the media started talking about the emergence of a “Beur culture,” with which Begag quickly became identified.⁵

Many of those to whom this label was applied, including Begag, had misgivings about it. The word *Beur* had originally been coined in the 1970s by second-generation North Africans in the banlieues of Paris. It is generally considered to be a piece of *verlan* (back slang), formed by inverting and partly truncating the syllables of the word *Arabe*, which was often tainted in

French usage by pejorative connotations inherited from the colonial period. By calling themselves *Beurs* instead of *Arabes*, second-generation North Africans hoped to escape the stigmatizing effects of the latter.⁶ The new word first came to the attention of the general public in 1983 in media coverage of a nationwide march organized that year by second-generation North Africans. Officially called the *Marche pour l'égalité et contre le racisme* [the March for equality and against racism], it was dubbed by the media the *Marche des Beurs* [the March of the Beurs]. Thereafter, *Beur* rapidly entered general circulation, becoming a recurrent feature in subsequent media coverage of the *banlieues*. The negative connotations attaching to media representations of the *banlieues* were one of several reasons why Begag and others tended to become reluctant to be labeled *Beurs*.⁷

Negative perceptions of France's North African minority were an important part of the context in which *Le Gone du Chaâba* was written and published. Although the narrator-protagonist never refers to events later than those of his childhood in the 1960s, he often speaks with a linguistic and perceptual subtlety that can only be that of the adult author. This older figure, who wrote the narrative in the first half of the 1980s, was intensely aware of the animosities whipped up by politicians and others against Maghrebis during this period. But, instead of denouncing misperceptions head-on by writing about the immediately contemporary situation, Begag sought instead to create a better understanding of France's North African minority by return-

ing to an earlier period and presenting it through the often naive eyes of his childhood alter ego. The young protagonist's respect for French authority figures and the frequent self-mockery with which events are narrated gently undermine the claims of those—numerous in the 1980s and still significant in number today—who present France's North African minority as a threat to national identity. Thus, while not directly addressing the tensions and hostilities present in the 1980s, the text serves in many ways as an antidote to them, inviting majority ethnic readers to enjoy the company of engaging and often humorous characters grappling with serious problems that are shown to be best tackled with good rather than ill will.

An important factor that had often poisoned Franco-Algerian relations lay in the colonial period and its legacy. When Begag was born in 1957, Algerian nationalists were in the midst of waging a guerrilla war against French rule, which had first been imposed on Algeria by military conquest beginning in 1830. Echoes of that period and of the bitter struggle through which French rule was eventually ended with Algerian independence in 1962 are dotted through the text. A subtle example lies in the statue of Sergeant Blandan in the Place Sathonay, at the foot of the hill on which the Croix-Rousse neighborhood is located. Although Begag does not mention this in *Le Gone du Chaâba*, the soldier commemorated by the statue, Sergeant Pierre-Hippolyte Blandan, was a native of Lyon who died in Algeria in 1842 at the hands of Arab troops resisting the French conquest. A more explicit reminder of the colonial pe-

riod is Begag's high school teacher, Monsieur Loubon, a *pied-noir* [white settler] from Algeria. When independence came in 1962, most *pieds-noirs* fled Algeria and resettled in France. Many were bitter about the end of French rule and the losses they had suffered on leaving Algeria. Smoldering resentment of this kind was one of the factors that would later help fuel support for Jean-Marie Le Pen's Front National. Monsieur Loubon is a notable exception to this pattern. Nostalgic for Algeria, he takes pleasure in linguistic and cultural exchanges with the young Begag, who, at the time of the events described in the narrative, has never set foot in Algeria. In this way, Begag learns from a *pied-noir* teacher many things about his so-called home country that his illiterate parents have never had the skills to teach him. At the same time, he gently asserts his own linguistic skills by commenting in an aside that, seemingly without knowing it, Monsieur Loubon speaks his brand of Arabic with a Berber accent, Berber being the language spoken in Algerian regions such as Kabylia. Through such exchanges Begag's relationship with Monsieur Loubon typifies his celebration of cultural diversity despite the political and other tensions that have often divided different ethnic groups.

This diversity is deeply embedded in the narrative fabric of *Le Gone du Châaba* , which is peppered with words in Algerian Arabic, Lyonnais slang, and other nonstandard forms of French, including the heavily accented French of Begag's immigrant parents.⁸ The text switches frequently—sometimes within the space of a single sentence—not only between different languages

(principally French and Arabic) but also between multiple linguistic registers (now formal, now colloquial, mixing baby talk with occasional adult crudities). This kind of linguistic richness is notoriously difficult to translate. In theory one might attempt to render Begag's mixture of French and Arabic slang by some comparable mixture of English and some other slang (e.g., the sociolect of Puerto Ricans in New York or of Pakistanis in London). In practice, such a linguistic transposition, mixing Spanish or Urdu with Bronx or cockney slang, would simply introduce a new set of problems and linguistic complexities to no very useful purpose, and the elimination of the original linguistic mix would drain the text of many of the specificities of Begag's narrative, which cannot be fully understood if they are detached from the particular circumstances that are those of North Africans in France.

In order to convey that specificity the translation retains all the Arabic colloquialisms and many of the French ones, together with instances of nonstandard pronunciation of French where these are featured in the original text. English translations are provided where such terms first appear and/or in glossaries at the end of the book. This too is in keeping with the spirit of the original text, which deliberately mixed nonstandard pieces of French pronunciation with liberal doses of Arabic and Lyonnais slang unfamiliar to the average French reader, for whom only occasional translations or explanations were provided in the main body of the narrative. In this way the reader was encouraged to widen his or her linguistic and cultural horizons by

inferring the meaning of unfamiliar terms from their contexts within the flow of the narrative, rather than having his or her attention deflected to external notes or other forms of editorial apparatus. It is noteworthy that Begag's original manuscript contained no translation of the Algerian Arabic colloquialism *chaâba* [a patch of spare land containing roughly improvised dwellings, used as a proper noun to designate the bidonville in which he was brought up]; neither did it furnish an explanation of the Lyonnais slang word *gone* [kid]. These two words, fused together in the title of the novel, symbolized its multicultural dynamic, and their meaning could be grasped by the reader only through immersion in the multiethnic context in which this fusion had occurred.⁹

Prior to publication a set of glossaries was added by the author at the suggestion of his publisher, Seuil, to assist readers who might not otherwise be able to figure out some of the linguistic particularities of the text. Positioned at the end of the book, these glossaries provide a useful and relatively discreet fallback, leaving the flow of the text free to draw the reader into the world of the narrator-protagonist uninterrupted by notes or other external distractions. A similar approach has been adopted in the English translation. Because, compared with Britain or the United States, France has generally had closer cultural relations with the Arab world, a significant number of Arabic terms have entered general usage in France and require little or no explanation there. The number of terms requiring explanation is inevitably larger for English-speaking readers. In rec-

ognition of this, translations of foreign locutions are provided more systematically on their first occurrence in the English-language text, and the glossaries have been expanded and adapted (in consultation with the author) to meet the needs of English-speaking readers. Fundamentally, however, in keeping with the original text, the translation endeavors to draw the reader into the world of Begag and his family as nearly as possible on their own terms, rather than transposing them into an Anglophone sociolect or overloading the text with intrusive editorial explanations.

In the twenty years since *Le Gone du Chaâba* was first published, Begag has built a distinguished career as a sociologist, writer, and now government minister. By 2006 he had published around thirty books and countless articles together with numerous media interviews. The key components of his intellectual and political trajectory since the publication of *Le Gone du Chaâba* are reflected in his latest book, *Ethnicity and Equality*.¹⁰ Written in the style of a political essay on the social and ethnic tensions that, in the fall of 2005, exploded in the banlieues in France's worst civil disturbances in almost forty years, the book also displays Begag's trademark propensity for good-humored storytelling in the face of personal and social adversity. For readers who wish to learn more about the thinking of the shantytown kid turned government minister, it offers a richly informative complement to *Le Gone du Chaâba*.