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I, Kayla Schaub, hereby submit this original work as part of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in French.

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Representations of Minority Women in *Banlieue* Cinema: *Divines* and *Bande de filles*

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by

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Abstract

In recent decades, women and women's issues are becoming increasingly visible in cinematic works. Female subjectivities are being showcased on the screen in addition to their diverse origins. The masculinized space of the *banlieue*, a recurrent backdrop in French cinema, has excluded women or reduced them to secondary or silenced characters. It is my goal to explore this space and its impact on the identities of second-generation women in two films by female directors. My thesis is an examination of how minority women are represented in French *banlieue* cinema, specifically in Houda Benyamina's *Divines* (2016) and Céline Sciamma's *Bande de filles* (2014). Dounia and Vic, respectively, challenge gender stereotypes, reject the heteronormative notion of the couple, and resort to petty crime in an attempt to escape the *banlieue*. I examine how the illicit acts committed by each intimate friend group are inextricably linked to the space the protagonists inhabit. Through their solidarity, the female characters support one another and exhibit agency, thusly, both films contribute to the discourse of minority women in the French *banlieue*.

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Introduction

Over the years, women have been represented in cinema through varying lenses. Their experiences are framed by directors and their artistic choices in terms of narrative, cinematography, and *mise-en-scène*. The struggles and successes of women may mirror reality, and more recently, women of diverse origins are being brought to the fore of French cinema. My thesis is an examination of how minority women are represented in French *banlieue* cinema, specifically in Houda Benyamina's *Divines* (2016) and Céline Sciamma's *Bande de filles* (2014). In both films, the female protagonists challenge typical gender stereotypes by assuming roles often played by males in films from the same genre. Dounia and Vic, respectively, are assertive young women who, due to their confinement to the outskirts of Paris, capitalize on crime and violence in pursuit of success and financial stability. Their friendships with other young women enable them to find emotional support in their female peers and reject the societal demands of marriage and the heteronormative couple. Both films that I analyze are directed by French women born in 1978 or 1980, whose protagonists are the daughters of immigrants. I will analyze how these films are similar in comparison and how they contribute to the discourse of minority women in metropolitan France.

Firstly, my thesis explores the female friendships forged in both films. The young women in each film rely on one another to survive and exhibit female solidarity, even in perilous situations. Secondly, I examine the contested space of the *banlieue*, that has become an increasingly popular setting for films since the 1995 release of *La Haine,* directed by Mathieu Kassovitz. In highlighting this space, filmmakers bring the social, political, and cultural implications to the fore. After World War II, France began to recruit labor from Northern Africa in order to satisfy the demands of the growing workforce and low-cost housing was constructed in order to accommodate the large number of immigrants that would now be living and working

in the Hexagon. *Cités* and HLMs (*habitation à loyer modéré*), or moderated rent housing became the imposing physical structures of the *banlieue.* These high-rise apartment blocks found at the periphery of large cities allowed cultures, languages, and customs to intersect due to the varying backgrounds of inhabitants. It is these cultural differences from the French majority that would stigmatize the people living in the *banlieue* and create the binary between the urban periphery and the city center.

As the first wave of immigrants struggled to find their place in metropolitan France, their children also had to navigate two cultures and find their own place in society as well. While their parents may have encountered the same struggles, the second generation faced additional obstacles growing up in a culture different from that of their parents and assimilating into the French educational system. They find themselves caught between the customs of their French majority peers and those of their parents, often unable to meet the expectations of both parties and, therefore, must make difficult choices. The youth facing these conflicting demands sometimes lash out, verbally, physically, and even by committing crime. I intend to expand on recent studies of women in French cinema, with a particular interest in women of Maghrebi and African descent. In Leslie Kealhofer-Kemp's book *Muslim Women in French Cinema: Voices of Maghrebi Migrants in France*, her goal is to analyze how cinema portrays women and their voices, notably first-generation Maghrebi women and how such films "have the potential to impact viewers' imaginaries, to shape perceptions and understandings of the first-generation women from the Maghreb in France and their experiences, and to challenge dominant stereotypes and paradigms about women of this generation, as well as the broader Maghrebi population in France" (5-6). I intend to study the portrayal of both Maghrebi and black women in *Divines* and *Bandes de filles*, therefore, adding two films that are more recent to this discourse and, thusly, expanding research on representations of minority women.

Previous research on such subjectivities in French cinema focuses on the first generation, whereas the protagonists of the films in my study are seemingly closer in age to second generation women, although their origins are never explicitly stated in either film. Rather, both films confront the issues faced by the daughters of supposed immigrants as Dounia's mother speaks Arabic and Vic's older brother exhibits a harsh patriarchal attitude in demanding that Vic not bring shame to their family. Kealhofer-Kemp indicates of the films covered in her publication:

> They form part of an extensive corpus of films that reflect significant depth and scope in the cinematic representations of first-generation women and also point to a broader trend: the desire both to create and preserve through cinema, and using varied techniques, the voices of women of this generation – women with ties to both colonial and post-colonial France and who have been part of a very particular, and in many ways tumultuous, period of France's history. (192)

It is my goal, then, to contribute to this area of research by examining representations of second-generation women. The daughters of the first generation of women have had access to French education and, therefore, have been exposed to opportunities not available to their mothers. This younger generation is also part of France's history, and current multiethnic population, and it is important to acknowledge their portrayal in the cinematic works I discuss.

The protagonists in both films inhabit the *banlieue,* a space generally considered to be dangerous and satiated with crime. These stereotypes about the *banlieue* and its inhabitants are perpetuated in the media that continually disregards the hardworking families that live there. The *banlieue* has become the target of racial prejudice and is, therefore, a source of political controversy. Nicolas Sarkozy and his infamous discourse on the subject of the *banlieue* in 2005 exemplify the racial prejudice that has targeted the outlying suburbs of Paris. Referring to its

residents as “racailles” or “scum”, as former Minister of the Interior, Sarkozy’s appearance in the media was instrumental in transforming the social and economic divide into a deeply racist issue and question of identity. As stereotypes were constructed and became more prevalent, law enforcement became more heavily concentrated in these areas, thus transforming residents into targets and creating a further divide between social groups. In his book *Space and Being in Contemporary French Cinema*, James Williams asserts that “French cinema has consistently codified place in terms of origin and class as an index of identity” (22) and as both *Divines* and *Bande de filles* are set in the *banlieue* post-2005, perhaps they provide a glimpse into this destructive binary between city center and *banlieue* and their implications for identity. These fictional narratives may be interpreted as mirroring reality, but simultaneously normalize and perpetuate the preconceived notions of the *banlieue.*

Female solidarity

The narrative structure of all three films follows either a duo or small group of female protagonists that bond through their shared experience and social status. Rather than leaning on female family members, they turn to their peers for support and friendship, as their lives at home are not always stable and their mothers do not seem constitute the strong role models that the girls are in search of. In her book *Cinema and the Second Sex: Women’s Filmmaking in France in the 1980s and 1990s,* Carrie Tarr asserts that “the mother-daughter bond can be seen in particular as the source of women’s ability to enjoy ongoing, meaningful relationships with other women, including women of different generations” (112). As is the case for both *Divines* and *Bande de filles,* Dounia and Vic’s mothers are relatively absent throughout each film. Dounia’s mother embarrasses her daughter by her excessive drinking and Vic’s mother is a *femme de ménage* and only appears once throughout the entire film in their apartment. However, both

protagonists enjoy and benefit from strong relationships with their female peers. Through specific examples from each film, I will examine how these relationships are brought to the fore.

To begin, *Divines'* protagonists Dounia, portrayed by Oulaya Amamra, and Déborah Lukumuena as Maimouna, arguably exhibit the strongest friendship of the two films, that proves to be unbreakable even in the most dangerous circumstances. Both girls dream of a life of glamour and financial security, two things that are inaccessible to them in their geosocial location of the *banlieue.* After witnessing a drug deal, Dounia decides to approach Rebecca, a peer of the same age who has a flashy car and shows videos to classmates of her extravagant vacation to Thailand. Rebecca affords these luxuries by selling drugs and Dounia and Maimouna embark on a journey that ends in a dark, fatal casualty. In their illicit adventures, the duo remains loyal to other another even when they are chased by the cops and their lives threatened.

From the opening scene, Dounia and Maimouna's friendship is highlighted in Benyamina's full-length feature film that was shown at the 2016 Cannes Film Festival. Separated by a physical barrier, Dounia looks in on Maimouna who is at the mosque, as her father leads a religious gathering. This scene, immediately placing Dounia "outside", also gives the viewer some background knowledge on Maimouna's parents and her stricter upbringing. Smoke floats across the screen, religious music in Arabic is heard, and small openings give way to a deep focus shot. Once the camera focuses, we assume the position of Dounia, who is gazing in on the ceremony led by Maimouna's father. The camera switches angles to a close-up of protagonist Dounia, who is looking through the holes of the barricade, problematizing her relationship with religion. The people attending the ceremony are blurry and out of clear view due to this structural barrier. Dounia tries to get Maimouna's attention as the camera switches back and forth between close-ups of Dounia and medium shots of Maimouna. Ending the first half of the sequence on a close-up of Dounia looking away, we hear the imam, Maimouna's father, say in

Arabic, “Guide us on the path of moral righteousness” (“Guide-nous sur la voie de la rectitude”) (*Divines*).

The camera cuts to a medium shot of Dounia against a nondescript concrete wall and then to a flashy red convertible arriving. Zooming in on the driver, Rebecca, this sequence gives the impression that both the people in the vehicle and Dounia are exchanging glances. A young man walks up to the car, as Dounia watches through the fence, and a close-up of Rebecca and the young man’s hands show an exchange of money, as the camera pans to capture the departure of the car, and our view of the car is obstructed. The young man cries insults at Dounia, which prompts her to leave, but the extradiegetic music insinuates that a war is to come. Benyamina expressed in an interview, “When I was younger – I mean, I still do – I felt like a bit of an outsider, which fed into feelings of injustice, of rebellion, of wanting to assert myself. The need for recognition and acceptance is where I recognise myself in Dounia’s character” (Hans). Binaries become present as the opening sequence juxtaposes potentially grounding aspects of Dounia’s life, her best friend and religion, with the contrasting forces, Rebecca and drugs, that will soon uproot the protagonist’s already unstable life.

The following scenes solidify the relationship between Dounia and Maimouna, where the director makes use of social media application, Snapchat, to show video footage presumably taken by the girls themselves. We see the background of the high-rise buildings, Dounia pretending to shoot a gun, dancing, attempting to ride a bike, showing their shared imaginative moments and crazy laughter. These short video clips later serve as morsels of communication that help the girls to stay in contact with one another even when they can’t physically be together. In stark contrast, the first scenes of Dounia’s mother show her being kicked out by her boss at the bar where she works, so drunk she must rely on Dounia to physically hold her up in order to walk home. It is clear throughout the film that our bold protagonist relies on Maimouna

for emotional support, from selling stolen candy with her to confiding in her when she recounts a recurring dream where she is falling and Maimouna affirms, “I will always be there to catch you” (“Je suis toujours là pour te rattraper”) (*Divines*).

As the girls begin to work for Rebecca, a fearless young black woman in their *quartier*, they stick together, Dounia completing the exchange of drugs and money with clients in a dimly lit corridor, as Maimouna surveys the street and potential threats of danger. We rarely witness the two girls apart and one striking contrast is the difference in parental circumstances that each girl has. While Maimouna’s father is an imam at the local mosque, Dounia’s mother has just lost her job at a bar for being intoxicated at work. It is clear that the two girls experience different levels of parental control in their lives. One noteworthy instance of female solidarity occurs when the two girls make a trip to the city center, in this case, Paris, in order to retrieve money “owed” to Rebecca from a former “associate”, Reda. This unsuccessful escape from the *banlieue*, that I will discuss in a later section, ends when Samir is not at the meeting spot to pick the two girls up. Upon her arrival home, to what Dounia refers to as a “camp de Roma”, we find Samir’s car and, shortly after, Samir having sexual intercourse with Dounia’s mother. This discovery sends Dounia on a violent rampage, determined to get revenge on Samir.

Dounia and Maimouna meet up and moments after, Dounia shatters the window of a car, pours in gasoline, and throws in a lighter. The car goes up in flames and the two girls watch the car that belongs to Samir’s mother burn down while Maimouna looks nervously right and left and at Dounia in disbelief. The duo begins to take selfies as an establishing shot shows the police arriving, blue lights flashing and sirens going off. The camera cuts to a medium-long shot of Dounia and Maimouna, sitting on the scooter and filming the fire. Dounia passes off the iPhone to Maimouna saying “Go ahead, film me” (“Vas-y, filme-moi”) (*Divines*). A medium close-up of Maimouna captures her fear as she asks Dounia what she is doing. The following handheld shot

of Dounia tracks her advancing towards the police, demanding them to leave the car alone. Cutting back to Maimouna, a medium close-up shows her horrified facial expression, but is a key example that she never abandons her best friend, even when she questions her actions and fears their consequences. The camera begins switching back and forth between the medium close-up of Maimouna, medium or long shots of Dounia, and medium shots of other young people arriving to see what has happened. As a police chase ensues, the camera begins alternating between point-of-view handheld shots, presumably with the smartphone Dounia is holding, tracking shots, and a thin shot comparable to how such footage would be captured on Snapchat. Even as they are pursued by the police, causing Maimouna a noticeable amount of anxiety, she does not desert Dounia until her parents forbid the two to speak as they leave the jail the next morning.

Although Maimouna's parents impose stricter rules on their daughter after the incident with the police, the girls continue to be each other's strongest source of moral support and comfort. Their friendship is again put to the test when Dounia seeks out Djigui, her romantic interest developed throughout the film, at the train station in order to escape the *banlieue* and pursue a relationship with him. A medium close-up of Dounia's blood-crusted, bruised face shows her at the train station, crying on the phone to Maimouna while telling her "I succeeded" ("J'ai réussi") that she repeats twice before announcing her departure from Paris (*Divines*). As she hangs up the camera cuts to an establishing shot of the train station, and then to a high-angle shot of Dounia searching for Djigui. After she spots him through the crowd, almost simultaneously, she receives a notification, and the camera cuts to a close up of the phone where we see she has a received a message from Rebecca who is forcefully questioning Maimouna as to the whereabouts of Dounia and, undoubtedly, her money. Dounia painfully watches Djigui walk away before rushing to leave the train station.

As Maimouna is being held hostage, Dounia must make a choice between her escape with Djigui, symbolic of the heteronormative couple, and her best friend, choosing the latter and, therefore, actively displaying female solidarity and undivided support for her female advocate. As the tension grows, a verbal altercation ensues, Rebecca pours gasoline on Dounia and eventually sets the trap house on fire. The three are locked in and literally unable to escape, a potential suggestion for the social status or confinement to the space of the *banlieue* addressed later in this paper. Up until the fatal end, as Dounia shouts "I'm staying with you" ("je reste avec toi"), this best friend duo is supportive of one another's dreams, goals, and perilous adventures, even when their well-being is at stake (*Divines*).

In comparison, strong female friendships drive the narrative of *Bande de filles*, where four young girls, Marieme, or Vic, Lady, Adiatou, and Fily, stick together in adverse situations. The gang is down a member, due to the former member becoming pregnant as we find out over the course of the film, and approaches Marieme, portrayed by Karidja Touré, to join them. Together, they take other girls' lunch money to reserve a hotel for a night of drinking and dancing and defend their unit through physical altercations with other competing squads. Although Lady, Adiatou, and Fily do not approve of Marieme's venture to sell drugs, it is this influential friendship that has opened her to the potentially beneficial outcomes of illicit activity.

From the beginning of Sciamma's 2014 feature-length film, we see that female solidarity is exemplified through the relationship that Marieme has with her two younger sisters, as her mother is absent from all but one scene in their apartment, and the two eldest sisters are subject to violent physical punishments from their older brother. Although the family relationships and shared space would be an interesting topic to explore in the film, my thesis is most concerned with the friendships and how they affect protagonist Marieme throughout the film. After she has been told she will not advance to the next year in high school, "*seconde*" or the equivalent of

sophomore status in the United States, Marieme angrily exits the school building where she is called upon by three girls dressed similarly in denim jackets and black clothing who introduce themselves and invite her to go to Paris with them. Marieme refuses until she sees a group of young guys, including her crush, Ismaël, going to talk to them. A tracking shot follows Marieme as she joins the group and this quintessential moment marks the beginning of a friendship that will change the narrative path of the protagonist.

From this point on in the film, the girls support each other in varying situations. In the following scene on the train, the space between the girls, as Marieme sits on one side, and the three girls sit on the right side of the train, physically separates them and distances them as Fily and Adiatou seem to whisper about Marieme. Although they have only known each other for a short period of time, as they are shopping at Les Halles, the white store clerk begins to follow Marieme around, potentially due to the fact that she is black or has a bookbag, and the members of her crew begin to defend her. "Why're you following her? You do that with everyone? Think we're here to lift this crap?" ("Pourquoi tu la suis? Hein? …Tu fais ça à tout le monde? Tu crois quoi? Qu'on va te les chourer tes merdes là?") Lady, the presumed leader of the group, asks the store clerk before Fily and Adiatou push her out of the way (*Bande de filles*). This small conflict that the girls laugh about as they are leaving shows the beginning of a bond that grows stronger over the course of the film as the girls relate to each other due to their age, race, and position in society.

Marieme's integration to this tight-knit group of friends begins on the shopping excursion and with a gift of a smartphone and continues with her changed wardrobe. She begins wearing denim shirts and a leather jacket and her braids are replaced by smooth and straightened hair and she now resembles more closely to the group, with the exception of Fily who often has her hair in a ponytail. A tracking shot accompanied by upbeat music announces her transformation before

the camera cuts to a medium close-up where she bullies another girl for her lunch money that the girls eventually use to reserve a hotel room and buy booze. This scene solidifies the girls' solidarity as they engage in a pillow fight, singing, taking selfies, watching TV, and sharing snacks and alcohol. She enters the bathroom to answer a phone call from her controlling brother where Lady encourages her, "don't answer! Turn it off! Enjoy this moment" ("Tu réponds pas, je t'ai dit! Éteins-le ! Profite.") and Marieme sits down next to the bathtub (*Bande de filles*). The camera cuts to a close-up of Marieme's hands as she opens a small envelope containing a necklace that says "Vic" that Lady explains "Vic like victory" ("Vic comme Victoire") and she helps Marieme fasten the necklace, that is very similar to her own, signaling Marieme's acceptance into the group by adorning her with this physical and symbolic object (*Bande de filles*). This intimate moment between the two friends reinforces their bond and solidarity with one another. From this point on, I will refer to Marieme as Vic as she is known under this alias for the rest of the film.

Shortly after, the girls go to a fight that has previously been arranged between Lady and a girl from another crew. Generally, young males challenge one another and resort to physical altercations. The crowd encircles the two girls who are fighting as Vic, Fily, and Adiatou cheer on Lady, once again showing support for a unit of their group. As the girl from the opposing crew beats Lady up and eventually removes her shirt, Vic comes to physically pick her up and Lady refuses her support. An uncertain amount of time passes before the girls meet up to play mini-golf, where Lady is still noticeably upset. Through laughter and a silly dispute about the rules of the game, the girls comfort each other, and an establishing shot communicates their joy and one of the rare moments where the backdrop is not the *cité*, to which they return in the very next scene.

In order to uphold Lady's reputation, Vic organizes another fight with the same girl

without consulting her. An over-the-shoulder shot positions Vic across from her competitor and a handheld shot captures the physical brawl between the two girls as Vic ends up victorious, brandishing the knife she previously took from her home to cut the bra off the girl who humiliated her friend. The camera cuts to a scene of Vic, Adiatou, and Fily as they celebrate by splashing one another with water and crying aloud in joy. A long shot brings Lady into focus. The girls reunite and Vic confesses "I did it for you" ("Je l'ai fait pour toi") to which Lady responds "You know who you did it for. You did it for you ("Tu sais très bien pour qui tu l'as fait. Tu l'as fait pour toi") and a medium close-up of their hug is used to show this resolution (*Bande de filles*). The four girls continuously support each other physically and emotionally, even in tense moments.

Lastly, in the final scene where the four girls are all together, Vic announces her decision to leave home and sell drugs for Abou, who she meets in a café and recruits her to sell for him in exchange for his protection against her violent brother who has abused her for her choice to have sexual intercourse with Ismaël. She has already run away from home when she meets up with her best friends in a hotel room and a series of shot-reverse-shots of Lady, Adiatou, and Fily and Vic frame them talking about her decision to work for Abou. She tells them they're going nowhere as the camera pans from right to left featuring a close-up of each girl. After she asks them if she should choose between her job as a cleaning lady or her reputation as a "whore", in reference to sleeping with Ismaël, she begins to cry, and the girls join in for a group hug. The girls tell stories, laugh, and share memories to comfort Vic and even fall asleep together in the bed. Once again, Vic finds solace through her peers and it is this female solidarity that she leans on until she moves to a new part of town and starts working for Abou.

Space

These forged bonds between the female protagonists in *Divines* and *Bande de filles* are situated in the *banlieue*, or urban periphery, of Paris. The term *"banlieue"* which is a direct translation of "suburb", has negative connotations, often signaling ideas of criminalized spaces inhabited by immigrants and are spaces considered to be unsafe or "outside" of societal norms. Often, the media's representation of these spaces perpetuates and reinforces negative stereotypes. Directors Benyamina and Sciamma chose to frame the space of the *banlieue* in a similar fashion with the high-rising apartment blocks as a backdrop in each narrative. Of these spaces, James Williams asserts, "the at once geographically and socially marginalised inhabitants of the *banlieue*…have been forced to cope with poor housing conditions, a faltering education system, reduced chances of vocational training, and high rates of unemployment" (25). Such conditions shape the realities of individual subjectivities and those of the protagonists of each narrative. Therefore, the choices made by the protagonists are potentially influenced by their surroundings and they each navigate the *banlieue* in a precise, however, raw manner.

The cinematic space of both *Divines* and *Bande de filles* is an important aspect of each film as the portrayal of the *banlieue* reflects a reality in metropolitan France that is under constant scrutiny in the media. Williams explains that "the existential and aesthetic issues related to cinematic space that we have been tracing become extremely pertinent and pressing within the particular context of French cinema which has always been preoccupied with issues of spatial identity and difference" (22). Williams goes on to describe Paris as the culturally rich city center, an escape both protagonists take, while referring to the *banlieue* as "'*zones'* or no-man's-land on the fringes of the city" (23). It is these marginalized spaces represented in both films that must be examined in order to understand how Dounia and Vic construct their respective identities. Carrie Tarr elucidates, "Representations of the *banlieue*…are thus not to be understood in terms of

transparent representations of reality, but as discursive constructs and sites of struggle for meaning" (*Reframing difference,* 17-18), thus affording each protagonist the opportunity to situate herself and define her own space in French society.

Previous films, centering primarily on first-generation women and their experiences in France, often restricted them to the private interior space of the home, thus, excluding them from the social sphere where their children would be sent to school to "integrate", surpassing their parents' linguistic abilities in their new country. Dounia and Vic are framed as being in constant motion between places and rarely featured at home with their respective family units. Moving between the *cités*, public spaces such as school, fast food joints, malls, or even lavish Parisian apartments, each set of girls exhibits unrestricted mobility. This fluid movement could imply shifting boundaries, but also reduces the meaning of these spaces. The movement of the characters depicts their continual search for a space to identify with.

As the protagonists discover their friendships, they also join each other's trajectories, whether real or imagined. While in reality they may escape to the city center, exploring glamorous parties or nightclubs, these trips are often failed attempts at "escape" as they must return home and measure their relative success to Parisian luxury. It is often their imaginative escapes that drive the protagonists to seek projects that will afford them the lifestyle they envision, at any cost. Their imaginations take them as far as Thailand and serve as a narrative relief in some cases, allowing the girls to liberate themselves from the *banlieue* and its resulting hardships.

In *Divines*, one of the most spatially interesting scenes is when Dounia is learning how to drive the scooter that Rebecca has given to her. On an unoccupied slab of concrete, she tries to navigate the new vehicle and the space behind her is filled by high-rise apartments, which crowd the screen from top to bottom. This scene gives the viewer a claustrophobic feeling, they are

surrounded by such apartments and unable to escape, as Carrie Tarr describes, "the *mise-en-scène* of space in *banlieue* films emphasises the ways in which its protagonists are blocked and fenced in by their surroundings: typically, shots of anonymous high-rise flats and graffiti-covered walls block their horizon and imprison them in spaces of socio-economic deprivation, alienation and isolation" (*Reframing difference,* 20). When Dounia experiences a small amount of success, being able to start the scooter after it falls on the ground, the camera pans out in order to provide us with a small amount of access to the sky. This scene, in addition to shots of broken windows and dark corridors, signal the poverty and desperation that is felt by the characters in the film.

While Dounia and Maimouna never seem to stay in one place, the film also portrays desired and imaginative escapes that take our protagonists beyond city limits. One example is the home footage shown by Rebecca to her male peers, with Dounia in the audience. We become privy to shots of Rebecca swimming in glimmering, translucent blue water, parasailing at sunset, an inebriated bubble bath, ending with footage from what appears to be a strip club. The camera cuts back to reality, with a shot of young men surrounding an iPad, who are themselves surrounded by the nondescript cement. Nonchalantly, Rebecca indicates that the footage was from her vacation to Thailand, further exoticizing her trip and inspiring envy in her peers. This pivotal scene serves as the final push for Maimouna and Dounia to seek out Rebecca in search of clandestine financial opportunities.

This captivating, yet brief, moment of escape inspires not only the motivation of the two protagonists that drives the narrative, but also an imagined escape embarked upon by Dounia and Maimouna, while waiting to make their first sale. Surrounded by concrete and run-down apartments, Dounia encourages Maimouna to stay positive by imagining they are in Phuket, referencing the earlier scene of Rebecca's trip there. In this two-shot, Dounia reveals a rare smile

and closes her eyes to begin the imaginative sequence that follows. After describing the surroundings, “blue skies, turquoise waters, sun, Ferrari, my Ferrari” (“ciel bleu, eau turquoise, soleil, Ferrari, ma Ferrari”) she walks over to her imagined car, coming to the foreground of the shot as she opens the door for Maimouna and invites her to join (*Divines*). The medium close-up of the two best friends shows them putting on Ray Bans and Dounia even begins to feign motor sounds as she revs up the car.

The car takes off in an ephemeral tracking shot that permits the girls to glide seamlessly over the concrete and through the drab, high-rising apartment buildings that are in the background. The camera even imitates the movement of a car as the girls laugh and shout out in happiness. Extradiegetic sounds of the car speeding up, turning a sharp corner, and even horns of other vehicles accompany the girls’ delighted exclamations as they continue to feel the wind in their hair and even pick up an imaginary, and attractive, blond guy along the way. The scene adds an additional extradiegetic sound when the girls turn on the radio and the movement of their imagined car continues to float effortlessly, even when Dounia takes her hands off the wheels to proclaim “Money, money, money!” with Maimouna as they pretend to distribute money and even toast with champagne. This scene gives us a glimpse into the motivations of Dounia and Maimouna who are genuinely looking to escape the *banlieue*, the backdrop of this ephemeral scene and their shared reality.

This scene is interesting for many reasons. Firstly, our protagonists are situated in the *banlieue* with the towering apartments and drab concrete serving as explicit reminders of the literal space they inhabit. Secondly, through the use of camera movement and extra-diegetic sound, a new space is created with the help of the imagination of both protagonists. Williams hypothesizes:

To privilege what is unknowingly evolving as potential between the subject and the other,

> or between the subject and the world, represents a prioritising of being over knowledge, or a displacement from the search for psychic truth (about the self) to an experience – and experiment – in relational transformation. Bersani and Dutoit underline brilliantly that the cinematic is never purely visual but also simultaneously invisible, aural and haptic, concrete and abstract, and thus can take us to entirely new spaces (affective, aesthetic, philosophical, intellectual) for reassessing and challenging the core determinants of human existence. (20)

The girls' imaginations create an abstract space within the space of the *banlieue.* While the space is not visual, it transcends reality and transports Dounia, Maimouna, and the spectator. They exist and experience this moment as does the viewer with Benyamina's creative *mise-en-scène.*

In contrast, one example of a real escape is portrayed when Dounia and Maimouna go to Paris. In this scene, with the Arc de Triomphe serving as a background and evidence to their change of place, Samir drives them to the city center, with the top down, as the girls sing and seem to enjoy their trip. In contrast with the slums, broken windows, and asphalt presented of the previous scenes, the girls enter a lavish nightclub where there is fire, fog, and champagne flowing. Prior to this scene, we learn that Dounia is to seduce Reda, a former associate of Rebecca's, in order to get back the money he supposedly owes her. Our daring female protagonist who has previously proclaimed, "I dare to be rich" ("j'ose être blindée"), uses the male gaze for her own gains and the *mise-en-scène* highlights the contrasting aspects of the scene (*Divines*). The lighting that serves to spotlight Dounia dancing on the platform and glittering white of her dress provide a stark contrast to her daily drab tracksuits and gray concrete walls. With her main source of support, Maimouna, cheering her on the entire time, the city lights allow the girls a momentary liberation from the *banlieue*, even if their adventure ends in disaster.

As the girls leave the nightclub, in search of Samir, they do not find him and are forced to

take a taxi home. As previously discussed, we find Samir and Dounia's mother having intercourse, and the girls' escape is rendered unsuccessful in two ways. To begin, they do not retrieve Rebecca's money from Reda, as they do not make verbal contact with him. Secondly, although they find a way home, Samir has invaded Dounia's intimate family space, further inspiring Dounia's contempt for her own mother.

Similarly, the *banlieue* also serves as the backdrop in *Bande de filles*. The high-rising flats are a constant reminder of the social status and problems encountered by Vic and her friends and family members. In contrast with *Divines,* Vic is seen more often in her tiny apartment inhabited by her two younger sisters, older brother, and her mother who is rarely there. The girls are often featured in public spaces including concrete courtyards and train or metro stations, but also in the privacy of their hotel room, where they share two of the most intimate moments in their friendship of the entire film. In reality, they escape to the city center to go shopping at Les Halles or La Défense, but they also use their imaginations as a means of escape the first time they spend the night at the hotel. While the opening scene is a group of girls playing American football together, the next scene immediately follows the girls home to the very marginalized space they inhabit.

While the girls sometimes physically escape the *banlieue*, the stereotypes still follow them. For instance, the shopkeeper who starts following Vic in the store. One of the most interesting escapes is when the girls dress up in their hotel room but stay there to dance. Comparable to the imagined escape to Phuket by Dounia and Maimouna, this scene is ephemeral and resonates differently with the viewer than the rest of the film. They put on makeup, give compliments to one another, and check themselves out in the mirror and the camera cuts from Lady exhaling what appears to be hookah, to a moody dark medium-close up of Lady, with a blue filter that transforms their hotel room into their own private nightclub. Rihanna's

"Diamonds in the Sky" begins to play as the girls seem to mouth the lyrics and the camera zooms out and pans right to Adiatou who joins Lady, singing and dancing. Next, Fily comes onto the screen to join the duo, and soon after the camera cuts to a medium shot of Vic who is dreamily watching her friends dance. Zooming in slowly, the camera focuses on Vic who eventually gets up to join the party. For the last chorus repetition, we finally hear the girls' voices as they sing along, whereas before, the only sound was that of the song. The scene ends with a shot of the friends with their arms around one another, before they all pass out on the bed. Although the girls do not imagine themselves in another city or part of the world, like Dounia and Maimouna, Sciamma's choice of *mise-en-scène* allows the protagonists to escape from the banal world of racial stereotypes, controlling male figures, and their confinement to the *banlieue.*

Spatially, even when the girls do not leave the *banlieue,* there are reminders of Paris, which serve to further separate the two spaces physically and symbolically. In order to cheer up Lady after she gets beat up, the girls go to play mini-golf. A close-up of Adiatou shows her concentrating and looking down at the ground. She tells the girls to be quiet and our view expands to an establishing shot where the girls are surrounded by trees and Adiatou has hit her golf ball through a mini model of the Eiffel Tower that she begins to dance around to celebrate her success after two tries. This prop is interesting because they are so close to Paris, yet, it is still represented as an important monument, due to its size in comparison with the monument in the next portion of the course. Since mini golf courses often have kitschy décor, this choice almost exoticizes Paris, making it seem even more distant form the *banlieue*. Although it is assumed that they are close to home, they are able to escape their daily hardships and the rather serious or harsh environment of the periphery.

Later in the film, once Vic begins to work for Abou and no longer spends time with Lady, Adiatou, and Fily, her spaces are transformed, as she runs away from home to escape her

older brother, has her own apartment, and must travel to lavish parties to supply drugs to Abou's clients. Upon her return one evening, we find Ismaël in her bedroom waiting and he expresses his disapproval of her apartment and the camera pans up and to the right, potentially suggesting Vic's power as she replies "Who cares? It's mine" ("On s'en fout, c'est à moi") and in this way, the protagonist finally claims a space that belongs to her, where she is not under the harsh rule of her brother or the harsh expectations and reality of society (*Bande de filles*). In this new place, she is able to meet up with Ismaël, play video games when she wants, and is not subjected to beatings or other violent conflicts.

After a conflict with Abou at a party, when Vic refuses his advances, she has nowhere left to turn, as she does not want to marry Ismaël as a way to resolve her current situation. The final scene shows her returning to her family's apartment, typing in the code, and we hear her anxious breathing as she awaits a response. Her younger sister asks repeatedly "Who is it?" ("C'est qui?") and with no response, eventually allows Vic access to enter the building (*Bande de filles*). A medium close-up shows us Vic's hand opening the door, and after a long medium-close up of her face, suggestive of her reflection on her decision to enter the building, we se another shot of her hand as she lets the handle go before turning away as the camera zooms in and provides a blurry view of the horizon, where other high-rise apartments were seen in the distance. Vic steps into the frame and her side profile, juxtaposed with upbeat music, and the fact that she has stopped crying, signal her pensive determination to find a new beginning. Her decision not to enter her family's apartment could be interpreted as a literal rejection of her old life and the harsh patriarchal norms imposed upon her by her brother.

Crime as a means of survival

As a result of their geographical location in the *banlieue,* the girls adapt and seek

unconventional means of survival. Normally, Occidental ideas of success are dependent upon education that leads to a prosperous career and, for women in particular, it is often assumed that success also relies on marriage and motherhood. Women's roles in the home and in the family have greatly changed as women enter the workforce or choose not to have children. While the girls in all three films are not confronted with the possibility of motherhood, they reject the heteronormative notions of the couple and resort to illicit acts and petty crime to attain success, rather than entrusting education or romantic relationships with their future.

Although many previous films explore women's roles in society, they foreground prostitution as the most common means of survival for the female protagonist. Such films portray an unconventional means for making money, yet still suggest a dependence on men as it is their money that funds these illicit acts. In her essay "A Space of Their Own? Women in Maghrebi-French Filmmaking", Patricia Geesey asserts that women's issues in previous *banlieue* films "[border] on the sensationalistic, such as domestic violence, forced marriages, the veil, and limited access to space outside the home" and refers to Tarr's *Reframing Difference* which alludes to the diminishing number of films in the genre that center on gangs and police violence, allowing women's issues to become more visible (*Screening Integration,* 163). However, in *Divines* and *Bande de filles,* Dounia and Maimouna and Vic, respectively, sell drugs which procures them money and other covetable items such as iPhones, scooters, clothes, and even a place to live in Vic's case and, therefore, revert to a criminalized and violent *banlieue*. While these films do not confront issues such as the veil, they give visibility to the female protagonists and their concerns of survival.

It is common in *banlieue* film to witness male protagonists in the same situations. The depictions of these "tough" guys suggest that drugs, theft, and physical violence are all a part of the *banlieue.* In her book on *beur* and *banlieue* cinema, Carrie Tarr explains, "the visual texture

of the *banlieue* film gives preference to spaces represented as male domains. The women who inhabit them are generally silenced, relegated to minor or secondary roles, and/or constructed through stereotypes" (*Reframing difference*, 111). The female protagonists examined here challenge preconceived notions of femininity by taking on the roles of males and showing they are just as resolute as their male counterparts. While they still interact with young men in each film, the narrative showcases each girl's agency and choice to reject the heteronormative expectations to "settle down". Looking through the lens of Kealhofer-Kemp's study, I will examine the agency exhibited by the female protagonists in each film, where Kealhofer-Kemp articulates:

> The notion of agency is a complex one that does not lend itself to simple definition, but at the core is the idea of self-willed action or doing something of one's own free will…An oft-debated question is the extent to which one can actually demonstrate agency, that is, act independently of outside forces, such as social expectations…The words spoken by the women…are of course significant…but they are not the only means by which the women's perspectives are communicated. (13)

In my analysis of *Divines* and *Bande de filles,* I consider the decisive actions of the protagonists and analyze how these choices are represented cinematically. I look not only at the texts, or dialogues in the film, but also each character's actions and how these actions challenge gender stereotypes and exhibit the protagonists' own agency.

In the case of *Divines,* Dounia serves as the protagonist who is most defiant to gender stereotypes. From the opening "independent" footage, we come to know Dounia as unconcerned with romantic pursuits when Maimouna asks "Are you going to get married?" ("tu vas te marier ?") to which Dounia responds "Are you nuts?" ("t'es malade ou quoi ?") (*Divines*). Benyamina also conveys Dounia as a tomboy through her wardrobe that downplays her femininity with over-

sized hoodies and sweatpants. We see another short clip where she confidently, somewhat hauntingly, proclaims "Look at my hands that are made for gold" ("Regarde mes mains qui sont faites pour l'or") that is juxtaposed with Arabic music and denotes her self-worth and unwavering will to do whatever it will take to seek financial gains (*Divines*). This desire is solidified in a later scene when her teacher asks what she will do with her life and her response, and the resulting chorus repeated by her classmates, is "money, money, money" (*Divines*).

After a fiery verbal exchange with her teacher, Dounia abruptly leaves school and doesn't return throughout the film. Thusly, the absence of this space suggests its limited importance for Dounia. As our protagonist has witnessed a brief escape to Thailand, via Rebecca's iPad, they decide to take advantage of this potential resource and show up at Rebecca's money green door. In this scene, the roles are reversed as Rebecca instructs the guy in her place, wearing only briefs, to wait for her as she talks to Dounia and Maimouna (*Divines*). Tarr explains that "representations of the adolescent girl in mainstream French cinema have often been associated with the display of the nubile female body as the object of the spectator's gaze" (112), while here, it is the male body that becomes objectified. The shot-reverse-shot shows the girls asking Rebecca if they can work for her and her refusal. Dounia stops the door from being slammed in their faces and reveals to Rebecca that her guy, Samir, leaves her product carelessly where anyone could find it to which Rebecca responds with a couple hearty smacks on the face and says, "You've got clitoris, I like that" ("T'as du clitoris, j'aime bien") (*Divines*). It is common for people to refer to being brave as "having balls", whereas, Rebecca's comment challenges gender stereotypes and insists that women can be bold and daring as well.

Another important scene to consider comes later in the film, when Dounia goes back to Reda's apartment after a concert. Although Rebecca was previously infuriated after a close call with the cops, due to Dounia setting a car on fire, she calls once again upon Dounia to infiltrate

Reda's apartment in search of the money he owes her. Benyamina presents another escape from the *banlieue* which takes place is Reda's spacious apartment, where there are large pieces of artwork and modern furniture. After snorting a line of cocaine, Reda starts to kiss a stiff and uncomfortable Dounia, who is still uninterested in sharing her body as a means of financial gains. Once he goes to take a shower, Dounia begins searching for the money, and when he finds her digging around in his armoire, a physical fight ensues. Violent scenes of Reda throwing Dounia around the apartment are interspersed with those of Djigui's contemporary, and very physical, dance performance.

A medium close-up of the violent physical battle shows Dounia reaching for a spray bottle, spaying Reda in the eyes and, finally, beating him senseless. She continues to search his apartment once he is unconscious and a medium close-up shows her finding an inconspicuous opening in the ceiling, from which, once opened, money begins to pour down on Dounia. Her amazement is captured by her smile and she begins to laugh as the camera pans down as she lays down in the bathtub. The camera cuts to a high-angle shot as Dounia literally bathes in a plethora of banknotes worth 20-200 euros in value. Although she is used as a sort of bait to get into Reda's apartment, Dounia does not have to surrender any part of her body or comply in any intimacy to obtain what Rebecca's money. In her chapter "Crime Dramas", Tarr highlights violence in the genre, claiming, "the boundary between law and lawlessness, has conventionally taken place within a male-oriented fictional world with its own codes, of which women are more often than not the victims", suggesting that the genre also leaves space for new interpretations (*Cinema and the Second Sex,* 196). Here, Dounia crosses the line of lawlessness, defeats her male counterpart, and is not framed as a victim.

In addition to her constant pursuit of money, Dounia's character takes on roles within the *banlieue* that are generally considered as masculine. The illicit world of theft and drugs are male-

operated spheres, where women do not have the strength or tenacity to survive under the threat of danger. In this way, Dounia challenges gender stereotypes and also defies the notion of the heteronormative couple by continually dismissing her relationship with Djigui which is narratively prominent at two moments during the film. Firstly, she actively chooses to miss his performance, choosing her money retrieval mission from Reda instead. Later, she chooses to attempt to save her best friend, rather than escaping with Djigui as she had previously planned at the train station. While her character seems receptive to the idea of a romantic relationship, she must perpetually make decisions that prove her alliance to her friendship with Maimouna and also her allegiance to making money more important than any romantic aspirations.

In comparison, *Bande de filles* also presents a protagonist who challenges gender stereotypes and desires to change her status in society. In the opening scene, Vic is playing American football with a group of girls, a sport generally only open to male athletes. Soon after, we find out that Vic will not be advancing academically to *seconde* in a high school but is suggested by a school counselor to take vocational courses, a path often considered less successful. From this point on, the protagonist turns to petty theft, physical altercations, and finally, selling drugs, instead of matriculating and completing any coursework that would enable her to find a job or advance professionally. At the close of the film, Vic undeniably rejects the possibility of marriage as an answer to her problems.

Protagonist Vic takes on the role generally assigned to her male counterparts throughout the film. Quickly after befriending Lady, Adiatou, and Fily, Vic is seen bullying a former classmate for her lunch money outside of the school gates. This same money is later used to purchase a hotel room and alcohol for the girls' soirée. In addition, her crew haphazardly, and often, encounters verbal confrontations and must prove themselves to be stronger and more ruthless than the next group of girls. This competitiveness and desire to confirm their reputation

leads to Lady fighting, and losing, and eventually, Vic challenging the other girl to a re-match. In order to get revenge, and re-claim their reputation, Vic even brandishes the knife she has taken from her own family's kitchen to cut off the bra of her rival who previously took Lady's shirt as her claim to victory. Vic, only 16 years-old, commits petty criminal acts in order to establish a space for herself in society and assert her power as a young woman.

Over the course of the film, Vic's crush on Ismaël is also developed. Through exchanged glances, brief moments of conversation, and a secret kiss in the stairwell, the protagonist develops feelings for her male peer who also happens to be friends with her brother. After she beats up her competitor to salvage Lady's reputation, Vic goes to Ismaël's flat and engages in sexual intercourse with him. Sciamma's narrative decision reinforces the power and agency that Vic has as a woman as she orders him "Undress" ("Déshabille-toi") and the scene ends with a medium shot of Vic removing her own clothes while Ismaël waits for her but does not watch (*Bande de filles*). Thusly, she is not an object of the male gaze and the viewer is not privy to this intimate scene. Her decision and authority in this situation exhibit her ability to decide for herself when it comes to her intimate relationship with Ismaël, although it will bring her a harsh punishment by her older brother. Tarr problematizes this sibling relationship, stating, "it is a matter of concern that they identify the oppressive immigrant *banlieue* family and the patriarchal violence of young men of immigrant origin as the chief obstacles that stand in their way" (*Reframing difference,* 113). In a tense scene, her brother slaps her, throws her on the couch, and with his hands around her neck, refers to her as a "slut", and reminds her of her family's reputation. While her decision is met with a severe reaction, it is still a decision she makes willingly, and where it could even be interpreted that she holds the power.

Following this confrontation with her brother, Vic goes to a small café for a beer where she meets Abou who refers to her as "strong and alone" ("solide et solitaire") after she refuses a

ride back to her apartment (*Bande de filles*). She decides to run away from home as evidenced in the next scene as she packs her bags. A series of shot-reverse-shots at the same café bear witness to their conversation where Abou uses Vic's conflict with her brother to solicit her to work for him as a drug dealer and assures her that her brother will not harm her if she works for him. Additionally, he reminds her she doesn't have much choice since she has already left home. Although she does not have many options, we see her interest in this opportunity when she informs her friends of her decision in a scene previously discussed. She sees Abou's proposal as an opportunity to make money, all while providing her an escape from her home.

Due to this new endeavor, and in an effort to fit in with the men who work for Abou, Vic alters her appearance. She wears baggy jeans and sweaters, keeps her hair in braids and even wraps a bandage around her breasts in order to suppress her feminine features. Her transformation contrasts not only her previous "look" when she hung around her intimate friend group, but also the image she adopts when delivering drugs. These scenes frame Vic dressed in a red, skintight mini-dress, adorning a short blond wig, and gracefully walking in heels. Whereas Dounia seems to take on a more mature, more effeminate appearance, Vic's outright masculine façade allows her to identify with her male peers and defy standard roles assigned to women. While the overly feminine attire highlights Vic's ability to use her femininity in order to survive.

In a key scene at the end of *Bande de filles,* Vic's decision to not marry Ismaël as a solution to her problems could be interpreted as her rejection of a heteronormative lifestyle. When Vic denies Abou's advances, it is clear that once again, Vic will be forced to leave the new space she has created for herself. She shows up at Ismaël's flat and the camera cuts to a medium-shot of them both sitting on the bed. They have not seen each other since Ismaël confronted her about her attempt at hiding her breasts, and therefore, femininity. They sit in the quiet, dark room and the camera cuts to a medium close-up of Ismaël who suggests they move in together and get

married (*Bande de filles*). The shot-reverse-shots display their conversation where Vic questions if he is kidding and even furthers "I'll be your little wife? Then you give me a kid. And that's my life?" ("J'suis ta petite femme à la maison ? Et puis tu me feras un gamin. C'est ça ma vie ?"), not only questioning Ismaël's proposal but also societal standards that women should marry and have children to be accepted and considered morally correct (*Bande de filles*). Her contempt for this lifestyle is interpreted through her tone of voice, even if she is happy that Ismaël would marry her and finally, rejects when she says, "I can't" ("Je peux pas") (*Bande de filles*). The medium close-ups of both characters allow us to read their emotions and witness the confliction that Vic experiences in rejecting her desire to be with Ismaël in order to pursue her own goals and be independent of marriage as an escape from her problems.

Other films to address

Tout ce qui brille

Another film that would be interesting to compare to *Divines* and *Bande de filles* is Mimran and Nakache's 2010 film *Tout ce qui brille* which portrays Lila and Ely, best friends in the *banlieue* who work undesirable part-time jobs, while Lila falls for a guy with a much different social status than her own. Directors Hervé Mimran and Géraldine Nakache, who also stars in the film in the role of Ely, juxtapose the glamorous apartment of Agathe and Joan, the rich friends they meet after a party, with less-tempting scenes of the *cités* where Lila and Ely live. The girls escape from unpaid taxis, feign upscale apartments in the city center, and Lila even steals a ring from the exuberant closet of friends Agathe and Joan. Lila's obsession with Maxx leads the two young protagonists to an argument that threatens to end their friendship. Throughout the film, the two girls depend on one another for moral support and endure difficult

moments together.

In comparison with the other films, *Tout ce qui brille* is very similar as the two protagonists live on the outskirts of Paris in Les Puteaux. The spaces the best friends frequent still fall under two very different binaries: the HLMs of Les Puteaux and the glamorous nightclubs, parties, and apartments in Paris. The film reaches a climax when Maxx, Lila's crush, drops Ely off and causes the dispute between the friends as a result of Lila's embarrassment. She has been lying to Maxx about where she lives in an effort to conceal her social status. The resolution of the conflict then takes place as a taxi drops the two girls off in the city center and the driver refers to them as sisters. This narrative choice by Mimran and Nakache could potentially suggest that problems are confined to the *banlieue,* whereas the city center could be seen as an answer or an escape where issues are seemingly nonexistent.

Both Lila and Ely resort to somewhat criminal activity, but are much less deviant than Dounia and Vic. While they often take taxi rides without paying, sneak into parties, and trick people into giving them money in order to buy shoes, they never resort to selling drugs in order to make money as they both have part-time jobs, albeit rather unfulfilling ones. The protagonists risk much less, but still try to achieve higher social status and financial stability through unconventional means for women. As Lila has Moroccan origins, this film could be included in the study of minority women in *banlieue* cinema. It could be easily compared to *Divines* or *Bande de filles* with a close reading of the gender roles that are influenced by the spaces the protagonists inhabit.

Fatima

In sharp contrast to the "gangster girls" of *Divines* and *Bande de filles,* a very different role is interpreted by Zita Hanrot in the role of Nesrine in *Fatima* (2015), directed by Philippe

Faucon. While her sister, Souad, is much more rebellious and actively refuses to participate in her education, Nesrine pursues medicine in order to become a doctor. As the daughter of an immigrant who speaks limited French, this narrative decision by Faucon goes against stereotypical portrayals of Maghrebi immigrant families in France. Other female protagonists whose parents have Maghrebi or African origins, like Dounia in *Divines* or Vic in *Bande de filles,* have resorted to dealing drugs or petty theft and Faucon's optimistic outlook abandons this representation of such women. From the opening scene of the film, where Nesrine is searching for an apartment with her future roommates and mother in tow, to the final scenes where the exam results are posted, Nesrine's assiduous pursuit of her studies are convincing, as she reviews on the train, has her roommate quiz her, and even declines a party invitation to recite her notes verbally, pulling an all-nighter. This performance by Hanrot defies gender norms and is a refreshing perspective on the potential experiences of women who inhabit the space of the *banlieue.*

Nesrine plays a critical role in this film and alongside her are two other female protagonists. Eponymous Fatima, her mother, and Souad, her younger sister, provide continual support for Nesrine who is overwhelmed by the demands that medical school places on her life. Fatima will do anything to help her daughter financially, physically, and emotionally by selling her jewelry, cooking her copious amounts of food, and listening to her voiced frustrations and worries while they sit on her bed and talk about life. Although Nesrine is less connected to her sister, Souad is still supportive of Nesrine, even if their mother's incessant efforts to provide for Nesrine become a source of jealously for Souad. This choice by Faucon to follow the three women accentuates their bonds and solidifies their female solidarity by placing less emphasis on the father. The films at the center of this discussion focus primarily on solidarity through female friendships, while *Fatima* is unique because although the daughters still do not want to follow in

their mother's footsteps, they constitute a harmonious unit, rather than a dissonant band that works against itself like the mothers and daughters in *Divines* and *Bande de filles*.

In comparison to the aforementioned films, we witness the unforgivingly drab *banlieue* backdrop in *Fatima* where all the women know one another. While they are trying to show support for Fatima, it is this familiarity that is stifling, and sometimes crippling, to Nesrine every time she encounters an accusatory neighbor. As in other films of the same genre, the *banlieue* is represented as a secluded and marginal space for immigrants, imposing heavy financial and social constraints. As Tarr asserts:

> The young women seek to free themselves from the excesses of their family backgrounds…and the films thus risk conforming to majority French cultural assumptions about inadequate immigrant families whose daughters need to be rescued. What makes them interesting is that they create heroines capable of rescuing themselves (with a little help from other ethnic minority women) and able to negotiate a provisional space of resistance for their emergent subjectivities. (*Reframing difference,* 121)

In *Fatima,* the heroines are responsible for themselves and exhibit solidarity in providing support for their female peers. Fatima is limited due to her language abilities and, therefore, marginalized because of her job; Nesrine seeks a better life through her studies, yet does not allow the *banlieue* to reduce her professional aspirations or push her to undertake illicit activities in order to succeed. Such subjectivities become heroines as they independently navigate and attempt to overcome the harsh realities of the *banlieue.*

Conclusion

In conclusion, in both Houda Benyamina's 2016 film *Divines* and Céline Sciamma's 2014 film *Bande de filles,* the experiences of minority women are exemplified through the

narrative of the female protagonists. The young women featured, Dounia and Maimouna in *Divines,* and Vic, Lady, Adiatou, and Fily in *Bande de filles,* stick together even in the face of perilous adventures with adverse or dangerous consequences. Although they have access to the city center, Paris, and imagine their own inventive escapes, the girls are confined to the space of the *banlieue* where they attempt to overcome the hardships they encounter as daughters of immigrants. They are hungry for an alternative life path that does not limit them to jobs as cleaning ladies, such as their mothers have taken on. The high-rising apartment complexes serve as a barrier that marginalizes and excludes them from society and, therefore, creates a perpetual cycle of crime as a means for survival. Through a close reading of the aforementioned films, it is possible to see how their actions and agency, primarily Dounia and Vic's, stage representations of minority women and, thusly, empower them to challenge gender stereotypes.

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