

Beur Culture as Re-exploration of the Enlightenment in *Entre les murs* (*The Class*)

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Ella Shohat and Robert Stam have argued that approaches to post structuralism and post structural film theories that deal with ethnicities are arguably located within the critical orbit of Eurocentric narratives and viewpoints (*Unthinking*, “Film Theory;” “Post-Third Worldist”). These Eurocentric approaches arguably fail to break away from “from the narrative of the nation as a unified entity” (Shohat 40) and often work to restrict critical debates aimed to set out a historical and geographic context for diasporic identities located within cultural difference. This inquiry will concentrate on how ideas commonly related to accentuated and diasporic cinema such as displacement, restriction and confinement are differently played out as central themes in relation to culturally different identities in Laurent Cantet’s *Entre les murs* (English title: *The Class* 2008). It will also focus on how the film sets up demarcations between different modes of language and social space at a formal/informal level in order to contest the civic, secular ideals of the contemporary French social order. The foregrounding of language and social space in the film is significant inasmuch as these aspects allow an exploration of the possibilities for a renegotiation of enlightenment ideas by French North African and Muslim diasporic groups.

Alternative critical frameworks from recent non-Eurocentric approaches to cinema (Naficy; Wayne) allow a possible reconfiguration of the concept of Beur and Banlieue cinemas in more heterogeneous ethnically specific terms. Such a rethink of this concept attempts to take into account a wider political recognition of hitherto marginal diasporic identities based on cultural difference as the product of a transnational intersection of class, gender and ethnicity in contemporary western societies. This approach provides a way of critically redressing what appears to be an invisible space in the representation of these ethnic groups in French cinema. In this respect, an exploration of how the film uses the cinematic codes from accented 'Third' cinema potentially allows a more specific understanding of how transnational and hybrid cultural identities are located and negotiated within the power relations of France's post-colonial social order.

The principle social discourse of the Enlightenment project explored in *Entre les murs* is the French education system, which provides a political terrain to contest issues around class, gendered and ethnic based differences. In the context of recent political changes state education—which is seen as integral to a fully functioning civil society and secular social contract—has now become more central to ideas of citizenship and national identity than in any other period in France's post-war history.

A free public education is a central principle of the secular social contract and one of the secured rights of citizenship in France. Mandatory right to a free education was originally introduced through the constitution of the Third Republic under the Jules Ferry law in 1882. Derived from Marie Jean Condorcet's earlier Plan of Education Farrington (2009) argues that it enacted laws for a "compulsory free elementary education" through state provision as the legal right of all citizens to be delivered by "professional and normal schools" (Farrington 5). The underlying moral arguments for a non-sectarian education originally set out by Gabriel Seailles and Alfred Moulet in the late nineteenth century are still recognised today as guiding principles for the state curriculum. This central political project, which was shaped by the legacy of

French colonialism and the ideology of the Etat-Nation, worked to marginalise the ethnic and cultural identities of immigrants as assimilation into society was dependent upon successful integration into the fields of French culture and language. While this system was originally introduced as a way of guaranteeing a separation between a secular civil society and the religious values of the Catholic Church it has more recently been seen as a way of ensuring the assimilation of culturally different second and third generation North African and Muslim groups.

The release of *Entre les murs* is timely given that each of these central planks of the enlightenment project have recently been seized upon by Eric Besson—Immigration and National Identity Minister in Nicholas Sarkozy's UMP administration. A range of initiatives have been launched by the administration as part of a great public debate on national identity which has been emphasised as integral to reclaiming France's Republican cultural heritage from Jean-Marie Le Pen's Front National in the run-up to the 2007 Presidential Election. Indeed, Besson took part in a controversial live national television debate on this issue with Marine Le Pen the vice president of the Front National in January 2010 so as to highlight the perceived importance of the issue of cultural identities to French society. Sarkozy's UMP has also further intensified police surveillance operations, increased the use of DNA testing and lengthened detention periods for migrants and criminal suspects concentrated in the banlieues through a program of repressive new immigration legislation and policies. Following the substantial support registered for the FN in the first round of the 2002 Presidential Elections successive governments have conceded significant concessions to right wing groups through adopting a series of punitive nationalist policies toward France's non-white residents and immigrants. Despite protestations by trade unions such as the CGT and from politically active left wing groups including SOS Racisme and the Union des Organisations Islamiques de France (UOIF) that these new directives are intended to stoke anti-Islamic prejudice stringent laws prescribing secularism have been revived, increasing the number of charters

used to deport undocumented migrants or *sans papiers* as well as introducing 'Preventative Detention', an accelerated procedure authorizing police to collect extensive personal information on individuals believed to represent a possible threat to public order. At the same time, The UN Human rights Committee have levied accusations against the DGPN involving specific cases of police brutality, racial abuse and unlawful killings involving young men of North African or Muslim origin in a series of high profile cases (Amnesty International Report 2009). These controversial incidents have served as the flashpoints for extensive urban rioting in the suburbs of Paris in October 2005 and November 2007 and more recently at Saint Etienne in July 2009. Each of these developments has worked to further heighten cultural tensions in French society between competing social groups aligned to civic and culturally different versions of national identity.

These migrant groups, controversially labeled by Sarkozy as "the *racaille*" ("the scum"), are predominantly composed of the North African Muslim "*Beur*" communities that make up the majority of residents in the *banlieues* or suburbs. This dynamic between the two terms prompt questions regarding how each term is categorized. Above all it raises one of the questions around which this volume is centered: can still talk about a distinct *Beur* identity within contemporary French cinematic culture? The term *Beur*, which has now become synonymous with the idea of the *banlieues*, is generally used to define second-generation citizens of Muslim-North African or Maghreb parentage primarily living in the working class outer districts of the main cities in France. Comprised of state provided housing for low-income residents in Paris, Lyon and Marseilles the *banlieues* were originally built for the working classes during the 1930s onward. It then became identified with an emerging North African immigrant labour force from former Francophone colonies which was absorbed into what became a multicultural urban space of 'Otherness' due to France's protracted decolonisation and sustained economic boom in the 1950s and 1960s (These cultural and economic influences effecting the *banlieues* are more fully explored in Chapter Two:

Forgotten of The Grandes Ensembles and Suburban Exclusion in Contemporary France). As an economic and legitimisation crisis in western capitalism took root within the French economy from the mid 1970s onward, changes in policies toward immigration and a sustained rise in unemployment have worked to marginalise Maghreb youth and reconfigure the banlieues as a transnational space of material deprivation, crime and racial tension. Tarr makes the point that films such as *La Haine* (1995), *Rai* (1995) and *Bye Bye* (1996), which were all made by directors of immigrant origin and focus on the experiences of Maghreb communities in France's outer-city estates, were the first popular releases to combine cinematic elements from both Beur and Banlieues cinema. Indeed, given this synthesis between forms it is legitimate to advance the argument that each term has come to be virtually synonymous with one another in critical discussion on French cinema.

Throughout the 2007 election campaign the UMP resurrected the long-standing Republican myth of the 'one and indivisible nation.'¹ Within this popular narrative the secular values of the Republican nation-state are perceived as under threat from ethnic and religious communitarianism. Hargreaves (*Immigration, 'Race' and Ethnicity*) argues that such policies can be seen as an attack on immigration and multiculturalism that are linked to wider fears of an encroaching Islamisation and the threat of 'Islamic fundamentalism'. Such Islamophobic policies have been most conspicuously evident in legislation enacted by the Chirac and Sarkozy administrations that has aimed at prohibiting Muslims from wearing the hijab, niqab and burka in public spaces. As well as reinstating the compulsory singing of *La Marseillaise* in French schools from November 2008 all public buildings are now legally obliged to fly the national tricolor in public. Crucially, this civic model of integration into French society is widely seen as prioritising the legal affiliation of citizens to the nation state and an officially sanctioned national culture that does not constitutionally recognise Other markers of identities such as social class, ethnicity and religion. These contemporary policies around national identity and citizenship—which inform the educational system—are based

on an implicit political recognition that the idea of being French, which has now become so essentialised in relation to 'official' civil society, is now incompatible with the idea of being a Muslim. Within this one-sided Eurocentric process of assimilation Arab/North-African immigrants in general and Muslims in particular are compelled to give up their distinctive ethnic characteristics and become culturally and linguistically indistinguishable from the majority of French society. It is this tension between assimilation and cultural difference that forms the main axis of conflict and negotiation within the social discourses of the film.

Entre les murs uses the state education system as an emblematic space through which to highlight the marginalised positioning of a range of Muslim and North African diasporic subjects within the social and economic order of contemporary neo-liberal France. It also draws on themes explored in Cantet's earlier films *Ressources Humaines* (*Human Resources* 1999) and *L'Emploi du Temps* (*Time Out* 2001) each of which focus on the relationship of the individual to the workplace as a way of interrogating the possibilities for collective unity, class resistance and struggle within the contemporary French social order. Consequently, the film calls attention to the effects of socio economic inequalities in French society through thematising the class and ethnic differences between a socially fractured and ethnically diverse group of students and a member of its professional staff within a typical secular state education institution.

Adapted from the autobiographical novel *Entre les Murs* (Gallimard 2007) by François Begaudeau—who plays himself—the film largely centres around the experiences of an idealistic young teacher—François Marin—working in an ethnically diverse banlieue school in Paris. It follows his progress as he teaches a single class of 14–15 year old students (played by a non-professional cast) the national curriculum for French language and literature lessons over the course of a full teaching year. During the course of François' lessons the French state education system and its curriculum are represented as rigidly fixed in their insistence on prescriptively following the national syllabus and

in their inability to accommodate the wide cultural differences and diverse cultural make-up of the group. The lessons are shown primarily as part of a wider process of socially integrating the students into the secular republican ideals of the nation as François struggles to successfully incorporate them into this space in any meaningful way. It is worth pointing out that the name François, the main practitioner of language lessons at the school, can be read to signify 'France' in the sense that he himself assiduously embodies these ideals. In this respect the school as an institution 'stands-in' as an allegorical model or microcosm of the civic nation state and what is commonly accepted in public discourse as 'officially sanctioned' secular culture.

Further weight is added to this idea of the school and François as allegorical representatives of the civic nation state by the fact that the whole of the film is set within the school itself and that (other than an official parents' evening) very little space is provided within the narrative to explore the personal or domestic lives of the staff and students—indeed the only point in the film that contradicts this idea is a sequence where François relaxes alone in a local café for a brief moment of respite immediately before the onset of the new term. Such ideas contribute to a pervasive sense throughout the film that the concept of a French civic secular culture works to subsume all personal, linguistic and cultural markers of difference amongst both school staff and students.

Within the dramaturgy of the film's social struggle a process of contestation takes place between officially sanctioned use of language, figured in terms of François' prescriptive teaching practice and adherence to the curriculum, set against the agency of the students in the classroom, primarily registered in terms of their use of banlieue street slang (or *verlan*). Street slang is utilised in different ways to negotiate the various demands and constraints placed upon the students in their day-to-day experiences in the educational system. It also seems to provide a means through which the students can distance themselves from the linguistic constraints of secular French culture. This strategy whereby Muslim and North African youth utilize *verlan* as a cultural resource to (re)

negotiate ethnic identities is also evident in Abdel Kechiche's film *L'esquive* (2004) and further explored in Géraldine Blattner's work in the present volume. Thus in the classroom an atmosphere of teacher centred learning and mutual respect is often undermined as students use this informal slang to challenge François' (French) teaching methods and ethics.

After one student appears to get the better of François in a classroom exchange another (unseen) shouts (within the subtitled translation) "He wiped you out sir," while a little later on when probing the connotative meanings of the word "succulent" a male student, Boubacar, replies within informal sexualised terms "Suck off." During another lesson when attempting to demonstrate the correct usage of the imperfect subjunctive as prescribed within the state curriculum François' attempts to justify its importance are bombarded by a barrage of complaints from the class that "Nobody speaks like that anymore! It's bourgeois!" and that "It's not today's language!" In the ensuing discussion he is forced to concede that such language is largely the preserve of the French upper-middle classes, but that it is also integral to formal written communication, much to the derision of the rest of the class who perceive such 'affected and sophisticated' behaviour as 'homosexual'. In these sequences this struggle between the values of the school system and those of the students often take the form of a series of conflicts between formal written language based upon prescribed totalising knowledge, set against informal spoken words or images rooted in the local and immediate, or alternatively, over the meaning of words themselves.

This tension around linguistic forms and conventions, which is explored through François' language lessons, takes on a wider symbolic significance in the film due to the diverse ethnic and cultural make up of the students. During his first class of the new term when setting out examples of how to correctly use words and construct sentences, two female students, Koumba and Esmerelda question his use of Eurocentric Christian names. Within the film's subtitled translation they each attempt to renegotiate these versions of cultural identity in more diverse, multicultural terms:

Koumba: "What's with the Bills?"

François: "The Bills?"

Koumba: "You always use weird names."

François: "Weird? A recent US President was called Bill."

Koumba: "Why don't you use Aissata, or Rachid, or Ahmed or..."

Esmerelda: "You always use whitey names."

François: "What names?"

Esmerelda: "Honky names."

François: "What's a Honky?"

Esmerelda: "Honkies, Frenchies, Frogs."

It is worth pointing out that in urban areas of France such as where the film is set, banlieue families commonly have bi-lingual language skills as part of the process of having French as well as North and West African identities located within accented cultural traditions. This intersection of class, ethnic and gender identities, which are placed in tension with the civic ideals of the education system, can be seen as part of an attempt to renegotiate power relations in more inclusive non Eurocentric terms.

Within the formal social space of François' classroom where teaching practice and lessons are defined according to the secular values of the nation-state, unity and consensus periodically breaks down to reveal hidden ethnic-class based barriers and hierarchies. In this sense, the film's social struggle between the contemporary values of the nation-state, which O'Shaughnessy argues has traditionally formed 'the implicit or explicit frame of French cinematic narratives' (163), and the cultural diversity of the students, point toward a social tension that is near impossible to reconcile as consent for Republican ideas can no longer be taken for granted amongst the students. An emerging paradigm particularly relevant to the representation of ethnic diaspora within film systems is Naficy's concept of *accented cinema* which attempts to provide a methodology that explains how these heterogeneous cultural identities operate within European 'national' film narratives. Such codes can be identified within a diverse selection of recent French diasporic films such as *Entre les murs* and *Paradis Allez* (*Paradise Now* 2005) as well as contemporary German examples such as

Gegen die Wand (*Head On* 2004) and *Auf der anderen Seite* (*The Edge of Heaven* 2007). Each of these cinematic examples interrogate diasporic cultural identities through utilising an open form, fragmentary narrative structure, often incorporating voice-over narration, direct address and critically juxtaposed editing so that a range of cinematic discourses are mobilised in order to support reading positions from which to 'comment upon and critique the home and host countries societies and cultures' (4).

The film also sets up a demarcation between the formal spaces of the school such as the staff room, classrooms and offices, where students are placed under direct constraint, and the informal space of the playground which is represented as a socially open and inclusive space where teachers seem to lack any legitimacy to control their responses, behaviour and movements. This is most obviously demonstrated when François confronts Louise and Esmerelda in the playground to contest the meaning of a remark he made earlier to them in which he labeled the two girls as 'sluts' following their disruptive behaviour at a student assessment meeting. At this point he is collectively challenged by a spontaneous show of social solidarity amongst the students as they gather around him in a random and intimidating manner. This tension is underlined by a series of tight close-up shots of over-excited students who proceed to dispute the accuracy of François' claims as he struggles to convincingly rationalise his remark. In contrast, in every other sequence when we see the playground it is from a high downward angle (at times replicating François' viewpoint and social position of authority) looking down from the classroom window onto this outside space. This idea of the schoolyard providing a neutral space seeming to locate students and staff 'on equal terms' is further explored toward the end of the film as teaching staff and male students compete in what appears to be an end of term football match. The sequence offers a utopian moment when class and ethnic hierarchies and barriers are dissolved for a brief period as each social group is literally re-placed onto a level position with one another for the duration of the game.

François' remark and his decision to literally confront the girls on

their own terms in the informal space of the playground are clearly actions marking a departure from his usual adherence to formalised professional practice in dealing with day-to-day concerns. This action can be read as a reversal of character or counterpoint to an earlier confrontation in a literature lesson between François and Koumba after he asks her to read a passage from *The Diary of Anne Frank* and she stubbornly refuses this request point blank. This leads to a heated exchange between the two at the end of the lesson as he demands an apology for her non co-operation and questions why their working relationship has broken down when they had been on good terms during the previous teaching year. In turn, Koumba's decision to confront him through the formal means of a letter (which he finds in his locker) and using the written word to express her personal feelings on this breakdown of their relationship can also be seen as a departure from her usual method of dealing with day-to-day concerns at the school through attempting to speak to François on equal terms, redressing the hierarchical relationship that exists between each along the axis of social class, ethnicity and gender. Recited through a disembodied voice-over, it reveals a refusal to acknowledge or accept any personal dynamic in her relationship with François while questioning this unequal system of power relations that exists between (François) teachers and (Koumba) students:

Respect. Adolescents learn to respect their teachers because of threats and the fear of having problems. For starters, I respect you and respect must be mutual. For instance, I don't say you're hysterical so why say that about me? I've always respected you so I don't understand why I have to write this. I know you have it in for me but I don't know why. I'll sit at the back to avoid any other conflicts unless you come looking for them. I admit I can be insolent, but only if provoked. . . . In theory in a French class, you talk about French, not your grandma, your sister or girl's periods. And so, from now on I won't speak to you again. Signed. Koumba. (dialogue)

This idea of using the written word as a means of personal expression is further explored as François sets the class the task

of writing self portraits in a formal standard style which they all proceed to read out publicly in class, recounting their mundane likes and dislikes about life. The students use the self-portrait—which is transposed through direct address—as a way of articulating their diverse transnational tastes in music, football and youth culture. Again, as with Koumba’s letter, use of direct address, a technique commonly used in accented cinema to register the dislocation of identities, provides a platform through which certain students, in particular Carl, (a French West Indian forced to repeat the year at his new school) speak about the complex personal and ethnic aspects of their identities that are repressed within civic, secular education:

I like playing football. I like playing computer games. I like playing with pretty girls. I like going on holiday in the Caribbean. I like chips, souk and dancehall music. . . . I like watching *MTV Base* and staying up all night. I like the series on the slave trade. I like my estate. I like the series *Homeland Security*. I like eating in restraints and having crazy times. I hate people crying for no reason. I hate techno and tectonic. I hate guys and girls that show off. I hate visiting my brother in jail. I hate talent shows on TV. I hate politicians, the war in Iraq. Goths and skaters. I hate maths, racists and Materazzi. I hated the Jean Eluard School. I like being here. (dialogue)

It is significant that Souleyman, a young French Malian, is the only member of the class that refuses to participate in the written exercise of producing a self-portrait. Despite certain educational and disciplinary shortcomings as the film develops it soon becomes clear that he has a flair for art and photography, and obviously favours the use of symbolic imagery rather than the written word as his preferred means of personal expression. Of course such aspects of non-verbal culture are not fully acknowledged as legitimate in relation to Republican discourses so are often located within a marginal position in the official curriculum of the French education. His interest in symbolic art is first hinted when he reveals an intricately designed tattoo of a Koranic image on his arm, but after prompting initially refuses to communicate its translated meaning to the class. François’ reply (“If only you could write such interesting

things on paper that would be great”) is a tacit acknowledgement of the importance placed upon symbolism within Islamic culture and stands in contrast to the central emphasis placed upon signification within the European enlightenment and its education systems. François is able to slowly build up a productive working relationship with Souleyman as he successfully encourages him to further develop his interest in non verbal forms of communication through using a series of private photographs he has taken of his mother and friends instead of a written composition to produce his self portrait. François then patiently guides Souleyman through the process of using his computer skills to further develop his ideas and use text to frame the meaning of the photographs with personal references. A measure of progress has seemingly been reached as François, delighted at his efforts, places the set of images up on public display for the rest of the class almost as if to acknowledge Souleyman’s efforts.

Within the school, access to formal spaces such as staff rooms and school offices is highly regulated while these areas provide a forum for day-to-day decision making from which students are usually excluded and where its hierarchy of professional staff can negotiate with one another and pass official decisions on individual students as well as providing a means of organising the bureaucratic running of the institution as a whole. In an early sequence within this formal space, members of staff are seen discussing the merits and shortcomings of students on their new class lists before the term starts. During a later meeting the teachers debate the most effective method of imposing a system of school protocol and discipline upon the students, leading to a debate over the merits of whether such rules should be arbitrarily or rigidly enforced in practice.

At the level of professional practice the hierarchies of the school are only able to deal with cultural difference and resistance in a punitive way within a formal bureaucratic and social structure aligned to the national-civic project. Magrebi youth is given relatively limited space in which to reconfigure the dynamics of these power relations as this problematic is played out in the film’s themes and issues. The figure of Souleyman and his relationship to

the school hierarchy as a teenage French Malian is made a central concern in the film and can be seen as indicative of the containment and expulsion of Beur youth from the legally sanctioned spaces of the education system. Building upon the earlier sequences focusing on Carl and Koumba, central themes in accented and diasporic cinema such as the 'confinement' and 'dislocation' of the transnational diasporic subject are further interrogated in the narrative through Souleyman's relationship with François and other staff members (Naficy 5–6).

Souleyman is located in contrast to Wei, a young Chinese male student who is fairly introverted and has difficulty making friends and 'fitting in' with the rest of the class. In further contrast to Souleyman, Wei is recognised by staff as academically intelligent, hard working and extremely disciplined in class. This is borne out by François' discussion with his mother and father at a Parents Evening in which he warmly praises Wei for his standards of attainment, interests and behaviour. Wei's parents attentively listen and continually nod in agreement, showing a compliant and deferential attitude toward François as he speaks, and a general enthusiasm and willingness to conform to the civic and institutional demands of their new life in France. Again, a stark contrast is set up between this sequence and François' later meeting with Souleyman's mother (his father's absence is left unexplained), who arrives at the school dressed in a traditional Muslim headscarf and long dress. His brother is also present at the meeting to translate their indigenous Malian language of Bambara into French as she is shown to have none of the native language skills that, to all intents and purposes, are a civic requirement in contemporary France. The role of Souleyman's brother as translator is significant in that he acts as a mediating figure between his mother and François struggling to accurately translate between one and the other. Both teacher and parent are placed in a dislocated relationship in terms of communicating their emotional response to one another as François reveals widely shared staff concerns over the shortcomings in Souleyman's personal character and academic achievements to the bemusement of his mother. In this

case Souleyman, who is unable to draw on educational support from his mother, particularly when studying within such a rigidly defined secular nationalist institution, is clearly located at a point of social disadvantage because of this linguistic deficit.

These parallels set up between the students are explored further as events come to a head for both of their families as the school hierarchy reacts to each of their situations in different ways. In a later sequence one of the teachers announces in the staff room that Wei's mother has been arrested to face trial as an undocumented 'illegal' migrant and is likely to be deported back to China with the distinct possibility that her son may also have to return. All of the teachers in the staff room show great sympathy for the family and immediately set about organising a collection in order to support them through the courts and fight the deportation order. The moment is then punctuated by one teacher, Marie, who announces her pregnancy with a toast hoping that the family wins her case and that her "child may be as intelligent as Wei."

Following the school's annual assessment on the students' final year marks—which includes Esmeralda and Louise as two student representatives who are given formal access to the decision making process—in spite of François' protestations that Souleyman is restricted by "academic limitations" the staff reach a consensus that he should face severe disciplinary measures for his behaviour. After Souleyman protests that he is the victim of revenge and remonstrates with François over his comment he becomes disruptive in class and storms out, accidentally injuring Koumba's eye in the process. Later Koumba reveals to François that if suspended Souleyman's father will intervene and send him back to their original home, a rural village community in Mali.

Despite François' protestations at a preliminary meeting that all 12 students that have faced such hearings in the past year have been expelled and that in practice official disciplinary procedures are counter productive, the rest of the staff refuse to reverse their decision or show any collective support or sympathy for Souleyman's predicament. As Souleyman's translates his mother's comments at the hearing, her defensive response, mediated

through her son, seems somewhat at odds with the views of the staff. Though this is uncertain as, again, no subtitles are provided to translate her indigenous language. The reasons for this are uncertain and are open to speculation. Perhaps she does not want to be separated from her son, or want him to be returned to Mali where his life chances would be dramatically reduced compared to those in France. No indications are given. The decision is a foregone conclusion and the sequence ends with a long shot from a high downward angle of Souleyman and his mother walking home, physically reduced to two tiny figures in a corner of the empty schoolyard to signify their lack of symbolic and material power in relation to civic, secular “Frenchness.”

As the school year draws to a close François asks the students what they have learnt and enjoyed about their experiences in class. They proceed to offer a diverse range of replies ranging from Pythagoras’ theory to the slave trade, but two surprising responses in particular are worthy of note and seem to provide a subtle measure of the students’ progress within the education system over the period. François is taken aback to hear Esmeralda’s reply that she learnt nothing during the year but instead enjoyed reading *Plato’s Republic* at home, followed by her sly dig that it’s “[n]ot a slut’s book.” Previously, after François first began the year he cautiously replied to a colleague’s enquiry over the suitability of course material for his class that “[t]he Enlightenment will be too tough for them.” This contrasts with the sequence immediately following when a young anonymous Black female student waits behind to confide to François that compared to the others she had learnt nothing and had difficulty understanding all of the subjects in the curriculum. Perhaps most telling, she has already decided not to go on to further education at vocational school.

Entre les murs represents the education system, and by implication the French social contract and its founding principles drawn from western enlightenment ideas, as beset by sclerosis and as therefore unable to accommodate the contemporary challenges posed to it by culturally different identities. Thus, although the French education system is founded upon universalist principles of equal

access for all citizens, this goal is not achieved in practice, primarily because of its failure to accommodate any recognition of the dislocations experienced by culturally different diasporic subjects such as Koumba, Carl and Souleyman. In the case of the latter, the institutional structure of the education system and its decision making processes can be read as a wider metaphor for the policies of exclusion enacted against North and West African diasporic youth within French society as a whole since the mid 1990s.

The film locates ethnicities and diaspora at the centre of its narrative and draws on the codes of accented cinema to articulate hybrid cultural identities within a post-colonial context. Its open form, critically juxtaposed editing, multivocality and fragmented narrative is centred upon a range of diverse cultural identities and issues which are explored through voice-over narration and direct address to critically comment upon the officially sanctioned secular culture of the nation state. The narrative explores demarcations between written and spoken language and within spatial relations along a formal/informal axis to contest relations of consent and interrogate the limited possibilities for legitimate cultural incorporation and social inclusion offered to French North and West African Muslim subjects. These stand as particularly pressing concerns at a time when France is in the process of reassessing its self-image and national-ethnic identities are situated within a tension between secularism and cultural difference. These identities renegotiate enlightenment ideals of citizenship in culturally different terms through using a range of transnational cultural resources that include language and knowledge rooted in both the local and immediate traditions of the North African/Muslim diaspora and Western popular culture. Use of the critical model of accented cinema allows an understanding of how narrative and visual devices in the film can potentially work to transform social relations and cultural identities beyond the narrow confines imposed within postcolonial discourse. Within this context, *Entre les murs* exposes the evident contradictions of traditional secular models of assimilation as new hybrid identities struggle to assert cultural pluralism and difference. Ultimately, such actions

are represented as a legitimate response given that the main enlightenment ideas and institutions that constitute citizenship work to marginalise these diasporic identities along ethnic, class and gendered lines in relation to the social order of contemporary French civic society.

Notes

1. See Wolfrey, J 'Sarkozy's Tough Talk on French Identity' in *The Guardian*, 6 November 2009. Print.

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