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‘Lessons in Adaptation: The Postcolonial Classroom in *Entre les murs* and *L’Esquive*’

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DRAFT

Lessons in Adaptation: the Postcolonial Curriculum in Kechiche's *L'Esquive* (2003) and Cantet's *Entre les murs* (2008)

Nicholas Harrison

Abstract

Current debates over decolonizing the curriculum raise questions about the “fit” between diverse student bodies and what is taught in the postcolonial classroom. This essay explores that issue through two acclaimed films focusing on the educational experiences of students from migrant backgrounds: Abdellatif Kechiche's *L'Esquive/Games of Love and Chance* (2003) and Laurent Cantet's *Entre les murs/The Class* (2008). It begins by noting that whereas colonial education was often characterized by a shocking disregard for the cultures and identities of students in, say, the Maghreb or West Africa, “adaptation”—a term used in the colonial era to describe the tailoring of the curriculum to students from non-European backgrounds—could also be a reactionary policy, favoured by some colonial educationalists. That history serves as a starting point not to undermine the “decolonial” project in education, but to emphasize the complexities of the political and educational issues with which it engages. Looking particularly at “French lessons” and literary education, the essay explores what can be learned from these films as they show different teachers and students—and filmmakers—responding in very different ways to a traditional French curriculum.

Keywords

Cantet; Kechiche; Bégaudeau; humanities education; literature and film in education; French (as academic subject); pedagogy; decolonizing the curriculum.

In French colonial debates about education, “adaptation” meant tailoring the curriculum to different localities and different student bodies. Today, colonial education is often associated with radical *non*-adaptation: something as out of place as history lessons on “nos ancêtres les Gaulois” delivered to young Senegalese children who had quite different ancestry, and different ancestral myths. Yet adaptation too could be a colonial policy. In its simplest form this could mean attempting to engage pupils by connecting teaching materials with local cultures, identities and circumstances, for example when a teacher in rural Algeria got young French-learners to chant “Aomar pompe l'eau,” or “Mohand emplit le bidon.” More drastically, adaptation could be about readying students for their inferior place in colonial hierarchy. “[D]ans un État républicain ou simplement libéral,” writes one colonial commentator in 1899, “il est naturel qu'on habitue les esprits à l'examen et à l'analyse de toutes choses et, par conséquent, que l'instruction soit fortement imprégnée de littérature, d'histoire et de philosophie.” Things are different in the colonies, he says: what is needed for the colonized is schooling “[d'] un caractère purement pratique et professionnel.” When it comes to the colonial underclass, “il importe d'éviter tout ce qui peut faire naître ou développer l'esprit de discussion.”¹

The term adaptation is not much used in such senses now, but occasionally one can still hear echoes of that colonial-era rhetoric. When, in 2003, the French education ministry organized a “Débat national sur l'avenir de l'Ecole,” one of the questions posed was: “Comment l'Ecole doit-elle s'adapter à la diversité des élèves ?” That question was incorporated verbatim into François Bégaudeau's autobiographically-inspired novel *Entre les*

murs about life in a school in contemporary Paris (Bégaudeau 2006, 61, 64), and then into the filmscript based on the novel (Stoppel 2010, 62–63). In Laurent Cantet’s version (2008), one of the films on which this essay will focus, the ministry’s wording did not make the final cut, but the question remained central.² Issues around the “fit” between diverse students and a particular curriculum are also at the heart of Abdellatif Kechiche’s *L’Esquive* (2003), the other film on which I will focus, which includes scenes, and takes inspiration, from Marivaux’s play *Le Jeu de l’amour et du hasard* of 1730. At points in both films, questions about educational “fit,” in the context of postcolonial migrations, relocations and reinventions, intersect with issues around adaptation in its other, cinematic sense: issues, that is, around the relative, shifting prestige of words and images, and the ideological work done by—and/or expected of—different genres and media. But in Kechiche’s case, given the film’s radical transformations of its literary source material—an eighteenth-century play rather than a contemporary novel—“transposition” may be a better word; and this essay will not enter into debates around cinematic adaptation as such. It is the colonial echoes of “adaptation” that are more relevant to my discussion here; my hope is that there will be something productively disorientating about keeping in mind that idea, and the clashing perspectives around it, including colonial suspicion of the capacity of literary education to promote “l’esprit de discussion,” as I respond to the films’ encouragement to think again about who should study what, and where we expect that to lead.

Both films raise questions about the place of student identities in the classroom, especially in French lessons (or their equivalents in other societies); about the educational uses of a literary tradition, including a theatrical tradition, characterized both by inherited meanings and by the possibility of reinterpretation and change; and about the socio-cultural function of education. I want to suggest that we can learn something from Cantet’s and Kechiche’s films on all these issues. Whatever “lessons” they offer are, however, exploratory and ambivalent, and my essay will follow the films’ lead in that regard too, on the assumption—which I will address directly in the final section—that much of the value of the films as such, as of teaching that makes film or literature its object, lies in that exploratory quality.

It is not by chance that the lessons we see in *Entre les murs*, as in *L’Esquive*, are French lessons rather than, say, chemistry classes. French as an academic subject has various historical foundations, among the most important of which is, or has been, a sense of alignment between a language, “a” literature and a “national identity.” That sense is partly imaginary, but institutions of education have helped make it self-fulfilling, to some extent.³ In that tradition the French language and the literature of France have been taken to encapsulate Frenchness, itself a notion that has always been somewhat racialized; and French educationalists have worked on the basis that to teach the language and the literature together is at once to give insights into that identity and, more pragmatically, to help cement it, binding students together—in the first instance, male students in metropolitan France—as future citizens.

In Cantet’s *Entre les murs* the protagonist, François, a French teacher in a *collège* in Paris’s 20th *arrondissement*, could be said to “adapt” his teaching in various ways, and with varying degrees of success, in response to the identities or the “diversity” of the students in his classroom. In one small instance the issue arises in the form of a sample sentence, as it did for the teacher in French Algeria who came up with “Aomar pompe l’eau.” François wants his students to understand the word “succulent” and writes on the blackboard: “Bill déguste

un succulent cheeseburger.” The sentence draws on everyday life and nods towards a US-dominated popular culture with which, François may assume, all his students are familiar. But one of them, Khoumba, challenges him, asking why he always chooses names like Bill rather than Aïssata, say, or Rachid, or Ahmed; and her friend Esméralda chimes in: yes, he always chooses “Des noms de babtou.” They are winding him up, of course, but at the same time making some sort of assertion about their identities: “babtou” is an inversion of the word *toubab* sometimes used in central and West Africa to designate White people, and is an example of the *verlan* or backslang that François keeps asking them not to use in the classroom. When François asks what they mean, Esméralda says: “noms de Français” then, with an ironic smirk, “de céfrans” (*verlan* for *Français*). “So you’re not French,” says François, with his own characteristic ironic look. Esméralda answers “no,” then, “En fait je suis française, mais pas fière de l’être.” And with this he, as a good liberal, can of course agree. (It’s the sort of thing I might say about being British, or English.) He adds: “si je choisis à chaque fois les prénoms en fonction des origines diverses qu’il y a dans cette classe, je vais pas m’en sortir.” They respond, reasonably enough, that he could introduce some more variety; and they clearly want his examples to bear some relation to who they are. As ever, the fundamental, prior issue raised by any question of educational “adaptation” is how the norm is defined—who defines it, who or what it excludes, and how far it is open to change.

François’s phrase “origines diverses” is carefully chosen; more carefully chosen, anyway, than the words of Bégaudeau in the book, who says: “Si je commence à vouloir représenter toutes les *nationalités* au niveau des prénoms, j’vais pas m’en sortir” (33, my italics). Both versions of his assertion point towards the ethnic composition of the classroom, which bears some relation to the contours of the French empire;⁴ and in that classroom, in contrast with the staff common room, he is in a smallish minority as a White person (a disparity discussed in Gueye 2010). In the book this is signalled first—and perhaps primarily—by characters’ names: in his opening description of the common room Bégaudeau writes (13): “Nous nous prénommons Bastien, Chantal, Claude, Danièle”—and so on, in alphabetical order, through to Valérie. The relatively unusual usage of *se prénommer* adds a kind of emphasis, and makes his sentence sound a little like part of a grammar drill, which one might connect with Khoumba’s point about the cultural norms carried in language teaching. Not all readers will think to themselves that these are *noms de céfrans*, however. In the film the corresponding “information” is primarily visual, a matter of different skin colors and different ethnic “types,” but that still leaves a lot of room for interpretation. All spectators, in our racialized societies, will see the differences in the racial composition of the staff and student bodies, but not all will register those differences consciously, or think about them critically. In any case, the idea of “nationalités” sits uncomfortably here: visual traits, like first names, may be a sign of “origins” in a broad, vague sense, but they certainly don’t give any information on nationality.⁵

Nonetheless, nationality does come up in both book and film, in the classroom and in the school yard, and also, in relation to questions of expulsion and deportation, in the staff common room; and in both book and film, as in the world outside, notions of nationality are ensnarled with notions of race. In the first classroom sequence when François asks his students to write themselves a nameplate, we see that Chérif has drawn an Algerian flag next to his name. Several of the boys are obsessed with the *Coupe d’Afrique des Nations* and support the team of the nation from which members of their family once came—Morocco, for example, or Mali. Those boys ridicule Carl, whose family background lies in the West Indies (that is, in a *département d’outre-mer*), when he says that the national team he supports is France. In his “self-portrait” he says he hates racists, and also hates Materazzi, an Italian

footballer who in the 2006 World Cup final was memorably headbutted by Zinedine Zidane. (Materazzi had insulted him, and it was widely believed that the insult was racist; Zidane was sent off; and France lost.⁶) Carl's support for the French team does not mean, however, that his perspective is one of republican color-blindness; the players he is most interested in, and pretends to be when playing football in the yard, are Black.⁷

Distinctions of social class are, of course, caught up with these racial distinctions in many scenes. At one point a question from Esméralda prompts François to start teaching the imperfect subjunctive, an exercise greeted with scepticism by his students. The obvious justification for doing so would be that it is a feature of some literary texts, especially older ones. François alludes to this in the novel, albeit half-heartedly as a teacher, and with self-referential irony as a novelist: "vous le trouverez dans des romans, et encore, pas très souvent" (189). In the film he does not offer any sort of literary justification: the students assert that the standard by which French should be judged is contemporary spoken language, and François gets drawn onto that ground, claiming, unconvincingly, that he and his friends use the imperfect subjunctive regularly in conversation—after which he is forced to admit that to do so is rare in speech, and that the students may be right when they label it "bourgeois." François's principal argument in the end is that the students need to distinguish between different registers, the informal and the formal, "l'oral et l'écrit." That seems like sound advice, but the distinctions are unclear to them. In the book (92) one of the boys makes a telling confusion between "l'intuition" and "la tuition;" what someone like François—middle-class and well educated—has come to experience as intuition regarding the nature and usage of different registers needs to be learned.⁸ As François suggests, that is one of the purposes of French lessons, and would be in any school, with any group of students. Here again one might challenge the origin and nature of the norm, but the questions of principle are complicated by pragmatic questions about social cohesion and the prospect of social mobility: those with "non-standard" French, or a poor command of the norms of written French, may be disadvantaged socially if they are not made aware of, and given a command of, certain norms of speech and writing, whatever the socio-historical foundations of those norms may be.⁹

The lack of clarity about the difference between, and relative status of, the "spoken" and the "written" lies partly in the distinction itself, of course; and inevitably this plays out differently in the book and the film. In the book there is a moment of irony—irony about linguistic norms in writing, and about teaching—when François says to the class: "c'est pas parce qu'on vous demande d'écrire un dialogue qu'il faut écrire comme on parle, vous voyez ?" (257). His concern, only partially hidden behind the shifting use of "on" (and the joke), may be more about how *they* speak than how he speaks, as the exchange over *verlan* suggested; again, hierarchical identities are in play. In both book and film, François's speech is different from his students'; for example, the film, where speech was only semi-scripted, captures a moment when Bégaudeau interjected an ironic "certes," an expression that the students, and the people playing the students, were unlikely to use, especially in speech. (Cantet points this out humorously to Bégaudeau in one of the "extra" videos on the DVD.) At the same time, however, his writing, as well as his own speech, differs from the style of writing he advocates. Things get complicated at this point: in the book the words Bégaudeau writes are presented as speech, and he goes on to write, about the "ne" of negation, "à l'écrit, on le met. [...] Toujours le faire, même si soi-même on trouve pas ça important" (258). This is nicely self-reflexive: he's just omitted the "ne" in writing, contradicting the advice offered in that very sentence, as well as the advice in the previous sentence about not transcribing how one talks. We see and "hear" that writing and speech are different; but at the same

time we are reminded that literary writing often includes speech, and is not always, and need not be, characterized by elevated or so-called “written” language. Any trained teacher/critic of literature would recognize this, of course.

Bégaudeau’s book is enriched by the various strands of irony and reflexivity here, and, without wanting to exaggerate its originality or other merits as a literary work, I would say that it develops a fruitful relationship with the long and ever-evolving written tradition that it evokes, and that it joins. I am thinking also of a moment towards the end when the students (including two called Abdelkrimo and Fatih, perhaps a nod towards *L’Esquive*) are involved in a public performance of a nineteenth-century play, Musset’s *On ne badine pas avec l’amour*. For me, at least, the dated but beautiful language that is quoted from Perdican’s speech was a highlight of Bégaudeau’s novel (286–87: a speech about the universal importance of love), partly because it was given renewed resonance when it was juxtaposed with, and erupted into, Bégaudeau’s differently spoken/written French, and its different socio-cultural context. When Bégaudeau’s book turned into Cantet’s film, however, Musset did not survive the transposition. Indeed, in the film, French literary tradition disappears almost entirely.

That shift and that near-absence seem to me to have something to do with adaptation in the post/colonial sense (here, the attempt by François, and by Cantet, to respond to a particular student body, whose particularity is understood partly in ethnic/racial terms) as well as the cinematic sense. When the history teacher, who appears rather traditional and inflexible compared with François, suggests to him that they make thematic links across classes around the *ancien régime* and the Enlightenment, François, although he has not yet decided what to study with his group, brushes him off, saying Voltaire is too hard for them. When, in one of the closing scenes, they discuss what they have learned that year, the only book mentioned is Plato’s *Republic* (which was not on the curriculum—see footnote 3); the script had suggested a positive mention of Boris Vian’s *L’Écume des jours* (214), but that did not make it into the film, where Esméralda comments that all the books chosen by François are terrible. On the board in the background during a lesson on versification there is a very brief glimpse of three lines from Arthur Rimbaud’s poem “Les Effarés,” but you could easily miss it, and that particular lesson soon disintegrates catastrophically, with François calling two of his students “pétasses,” and Souleymane, one of the most difficult students, storming out and accidentally injuring Khoumba. The only book we see them studying is Anne Frank’s *The Diary of a Young Girl*. That is a good thing to study, I would say, and indeed its almost incontrovertible value could be the reason it was chosen, by the fictional teacher or by Cantet. What is more, the choice may also, as Guiney points out (2017, chapter 6), reflect educational policy at the time. But it is a choice that raises—or, to put it another way, avoids—important questions about what in the tradition of (French) literary study is worth preserving, for François’s particular students or for other students.

What is striking about the choice of Anne Frank’s text from that perspective is its significant distance from the traditional foundations of French as an academic subject: it was not written in French, and it is not a “literary” text in the sense that has been central to that tradition, which associates literariness strongly with fictionality as well as a particular creative relationship to language. What is more, there is little sign that the students find the text engaging. Nobody in the class, François complains, has read the extract they were asked to read; and they don’t really discuss it. Instead, it comes to serve as a kind of pretext to do something else. This suggests that if the curriculum is being “adapted” here, it is not only through the choice of text but also in terms of critical/pedagogical methodology.

François uses Anne Frank's diary to launch an exercise in self-portraiture—a move that may seem a little inapt, if you feel that more attention is due to the specificities of the text and its context. The students' objections are different: one, Lucie, protests that her own life is uninteresting in comparison; and Souleymane refuses to take part on the grounds that François's interest in their personal lives is intrusive. Yet despite the students' misgivings François persists, and in the end the student who is seen to get most out of the exercise is Souleymane. Cantet, it seems, wants us to view the exercise as a success; but in some ways his film seems to have other ideas, or at least to make room for a sceptical response.

The scene where the self-portrait exercise is seen to take flight is filmed not in the usual classroom but the computer room, and the different space is the first of a series of visual shifts marking François's move into a realm of greater pedagogical success. This is not to deny that in the main classroom scenes too there is a lot that feels positive. There Cantet shot with three cameras, one trained constantly on François, the other two on students as they answered questions or messed around.¹⁰ The way the camera loses focus and pans belatedly to catch up with a student who suddenly speaks, or draws attention in some other way, makes the classroom feel full of energy. It helps give the images their "documentary" feel, which is an aesthetic choice and partly a matter of artifice, but also reflects a degree of improvisation in those scenes. As well as connoting authenticity, then, Cantet's technique captures something authentic about the kind of improvised and somewhat theatrical performance required of teachers as they respond to students' interventions and interruptions (another small, and usually positive, form of adaptation), and their testing out of different roles. But, especially in the film's cinemascope format, the space also feels crowded; and the camerawork, as well as the narrative, conveys the sense that some energy is being wasted. François tries to maintain the level of control needed for a sense of direction; and in scenes such as the exchange over the subjunctive, his position of authority is suggested by the way he stands at the front while the students are seated in rows facing him, and looking up at him. Shots and counter-shots establish a sense of complicity at moments, for example when François teases Khoumba, but this set-up can also suggest an oppositional relationship, and we also see conflict. In the computer room, by contrast, everything appears calmer and more purposeful: all the students are focused, the camera is less twitchy, and when François approaches Souleymane, he stoops down to look closely at the computer screen, turning his head to look at Souleymane from quite an intimate distance, sharing the shot with Souleymane, Boubacar and other students. Soon after this we see Souleymane standing alongside François, smiling with pride and embarrassment as François acclaims his self-portrait, a series of photos which François pins up for all to see.

One of the implications of this sequence is that the students respond positively, in personal and educational terms, when they feel that lessons speak to their identities and when they have opportunities to express themselves. As I have already emphasized, these are long-standing aspects of the French literary/linguistic pedagogical tradition in play here, but we are also seeing successful adaptation of some sort. Although Souleymane initially objected to the self-portrait exercise as intrusive, he overcomes his misgivings and takes the chance to represent something of his personal life. One photo shows his Koranic tattoo, another his multiracial group of friends, all drawn from his class. His shift of attitude is connected above all, however, with his most arresting image, a photo of his mother. We see it first at the beginning of the sequence, in a close-up on the viewfinder of Souleymane's camera, and it gains in significance because we see it a couple more times as he works on the computer, before Cantet's camera lingers over it, again in close-up, when the photos are put on display. Souleymane's mother holds up a defensive hand towards the camera, and we can

see (and we are also told) that she dislikes photos; so *she* still finds the exercise intrusive. This reinforces our impression that there is a gap between her and the world of the school (and of the film): we were introduced to her in the sequence immediately before this one, when she was François's last appointment at the parents' evening, an encounter that left him looking deflated. She can neither speak nor read French, and is unaware of her son's difficulties in the classroom. We hear her talking quite a lot, but many of her comments go untranslated by Souleymane's brother, who is serving as interpreter. What is more, none of her speech is translated for the film audience. Her lack of French is disempowering, and disadvantageous to her son. When the photo brings her, and his personal world, into the school for the second time, Souleymane shows he is willing to override her sense of intrusion, and perhaps a certain sense of difference; the implication is that the image (along with the photo of his classmates) represents a successful move away from her and towards the school's own social and educational cultures.

The apparent success of the self-portrait exercise in the eyes of the students and of Cantet is reconfirmed when, at the end of the school year, and the end of the film, François unexpectedly gives all his students bound copies of their collected work. The delight they express seems real, and plausible. By that time, however, Souleymane has been kicked out of school, after his mother has appeared for the third and final time, accompanying him at the *conseil disciplinaire*—a scene whose implications I will examine further in the final section. For now, I want simply to note that Souleymane's fate represents one significant limit on the achievements of the self-portrait exercise, irrespective of the exercise's merits in itself. Another limit, if one is looking for ways to adapt and renew, rather than reasons to discard, the French/literary curriculum and its role in developing "l'esprit de discussion," is that Souleymane's experience of educational success depends not on writing but on photography. This is a medium with which he is already familiar, and with which he feels relatively comfortable. Although François asks his students to *write* a self-portrait, he greets Souleymane's switch of medium with enthusiasm. (He subsequently asks Souleymane to add brief captions, but we barely see them and they do not seem essential to his work.) Within the diegetic world François's openness to the switch is understandable in terms of Souleymane's prior disengagement, as well as the inherent interest of photography as a medium of self-portraiture.¹¹ It may also be understandable, if one looks at things from Cantet's perspective and with cinematic adaptation in mind, in terms of photography's close relationship with cinema. Be that as it may, the upshot is that the French lesson is seen to work best when François proves willing to move away from both language and literature.

Compared with François, the French teacher in *L'Esquive* comes across as relatively conventional in her approach. She has some success in drawing students into an "unadapted" curriculum, in the form of Marivaux's play *Le Jeu de l'amour et du hasard* of 1730. This presumably reflects something of Kechiche's own education (he was born in Tunisia, but grew up and went to school in France), and an interest in French literary tradition. In most respects the double encounter of Kechiche and of the students with Marivaux appears to be a triumph. The students carry the Marivaux beyond the classroom both as characters—that is, voluntarily, in the film's internal universe—and as facets of Kechiche's highly accomplished transposition of the play into film form. So while the literary source material is unadapted within the diegetic world in the classroom, rehearsals and a performance, it is at the same time radically adapted cinematically, shaping plot, theme and dynamics in playful and thought-provoking ways. To a significant extent, the film's meanings

emerge through the counterpoint and interpenetration of the narratives, genres, and historically specific languages—the worlds—of the play and the film.

One of the effects of this juxtaposition/incorporation is that we are constantly reminded that the teenagers' way of talking to each other, and interacting with one another, involves a kind of performance in which the everyday is infused with the theatrical. It is possible to think of their interactions as a kind of modern *marivaudage*, an idea pursued by critics including Swamy (2007) and Gomot (2014). Seeing things that way need not imply that the characters' speech lacks real emotion, or that the film lacks authenticity.¹² On one level, this modern *marivaudage* is simply the way these characters speak, and the way they are; but the quotidian theatricality of their way of being means that even a relatively inflexible character like Fathi proves capable of switching codes and stepping in and out of different roles, as must the four main characters in Marivaux's play. When Krimo's mother comes to the window after Fathi has barked Krimo's name outside their block of flats, Fathi immediately shifts tone and register. The abruptness of the change makes it quite funny—it's almost as if he's a language learner doing his oral exam ("Bonjour Madame... Comment allez-vous?")—but as in the play, the stagey and the real are intertwined. The switch of register is at once a performance of politeness that seems slightly artificial, and a genuine form of politeness. In such ways the film's high cultural underpinning, which could be taken to reveal a gulf between Marivaux's world and the world of these young people, can also suggest that their "sub"culture should indeed be thought of as a culture, not a lack of culture; and it allows the circulation of value between the two worlds: a certain sense of dignity, say, or, at the level of representation, a certain sense of "relevance." This also raises questions about any assumption that "mainstream"/literary culture, or bourgeois culture, is the true, direct, or sole inheritor, or prolongation, of the now distant culture of Marivaux.¹³

The culmination of the students' work on Marivaux is the performance of the play just before the end of the film, an event that brings together the students, the teacher and a whole community of friends and families. Krimo, however, is a notable absence, or a presence only on the margins. His attempts to take part, and so to give himself a way of courting Lydia, have not necessarily got him any further with her, and have been disastrous from the teacher's perspective. His failure has a deep effect on the whole tone of the film as well as its plot, and this complicates any sense that the unadapted curriculum in the diegetic world, in the form of Marivaux's play, has proved an unequivocal success. Nevertheless, the fact that some of Krimo's friends have embraced the play suggests that some of the difficulties he faces are his own. What is it, then, that holds Krimo back, and what in the Marivaux, besides *marivaudage*, works for the others? And might Krimo's particular case, along with that of Souleymane, have any general implications with regard to the curriculum and the educational system in which he never seems to feel at home?

Gender is one factor that shapes and seems to inhibit Krimo's participation, and another area in which the adaptation or transposition of the play's world into the film's world is deft and illuminating. Across both film and play the spheres of masculine and feminine behavior are in constant interaction and dialogue, but also somewhat distinct. At moments the interaction involves male dominance, both indirect—manifested for example in a kind of machismo that is internalized to some degree by the girls but is more marked among the boys—and direct, for example in Fathi's sometimes violent interventions in the girls' lives. (At different moments, when he isn't acting/being polite to Krimo's mother, Fathi acts as a marriage broker, a bully, and some kind of would-be theater or film director.) These unequal gender codes may help explain why in general the girls seem more comfortable

with theater than do the boys: the codes of femininity seem to allow greater awareness of—and greater comfort with—the performance of gender as performance. That appears to soften the boundary between theater and reality, making it easier for them to step into theatrical roles. Lydia seems simultaneously self-conscious and unselfconscious (without seeming fake or “not herself”) when she keeps using her fan, a prop from the play, even when she is not, or not fully, “in character.” All of this may also help explain why the girls, in this film as in *Entre les murs*, often appear more comfortable in the classroom, which, as noted earlier, is another theatrical space.

Other issues faced by Krime are more individual. Whereas Cantet’s film is set almost entirely within the walls of the school, never showing us the students in any other context, Kechiche’s camera spends most of its time in public spaces, where the young people hang out when not at home and not at school. In *Entre les murs*, as we have seen, the little we learn of the students’ wider lives surfaces—along with our sense of how little we know about them, and how little the school knows—through snatches of dialogue, through the self-portrait exercise, and through the walk-on parts of family members who attend meetings. In the case of Krime, by contrast, not only do we see and learn something about his mother (the only parental figure with a substantial role); we also go inside his home. Throughout the film, and especially in the classroom, Krime’s expression is often emotionally blank, but his relationship with his mother is visibly warm; and the intimate scenes when he is with her or alone in his room are important to our sense that he has a complex inner life. What is more, the scenes in his flat lead into the first two classroom scenes, inviting us to make connections, which I will explore further, between his home life and his experience of school. In the classroom scenes his inner life is crucial, in fact, although to the teacher it is invisible, or visible only as a kind of blockage.

The first classroom sequence follows an evening scene in Krime’s flat. He returns home to find his mother asleep on the sofa, exhausted after a visit to her partner, his father, in prison. When she tells Krime there is a picture for him in her bag, we don’t get to see it properly, or not at first: a side shot shows Krime looking at it, but we are not offered the point of view shot we might expect. Then, expressing sympathy for how worn out his mother is, he says “Vivement le voilier !” and goes into his bedroom. The remark makes sense when we see him in close-up, from behind, pinning the picture to the wall. It is a painting of a sailing boat, and the next shot, from the same angle but further back, reveals several similar paintings already attached to the wall—three of which are then emphasized in a series of extreme close-ups. They seem to be connected with notions of escape or transformation, and hopes for a better future. (The fantasy behind “Vivement le voilier !” is echoed in a remark—slightly implausible, or non-naturalistic—made later by Fathi when expressing regret that Krime has split up with Magali; he had imagined them all, he says, sailing around the world, with Krime and Magali’s children.) The paintings that Krime’s father sends to him, in which at least some of the boats look like dhows, may also suggest something about art’s relationship with origins, and certainly something about its role in both self-expression and communication.

When we move into the classroom the sound of the teacher’s voice precedes fractionally the cut away from the bedroom; but what we see first is not the teacher but Krime again. This transition, with its overlapping sound, suggests that the different spaces are leaching into each other. The last close-up of a sailing ship, some kind of point of view shot (emotionally if not necessarily formally), leads to another close-up: a slightly out-of-focus Krime with his head down, making his own drawings. The whole classroom scene, like many

in this film as in Cantet's film, is shot with a highly mobile, often unstable camera, frequently so intimately or even intrusively close to individual characters that they break the frame. After a few shots of the teacher and then some other students we get an extreme close-up of Krimo's downturned face, then, very briefly, his drawings, a tangle of schoolboy doodles. What we hear during these shots are some instructions for French homework, as the teacher dictates an essay question about how Marivaux could be said to privilege emotion over action. One could say the same about Kechiche's work in this scene. Krimo, wrapped up in his thoughts, fails to act as he should (he appears not to be writing down the homework task), and all this establishes another link, and another contrast, with the action—or inaction—in Krimo's flat, where the understated emotional currents between Krimo, his mother and his absent father found some sort of expression in spaces that were low-key, darkly lit and relatively static.

Krимо perks up when three of his classmates—including Lydia—are called on to rehearse in front of the others. We see them in a shot over Krimo's shoulder, close to his point of view. Lydia/Lisette, now in close-up, launches in, and when Rachid/Arlequin responds, the camera pans belatedly across to his face, as if reacting to spontaneous dialogue. As in *Entre les murs* this technique gives the sequence a "documentary" feel in a loose sense, and here it associates the play more closely with the diegetic "real;" but at other moments—for example when we cut to Frida/Silvia just before her entry—we can see that the camera knows what will happen next. Whereas Cantet's technique, and Bégaudeau's diverse roles, may blur the boundaries between fiction and reality in *Entre les murs* (making it easier, perhaps, for some commentators to treat it as a documentary, or as a pretext to express their personal anxieties about contemporary education), it remains clear that Kechiche in his film, like Marivaux in his play, is constructing in an exploratory way, for his audience, the fictional world of his characters.

At the same time, as I have noted already, the film points to theatrical aspects of everyday behaviour, and of teachers' and students' roles in the classroom; and the play within the film, for all its theatricality and overt fictionality, acts as a bridge between the classroom and the world outside. The film shuttles between the two spheres as it investigates Krimo's inner life. Another dimension, more overtly political, opens up when the rehearsal of the scene from Marivaux is interrupted by Lydia asking the teacher a question about their roles, about how best to play rich people playing poor people and vice versa. The question has additional emotional weight for the audience because we have already seen it prompt an argument between Lydia and Frida when they were rehearsing on their own. Beyond the immediate issue of dramatic technique lie questions about the relationship between the rich and the poor and about the relationship between theater and reality. The teacher responds with a forceful critical analysis:

la question qu'elle [Lydia] pose, elle nous amène vraiment au cœur de la pièce. Ce que Marivaux nous dit, là, les riches jouent les pauvres, les pauvres jouent les riches, et personne n'y arrive ... Personne n'y arrive, bien, ce qu'il nous montre c'est qu'on est complètement prisonnier de notre condition sociale, et que, quand on est riche pendant 20 ans, pauvre(s) pendant 20 ans, on peut toujours se mettre en haillons quand on est riche, et puis en robe de haute couture quand on est pauvre, on se débarrasse pas d'un langage, d'un certain type de sujet de conversation, d'une manière de s'exprimer, de se tenir, qui indiquent d'où on vient. (...) On est conditionné, complètement conditionné par son milieu d'origine, et on reste entre soi. Et on peut toujours se déguiser, on n'échappe pas à sa condition d'origine. Donc, quand vous devez jouer les riches et les pauvres qui jouent les pauvres et les riches, il y a des moments où ils y arrivent—mais pas vraiment, il reste toujours des traces de cette condition—puis des moments ils y arrivent pas du tout ; il y a les vieux réflexes qui viennent.

The camera stays close to the teacher's face for most of this speech but cuts occasionally to the students, notably when they chorus "des pauvres" in response to her question about who the poor fall in love with. This speech and its echoes through the subsequent classroom sequences have complex implications for questions about the fit between the students and the curriculum—and more specifically here about the place in their education of this old play, and of her analysis.

The teacher's generalizations, which pass through the play and into the world, are quite compelling, and are articulated from a critical perspective that may be understood to be, or intended to be, politically progressive and egalitarian; but in their context, they may also sound quite brutal. Again here, as in François's classroom, the would-be general, impersonal pronoun "on" proves not to be entirely impersonal; it keeps fissuring, or getting stuck to one person or another, losing some of its generality, and eventually giving way to an awkward alternation between "vous" and "ils." The teacher's own position in relation to the generalizations is (again) very different from that of the students—which casts doubt on their general validity, and more specifically here on the supposed universality of the play and/or its "message." Along with her age and position, the teacher's way of speaking French already marks her, for us as for her students, as someone different, from a relatively privileged background; and everyone can see that she, like François, and unlike most of her students, is White. Perhaps in some sense she too is "prisonni[ère] de [sa] condition sociale," but the constraints on her are quite dissimilar to those faced by someone like Krimo. "[O]n n'échappe pas à sa condition d'origine" is advice more pertinent, and more aptly connoted, for Krimo than for the teacher; she probably has no particular reason to want to "escape." For his family, as we have just been reminded, imprisonment is not just a metaphor. Similarly, when Lydia talks about putting on a "robe de haute couture quand on est pauvre," the film has primed us for the remark to take on particular emotional and socio-cultural weight. We have seen her haggling her way, with a subsidy from Krimo, into the posh frock she is wearing in the classroom, and it impresses her friends ("on dirait Miss France," says Zina) but will not necessarily appear posh to everyone who watches the film. The scene ends with another close-up of Krimo's face, slightly dreamy but attentive as the teacher explains that even love, reputedly a pure sentiment, is "influencé par l'origine sociale."

In the second classroom scene Krimo, who has bribed a friend to allow him to take the role of Arlequin in the play, has achieved a limited sort of transformation: he is now wearing a costume, and gets to be on stage with Lydia. This scene, like the earlier one, is preceded by a short sequence in his bedroom. Krimo is already in the harlequin costume, and has the possibility of some sort of success ahead of him, though he looks less than confident. He has managed, more or less, to learn his lines. But in class he mumbles them in a monotone, unable to bring them to life. The teacher could be talking about the film as well as the play, and to us as well as him, when she asks: "tu te rends compte de l'importance du langage dans cette pièce et dans cette scène ?" Understandably she becomes increasingly frustrated. When she says to him: "il est déguisé, il s'amuse, il imite un maître—tu sais ce que ça veut dire ? Ça veut dire quelqu'un qui a du pouvoir, donc essaie de... essaie de jouer quelqu'un qui a du pouvoir," the different socio-cultural positions of the teacher and the students again make themselves felt a little awkwardly (to us, and to the students). She, the "maître(sse)" in the classroom, has some power; he can only try to pretend.

We return, very briefly, to Krimeo's bedroom, and to his often hidden emotional life, after that second classroom sequence: we see him slumped in a chair, sniffing and passing his hand over his face, perhaps wiping away tears. The medium shot, from slightly above, shows more details from his room that suggest more of his inner world, if you look closely: another sailing ship or two; a surprisingly neat desk; the corner of a poster commemorating Muhammad Ali's knock-out of Sonny Liston. Some discreet extra-diegetic music rises up, for the first time in the film, carrying us through the next brief side-shot of Krimeo smoking (perhaps somewhere different, perhaps at a different time), and into the beginning of the sequence where Krimeo tries to kiss Lydia when rehearsing with her outside school. The music creates another bridge between his private thoughts and the world of drama. We do not hear music again until near the end of the film, when the Marivaux performance is preceded by a play performed by young children, also a moment of heightened emotion. In that final theater scene music is heard twice, in different forms, when the children pretend to be birds. Its uncertain transdiegetic status suggests it is about the audience's emotions as much as it is part of the performance; and again art—music this time—becomes associated with imagined escape and/or transformation.

The sense of joy in that generally up-beat final theater scene, to which I will return in the closing section, is poles apart from the third and final classroom scene, which is typical of Kechiche in its use of precarious close-ups and lots of shouting, and the way it goes on and on long after you start to hope that it might stop. As in earlier scenes the camera tends to move gradually nearer to the characters' faces to ramp up the emotional tension. It reaches its peak when the teacher, ever more exasperated by Krimeo, yells at him:

Il y a du plaisir à faire ça, il doit y avoir du plaisir à sortir un peu de soi. Sors de toi ! D'accord ? Amuse-toi ! Aie du plaisir à ça. Change de langage, change de manière de parler, change de manière de bouger, amuse-toi ! (...) Amuse-toi, libère-toi, tu comprends ce que je veux dire ? (...)
AMUSE-TOI ! DONNE-TOI !

The experience—and the uncomfortable pleasure—of watching this involves a complex layering of perception. In this sequence as in others we know the whole thing is a fiction (albeit one that relies on and captures many facets of reality), with another fiction inside it; and we see the characters simultaneously succeed and fail in their attempts to transform themselves, verbally and otherwise. It is clear why the teacher reacts to Krimeo's performance by saying: "il n'y a pas de cœur, il n'y a pas de conviction, il n'y a rien," but there is dramatic irony here: as we know, and most of Krimeo's immediate audience in the classroom knows, his inhibitions stem partly from the fact that his heart really is involved. He is genuinely attracted to Lydia, in the same way that Arlequin is attracted to Lisette, and does not need to be told: "elle est belle, tu touches sa main, c'est merveilleux." In one of the few overt signs of emotion in his performance as Arlequin he discreetly caresses the back of Lydia's hand, a gesture shown to us in close-up, but presumably invisible to the teacher. He has already given of himself by taking on the role; and by disguising himself—not as Arlequin, but as someone who wants to take on the role of Arlequin in a play—he has done what the characters in the play have done. He has adapted, in his way, to the material he is being asked to study, however inflexible he appears to his teacher. There is a further dimension of irony for the film audience: we can enjoy how well all the *real* actors here are playing their roles, including Osman Elkharraz in the role of Krimeo, made into a "real" actor at least for the duration of this film, and acting as someone who cannot act.

There are a couple more layers of possible irony here, and perhaps some further implications for how teachers should choose their material, how they should approach it with their students, and what they should expect to come of it. The first emerges if one recalls that Marivaux worked with the “Comédie-Italienne,” whose acting and staging were non-naturalistic. According to Sermain (2013, 116), Marivaux, like other playwrights of the era, “ne compte pas produire sur scène une illusion de réalité ou de présence.” Migé makes the same kind of point (2006, 16): “Marivaux apprécie le jeu collectif, distancié et dépourvu de naturel : ils [les comédiens] jouent et montrent qu’ils jouent sans jamais faire corps avec leurs personnages. Le masque qu’ils portent interdit d’ailleurs toute identification et accentue la théâtralité.” I don’t mean to suggest that Marivaux would have admired Krimo’s technique; even in the different context described by these critics, Krimo’s performance would, I imagine, have appeared less than riveting. This literary-historical backdrop is a reminder, nonetheless, that actors have not always been expected to “inhabit” their role, and that being a member of a theater audience did not always mean, and does not have to mean, finding the characters convincing or seeking any simple form of identification.¹⁴

Finally, a certain sense of irony may arise from the apparent disjuncture between the theoretical, political analysis of the play that Krimo’s teacher has offered her students, and her expectations of them as students. As we have seen, before bellowing at Krimo: “Change de langage, change de manière de parler, change de manière de bouger,” she had told her class that they were “complètement prisonnier[s] de [leur] condition sociale” and explained: “on se débarrasse pas d’un langage, (...) d’une manière de s’exprimer, de se tenir, qui indiquent d’où on vient.” If you put those comments together, it is tempting to think that she has no right to be surprised if Krimo cannot change.

In her introduction to the 1991 anthology *La République et l’école* Elisabeth Badinter wrote: “Grâce à l’école, des générations d’enfants pauvres ou immigrés se sont intégrés à la société française et ont pu y faire leur chemin, en respectant les valeurs de la République” (cited by Guiney 2004, 184). Both *Entre les murs* and *L’Esquive* capture some of the positive energies implied by Badinter’s assertion, but also cast light on its internal tensions, and the way it makes light of the difficulties faced by a Krimo or a Souleymane. The films may help us detect a whiff of racialization in Badinter’s phrase “enfants immigrés;” that sort of label is often attached to children born in France who have not themselves immigrated, children who are—like Esméralda and virtually all of the other students in these films—French, whatever the complexities of their identities and affiliations, and who are in any case already part of French society. The films can also help us see something crude, and revealing, in the way Badinter places immigrants and the “poor” in the same relationship to education. There is of course significant overlap between the two categories, but it is simply wrong to imply that the poor are not members of French society until school takes charge of them; the phrasing suggests unselfconsciously that true French society—the norm into which others may be assimilated, or that they may seek to challenge or adapt—is to be identified with “les bourgeois,” as Lydia puts it to her friends, or “les riches,” as she puts it to the teacher, and *their* “values” or culture—or subculture. On another level, as the films also suggest, Badinter’s remark may implicitly exaggerate schools’ success in allowing children to “make their way” in society and to achieve “integration”—another word with colonial echoes—when some of those children start out disadvantaged economically and/or by ambient racial discrimination, or other forms of discrimination. Integration or assimilation, into an unequal

order, may not really be on offer to an underclass, even if, as under a colonial regime, a few individuals may “escape” their original social conditions.

What is more, educational institutions, with or without a veneer of “meritocracy,” can serve to perpetuate social hierarchy. Both films are tinged with pessimism about that aspect of education’s social function or effect, even if they also envisage other, more positive capacities and outcomes. In an interview Cantet remarked: “Schools in France create a lot of exclusion. They enable a kind of sorting process—there are those who will attend university, others will be sent to vocational schools, and then there are others who fail or are expelled” (Goodman 2008).¹⁵ In *Entre les murs* the apparent socio-cultural distinctions between the teachers’ common room and the classroom could be read as a sign of that dynamic, and it is evident later in the film. The school year closes with François asking his students what they have learned, and one, Henriette, approaches François timidly, looking crushed, and says she has learned nothing all year, but does not want to go to a *lycée professionnel*—that is, a school “adapted” to less academic students, oriented towards sectors of employment for which more academic education is not required. Cantet’s film also ends up conveying a general sense that François’s classroom, relaxed and accommodating though it may be in some respects, is part of a more rigid hierarchical structure, both educational and social. When Souleymane is expelled—the French verb in this context is *exclure*—it is arguably not for any very good reason; and in any case, the process through which the decision is taken is distorted by the ultimate impulse towards solidarity among the *maîtres*. There may be a vote in the *conseil disciplinaire* but it involves a pantomime of democracy, with a “ludicrously oversized” ballot box whose capaciousness and transparency appear ironic (Strand 2009, 268). As François himself points out (in a spirit of criticism, because his instincts are liberal, and because he has reason to feel guilty about his own behavior as well as his role in this structure), the outcome of these meetings is always *exclusion définitive*. In Souleymane’s case, his mother’s lack of French again makes things more difficult—for him, for François and for (most) spectators of the film. Souleymane is called upon to translate but is reluctant to do so, suggesting—and enacting—a gulf of communication between the school and the diverse cultures that lie intermingled beyond its walls, and that are woven inextricably into students’ experiences of education. In Souleymane’s case, as Khoumba explains to François, expulsion from school will also mean “exclusion” from France. The symbolism linking educational failure or rejection with a wider failure of social integration was chosen by Cantet but could have been chosen by Badinter.¹⁶

L’Esquive also hints at the limits on what schools can achieve in promoting opportunity, equality, and social mobility, and not only through the figure of Krime. Towards the end of the film Krime, Lydia, Zina, Frida and Fathi are stopped and searched by the police. A copy of *Les Jeux de l’amour et du hasard*, crumpled through extensive use, is found in Frida’s pocket, and a police officer flicks through to check if she is hiding something. Perhaps it seems implausible that Frida is interested in her schoolwork, or in that sort of play; and the officer, when she finds nothing compromising inside, tosses it aside. The sequence ends with a close-up of the book stranded on a car bonnet, a shot that surely invites a symbolic interpretation. Frida’s serious-minded involvement with the play and by extension her engagement with school are made to appear irrelevant at this moment—to her, and to the representatives and enforcers of social order. It seems these “enfants pauvres ou immigrés” are being kept in their place.¹⁷

We do not get to see what happens next, however. We may assume that at least some of the group would have been taken off to the police station, but Kechiche cuts abruptly to an

image of a child peaking out from behind a theater curtain, which leads into the sequence where the small children are pretending to be birds, which then, as I mentioned earlier, leads into the final Marivaux performance. Marivaux, it turns out, is on the same bill as an adaptation of Farid al-din Attar's Sufi poem *Conference of the Birds* (though this is not named), and this staging too is a great success.¹⁸ Kechiche shows a contented audience, including Fathi, then a happy community after-party. Magali, we suddenly see, has a new boyfriend, and, although other characters show that they—like us—are surprised by that turn of events, we may have the disconcerting feeling that there are gaps in the narrative logic as well as the chronology. It is almost as if the film is toying with alternative endings, in different registers, and with very different levels of optimism about the transformative powers of theater/film and education. The violent *dénouement*, something of a cliché for a film about the *banlieue*, may appear more plausible;¹⁹ but the joy of the theater scene, implausible or not, leaves us with a generally positive feeling about these students' encounter with the traditional French curriculum in the form of Marivaux.

I suggested earlier that it is tempting to say, in light of the critical/political analysis drawn by the teacher from Marivaux, that she has no right to be surprised if Krimo fails to throw himself into the play, and if in some deeper sense he seems unable to change. That is not quite right, however. The restrictive wider social circumstances evoked in the police scene make her work more difficult, and limit her success, as do the particular problems faced by Krimo; but there would be no point, unless from a deliberately reactionary perspective, in teaching *this* play to *this* group of students, or for that matter to any group of students, if its ultimate and incontrovertible “message”—perhaps the message one might expect from an author from a noble background, and from a play written under the *ancien régime*—was that their identities and life trajectories were essentially fixed.²⁰ There is bathos here, not only because we can see limits to the change the teacher can expect, but also because when she yells at Krimo she mainly just wants him to be a better actor. Yet when she says “Sors de toi ! [...] Change de langage [...] libère-toi” her vocabulary resonates with the highest political ambitions of both art and education. *Fundamentally*, her educational practice must work against the deterministic view that she attributes to Marivaux's play.

This is not to say that her political “reading” of the play is illegitimate, but it gives insufficient weight to the complex and diverse reactions that the play can produce—and in this way misrepresents both how the play “delivers” and the nature of her own work. The close relationship between reality and representation is crucial to both, but so too is the gap between reality and representation. As I emphasized in my discussion of the many-layered and sometimes uncomfortable experience of watching Krimo suffer in the classroom, making sense of film or theater always involves an understanding of the differences between theater/film and reality. Learning from plays, films and literature should involve, and hone, that same understanding, and the complex pleasures and insights it can support. In that creative/pedagogical space, Marivaux's play does not necessarily endorse the idea that “on est complètement prisonnier de notre condition sociale” (as something generalizable, across time and place, from these fictional characters), and certainly cannot require its audiences to do so. One of the markers of a “successful” play, book or film, according to most critics and teachers, is its ability to generate multiple meanings, perhaps to mean different things to different people at different moments, and to hold different meanings in tension. Kechiche's inventive transposition of Marivaux into film and into the suburbs is, to my mind, a particularly good illustration of this sort of polysemy and plasticity. And part of the teacher's job when dealing with something like Marivaux's play—or Kechiche's film—is to allow the students to test out their own varied reactions and interpretations. A text's politics, which

is not determined by authorial origin or intention, cannot be inferred from immanent critical analysis alone; it must be considered as a matter of “impact,” through the experiences as well as the meanings the text offers, in whatever broad and shifting realms of reception it reaches. Those realms are shaped and mediated in significant ways by critics and teachers, but not ruled by them. And it is in that realm of reactions, reaching far beyond any simple process of recognition or identification, that any play carries significance, and that its meanings take substance. Some of the students in *L’Esquive*, irrespective of what the teacher says, and despite the obstacles that their society puts in their way, adapt to her unadapted curriculum, throw themselves into it, and take something positive from it.

All of this implies that the formal or aesthetic dimensions of Marivaux’s play, or anything comparable that we may study—the way it offers a layered experience of affective complexity and allows a proliferation of possible meanings—have a close and positive relationship with how democratic education can work at its best, fostering participation and the “esprit de discussion.” That sort of positive emphasis on artistic forms has shaped my own discussions of the films in this essay, and how I envisage its possible interest to other critics/teachers/students, just as it shapes what I (and many others in the “humanities”) do in the classroom when teaching film or literature. This sort of idea of “form” also helps us see, and articulate, the value of something like Souleymane’s photographic self-portrait, despite what I described earlier as the limits of François’s attempts to help Souleymane: the fact that the opportunity for self-representation was somewhat formalized and creative (to a degree that it is not in incidental speech, say, or choice of clothing) was a precondition of whatever educational success the exercise had as well as whatever aesthetic success he achieved, helping him to come out of himself a little, and communicate better with those around him.

This leaves us with a lot of questions about how we choose what we teach, the norms that, as teachers, we may seek to sustain, adapt or overturn, and how we factor in what we know or assume about the identities of our students. The context of our choices today is not only the current “decolonial” scrutiny of the origins and identities of writers and filmmakers, students and teachers, but the educational and critical history that this essay has both evoked negatively and drawn on. I have depicted that history as compromised by its entanglements with a racialized, gendered nationalism, but it has also helped create spaces, methodologies and vocabularies allowing people in schools and universities to teach and write about literature, theater and film. I have emphasized in this final section that those spaces are opened up and sustained partly through careful attention to the “aesthetic” dimensions of medium, form, narrative construction, and so on; but it must also be emphasized that nobody has ever constructed a curriculum according to purely formal or aesthetic criteria, and that aesthetic criteria have never been pure. Within this history, to which film is a latecomer, anyone with aspirations as the author or creator of the kind of work that other people might take seriously, and might even study, has been disadvantaged by being a woman, by having skin that isn’t (categorized as) White, and even, in a sense, by being alive.

If I have chosen, in this essay and sometimes in the classroom, to talk about *Entre les murs* and *L’Esquive*, the reasons include the fact that those films have helped me think again, and encouraged me to think harder, both about what is worth keeping from a certain literary/pedagogical tradition, aesthetically and pedagogically, and about how and why it might be “adapted”—questioned, extended and altered.²¹ It is also because, after all this, I am still not entirely sure what to make of them. In writing about these films, and in discussing them with colleagues and students, my mind has kept changing. It has mattered to

me that both films treat the endless renegotiation of identities as an ongoing part of the work of cinema and of education alike; and—or but—it has mattered to me too that both, in their different ways, seem to draw on and sustain the assumption that an encounter and negotiation with alterity is among the things making literature, theater and film valuable, in themselves and in the classroom. In Kechiche's film, of course, this includes the alterity of the past and of older forms. The real and imagined distance between Marivaux and the students in *L'Esquive*, an aesthetic matter as well as a matter of history and identity, is part of what allows their array of responses, and brings pleasure to them, or some of them; and the interplay it stimulates between identity and alterity allows them a kind of distance on themselves—and so, perhaps, indirectly, insight into themselves. The artistic forms that allow people to “express” themselves, and that allow writers and filmmakers to speak to other people across significant cultural distances, also take us outside ourselves; and those forms and their languages are never just, and never quite, our own.

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NOTES

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¹ These brief remarks on colonial education draw on my book *Our Civilizing Mission: The Lessons of Colonial Education* (2019). The examples come respectively from Besserve-Bernollin 1981, 135 and Billiard 1899, 33–34.

² Responses to Cantet's film, which I do not have space to discuss, are also relevant here: they evinced widespread willingness to express anxiety—some of it fundamentally racist—about education in a multicultural society. See Debril 2008, an interview with Xavier Darcos, then Minister of Education; Vincendeau 2009; and Christopher 2009. I consider Christopher a possible winner, from a strong field, of the prize for the most offensive comment in the first wave of reception: Cantet's film, he wrote in *The Times*, should be shown to all MPs because of the light it cast on “one of the most toxic ethnic stews in Paris.”

³ Another foundation (see Steiner 1967) is the relationship, again partly imaginary, of modern European literatures to the literatures of Rome and Greece. In *Entre les murs* when we, along with François, discover that Esméralda has been reading Plato's *Republic* in her spare time, the intended effect hinges on the high cultural status that such texts continue, to some degree, to enjoy, but also on their loss of (imagined) centrality and their restricted currency among different sectors of the population.

⁴ When an interviewer remarked to Cantet that France's social make-up is “a direct result of [its] imperial ambitions of centuries before,” Cantet appeared reluctant to pursue the issue (Harris 2008, 102). In Bégaudeau's book colonialism as such comes up in passing. A teacher complains that when a student called Djibril stated that the Spanish are racist, and she responded that the Spanish are no worse than anyone else, all the other students started yelling their agreement with Djibril. This prompts her to describe the students to her colleague as “des vrais sauvages” and to say “Ils ont une espèce de racisme anti-Blanc,” then: “Le colonialisme, OK, mais là ça va y a prescription” (105). In both the film and the book there are more echoes of imperialist/racist language in the speech made by a teacher who complains that the students “m'ont fait un souk,” are “en rut,” and sound like “animaux sauvages” (Bégaudeau 2006, 213–14; the equivalent scene is about 26 minutes into the film).

⁵ One student, Wei, whose family is at risk of being deported, describes himself as Chinese, and in his case that presumably is a description of nationality, but one can assume that most if not all of the other students are French.

⁶ The incident was commemorated in a sculpture by the Algerian artist Adel Abdessemed, shown in Paris then briefly in Qatar; see <https://www.adelabdessemed.com/oeuvres/coup-de-tete/>.

⁷ See Brozgal 2019 for more analysis of the film's handling of issues of race and “color-blindness.”

⁸ For an analysis of this sequence inspired by Pierre Bourdieu's educational theories, see O'Shaughnessy 2015, 138–39.

⁹ An argument along these lines was made by Antonio Gramsci in the Italian context, even though he saw that the very notion of a national language reflected a privileged group's hegemony (see Mayo 2014).

¹⁰ The mode of filming is described by Cantet in interviews and commentaries on the “Extras” disc in the *Artificial Eye* DVD set, and is analysed by critics including Williams (2012).

¹¹ It is worth remembering that the high era of selfies, and of disapproving pronouncements on selfies, had not arrived when the film was made.

¹² Osman Elkharraz, the actor who played the protagonist Krimo, has suggested, however, that Sara Forestier’s delivery did not sound authentic to him; Elkharraz 2016, 65.

¹³ Today, Shea argues (2012, 1145), “Marivaux’s language is as foreign to the well-to-do Parisian as it is to the banlieusard: as such, it belongs more readily to all.”

¹⁴ For those (like me) with little knowledge of that tradition there are helpful entries on *Comédie-Italienne*, *commedia dell’arte* and *Arlechinno* in Hartnoll and Found 1993.

¹⁵ In the same interview Cantet made the (problematic) remark: “People have the notion that school is like a sanctuary, sheltered from the world, where children are taught wonderful things. But unfortunately—or fortunately—these kids don’t have simple lives. They’re all different races, with different backgrounds. In some homes, the French language is never even spoken.”

¹⁶ On the Souleymane storyline see Harris 2008. Vincendeau remarks (2009, 36) that the film made itself a “hostage to fortune” in showing Black and “Beur” students as the most disruptive. Wood, in a thought-provoking discussion of the film (2009), writes that we are supposed to think that for Souleymane to be sent to Africa is “a fate worse than death.”

¹⁷ Kechiche sometimes places emphasis on class where spectators might expect emphasis on race. In the police sequence there is no sign that Lydia is treated any better than the other girls, and we have just discovered that Fathi did not actually know who Lydia was, or that she was White—something that has of course been visible throughout to the other characters and to spectators, but that never gains any explicit or unequivocal relevance.

¹⁸ The incorporation of this material, according to Sachs’s pleasingly counter-intuitive argument (2014, 144), may even be “the film’s quintessential republican gesture.”

¹⁹ Swamy (2007, 63) discusses the police scene as an “eminently recognizable trope,” arguing that Kechiche’s ellipsis “emphasizes the very quotidian nature of such violent encounters.”

²⁰ Tarr 2007 discusses this tension, linking the teacher’s confidence in the play with Kechiche’s assumption that the young amateur actors in his film would also benefit from access to the “means of expression” (139). Tarr worries that the film “runs the danger of allowing a white professional actress to outperform the non-professional beur actors” (139). I am not sure how far that amounts to a criticism of the film, but it is true that Forestier’s subsequent career has been the most successful, for reasons that may be linked to race as well as class. See also Elkharraz 2016.

²¹ One interesting pedagogical/critical response to this complex landscape is the anthology *Entre-Textes : Dialogues littéraires et culturels* edited by Panaité and Klekovkina (2018).