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## Islam, Immigrants, and the Angry Young Man: Laurent Cantet and the “limits of fabricated realism”

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## Islam, Immigrants, and the Angry Young Man: Laurent Cantet and the “limits of fabricated realism”

### Abstract

My paper juxtaposes Laurent Cantet's films *The Class* (2008) and *The Workshop* (2017) to explore how they are infused with concerns about radical Islam and the place of Muslim immigrants in the West. Both films center on "angry young men" facing class-based marginalization, who are prone to anti-social behavior. In *The Workshop*, however, a great effort is made to reveal the intellectual potential and moral complexity of the young white French-born Antoine, whose alienation is defined by his attraction to the xenophobic and Islamophobic rhetoric of the Far Right, whereas viewers of *The Class* are kept at arm's length from Souleymane, a Malian immigrant teenager whose nature as a recalcitrant student prone to violent outbursts is interwoven with signifiers emphasizing his Muslim identity. In contrasting these antiheroes, I highlight the way Cantet, despite his politically progressive veneer, perpetuates dominant narratives of Muslim immigrants as intractably foreign, which are rooted in colonialism but have experienced a resurgence since 9/11. The cumulative effect of the divergences in these characters' fates is to depict an angry young Muslim man as innately threatening and "different," unable to assimilate into European culture and drawn inexorably to a tragic end, while an angry young white man embodies great promise, distorted and nearly thwarted by external socioeconomic and cultural factors. Taken together, these films play out western tendencies to marginalize Muslims or reinforce stereotypes of them as inscrutable and alien, while centering, humanizing and valorizing white men.

### Keywords

9/11, Islam, Islamophobia, Muslims, nationalism, Laurent Cantet, "The Class", "The Workshop", Begaudeau

### Author Notes

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*What he brings back from his expedition is but a harvest of stereotypes that express the limits of fabricated realism.*<sup>1</sup>

Laurent Cantet has built his career on films with disaffected antiheroes. His embattled young men, struggling to find their place in the world, also function as a sign of their times, reflecting political and cultural currents in France and the West more broadly. While Cantet's narratives invariably hinge on social class and economic insecurity, they more recently foreground tensions around religious identity as it overlaps with race and nationality, reflecting debates on immigration that have emerged in reaction to rising unemployment and acts of terrorism in western Europe. His most recent, *The Workshop (L'Atelier* [2017]) raises such hot-button issues through the protagonist Antoine, a teenager who espouses far right Islamophobic political propaganda. This latest incarnation of Cantet's antihero was preceded a decade earlier by Souleymane of *The Class (Entre les murs* [2008]) which, coming close on the heels of 9/11 and the 2004 Madrid bombings, was infused with concerns about radical Islam and the place of Muslim immigrants in France through this rebellious Muslim student. Souleymane and Antoine, though on opposite ends of the political spectrum, are linked in their roles as "angry young men," a term which captures the sense of class-based marginalization they share and the resentment that stems from it. While the concept of the "angry young man" originated across the channel to describe a literary movement of writers in postwar England,<sup>2</sup> Cantet's millennial rebels nonetheless embody its spirit, especially as the

term has expanded into broader usage.<sup>3</sup> As working-class teenagers on the cusp of manhood, the limited prospects both face lead them from bitterness and alienation to rage, expressed primarily through their scorn for their bourgeois teachers. Structurally, too, *The Class* and *The Workshop* bear a striking resemblance to one another (much as their similar titles suggest) since the action in both films revolves around a cohort of students that is racially diverse, but united by class, who spar with a Parisian writing teacher in whom they sense both privilege and hypocrisy.

Culturally, however, these two angry young men appear quite different: Antoine is white, a native of France, presumably from a Christian background, living in a depressed industrial town in the South, while Souleymane is Black and Muslim, the son of immigrants from Mali who live in Paris. Yet what ties these two together as profoundly as their roles as alienated provocateurs is the way the characterization of both is imbricated with anxiety over a politicized version of Islam. Souleymane and Antoine are disruptors, each driven by an impulse to rebel that includes hints of political extremism – in Souleymane’s case, in support of Islam, and in Antoine’s, against it – that develops into a threat of physical violence. The plots of *The Workshop* and *The Class* (which I summarize in more detail in the sections below) hinge on the actions of these angry young men, culminating in an act of physical aggression against their teachers in each film’s climax. Both films’ resolutions, in turn, point to the fates of these angry young men beyond the space of the classroom in the larger world.

Ironically, Cantet's parents were themselves teachers for whom he has said it was "not very easy...to fit with the system," referring to their "progressive" influence on him.<sup>4</sup> As a filmmaker, he is viewed as "one of France's foremost practitioners of a realist, socially engaged cinema," considered "leftist but not dogmatic," as one *New York Times* critic put it.<sup>5</sup> Cantet himself has spoken of the centrality in his work of the theme of cultural exclusion and inequality: "in regards to opportunity, work and power, cultural and social integration."<sup>6</sup> Touching on the labor movement's 2018 protests, for instance, he expressed sympathy towards the *gilets jaunes* ("yellow vests")<sup>7</sup> and criticism of Macron's technocratic style.<sup>8</sup> Yet despite his intention to address critically issues of inequality and exclusion, *The Class* and *The Workshop* can be seen to perpetuate broader, more conservative cultural tendencies to center, humanize, and valorize white men of Christian background, while presenting Muslim immigrant men — a religious identity which, I will assert, is racialized — as marginal, inscrutable, and irrevocably alien. By juxtaposing Souleymane and Antoine as angry young men, then, I will explore the way longstanding misconceptions about Islam and more recent prejudices against Muslim immigrants in the West bleed into Cantet's portrayal of Souleymane, in particular. By noting the tension between what these movies want to be — an anti-hegemonic critique — and the way they get there — that is, by relying on problematic racist tropes, I intend to offer a critical intervention into the reception of Cantet's recent oeuvre and its progressive veneer. Specifically, by contrasting certain

elements of his treatment of Souleymane and Antoine, I will shed light on ways that these films, despite Cantet's intentions to portray both young men sympathetically,<sup>9</sup> fall into reinforcing stereotypes and dominant narratives around Islam and Muslim immigrants. The cumulative effect of the marked differences in Cantet's portrayal of Souleymane and Antoine – some striking, others minor but telling details— is to depict an angry young Muslim man as innately threatening and “different,” unable to successfully assimilate into European culture and inexorably drawn to a tragic end, while portraying an angry young white man as a story of great potential distorted by outside influences and thwarted by external factors. Whereas Cantet goes to great lengths in *The Workshop* to reveal Antoine's moral complexity and to draw the film's viewers to sympathize with him, in *The Class* he keeps viewers at arm's length from Souleymane, who is painted in broad stereotypical strokes, a problem I analyze in the section below through a close reading of several scenes from *The Class* in combination with postcolonial theory.

#### *THE CLASS AND THE ANGRY YOUNG MUSLIM MAN*

*The Class*, adapted from the novel by former teacher François Bégaudeau, takes place at the Françoise Dolto Junior High in Paris's 20th arrondissement, a setting we never leave – hence the original French title of the film and novel, *Entre les murs*, or “between the walls,” which captures the enclosed feel of the classroom of François Marin, the filmic surrogate for the novel's first-person narrator. Cantet's

use of the name “François Marin” serves a dual purpose, echoing the name of novelist François Bégaudeau and so blurring the line between fact and fiction in keeping with Cantet’s docudrama style, but also signaling through the name *François* that this character stands in for France, or a certain kind of “French-ness” that represents liberal European culture. That Cantet chose Paris, the capital and cultural center of France, as the location for *The Class* – not the banlieues, with their immigrant population and problems of unemployment and poverty – also underlines that his film is not just about schools, but about France, how it defines itself as a nation and who belongs. Cantet stages the classroom, then, as a metaphor for the French nation in its struggles to define its identity in the new millennium, anticipating the resurgence of the Front National with its newfound populist bent, new-old xenophobia, and distinctly contemporary concern with fighting “radical Islam.”

In keeping with Bégaudeau’s original text, much of *The Class* has a fragmented quality, particularly in its first half. While tensions erupt often as François and his students spar, there is little clear plot line. The action instead rises and falls in small bursts as François attempts to teach his students and they question and resist his lessons. This absence of a clear overarching plot reinforces the film’s documentary feel. Over time, however, certain students grow more prominent. This is especially true of Souleymane, whose character and relationship with François is developed over several scenes so that he emerges as a central character about

halfway through the film.<sup>10</sup> *The Class* also features fraught interactions between François and other students, to be sure, which touch on issues of class, race, nationality and gender, vectored through debates on the use of the French language.<sup>11</sup> Most saliently, in the film's climax, two student representatives who observe faculty meetings reveal to Souleymane that François referred to him as "limited," sparking François's rage for this breach of confidentiality that leads to a class mutiny. In this scene, François lashes out at these two girls in a startlingly sexist breach of professionalism by calling them *pétasses*, or "skanks." This language, which critics have read as a problematic appropriation of the students' street slang, has been thoroughly analyzed by other scholars.<sup>12</sup> For the purposes of this essay, my focus will be on how Souleymane is represented in several scenes (this one included) in which he figures prominently, as a means to consider what his characterization and narrative arc reveal about how Muslim immigrants are viewed in a world still reeling from 9/11.<sup>13</sup> These scenes include one in which he reveals a tattoo on his bicep; a parent-teacher conference with his mother; a workshop where François encourages Souleymane to complete an essay by using photographs from his phone; the climactic classroom scene touched on above; and finally, a school hearing in which Souleymane is expelled.

It is important before revisiting these scenes, however, to look at some key points about the production of *The Class* in order to understand how Souleymane's character was crafted – this in light of the fact that *The Class* was touted for casting



Parisian teenagers, rather than professional actors, and building its script on their improvisation to present a more authentic representation of their lives.<sup>14</sup> Notably Cantet's decision to cast the students' parents and teachers in corresponding roles added to the film's aura of authenticity. Although the screenplay was written in collaboration with Bégaudeau and screenwriter Robin Campillo, it is Cantet who emphasized *The Class*'s purported realism, largely by underlining his casting of "real" teenagers<sup>15</sup> and the evolution of the script through their workshopping. Bégaudeau, by contrast, has stressed his novel's fictional quality, referring to it as a "docu-ro-ment," combining *roman* (novel) with a conjugation of *mensonge* (to lie), so as to emphasize its blend of invention with actual experiences from his years as a teacher.<sup>16</sup>

In keeping with Cantet's desire to blur fact and fiction, it comes as no surprise that he assigned the film's characters the same first-names as the students who play them: Wey Huang and Boubacar Touré play *Wei* and *Boubacar*, for instance, and Nassim Amrabat plays *Nassim*, while his father, Khalid Amrabat, plays *Nassim's father*. Yet buried in this discourse of authenticity— one Cantet initiated, but which many critics assumed<sup>17</sup> — is Souleymane, a character who Cantet developed to play a far more pivotal role than in Bégaudeau's novel, where he appears briefly and is characterized almost solely by François telling him to remove his hood and cap when he enters the classroom at regular intervals.<sup>18</sup>

Souleymane was Cantet's starting point for the film, however, predating any casting or workshoping with the actors, or even his reading BÉgaudeau's novel, as Cantet notes in response to an interviewer's query:

It was the first thing that I wrote, in fact, for this film. Even before meeting François, even before reading the book, I wrote the story of Soulemain [*sic*], which is the narrative line of the whole film. And the first scene I ever wrote was the scene with his mother [at] the disciplinary council. ... And then I met François and read his book and decided that his book would give me the flesh of the film, all the documentary material that I needed for it.<sup>19</sup>

*The Class*, in other words, served largely as a vehicle for a story Cantet had already written, one he used BÉgaudeau's material in combination with workshoping with the student-actors to give a documentary gloss, a point that counters reviewers' emphasis on the unscripted quality that was often overread as authenticity. That Souleymane's story was predetermined from the outset, far more than other students', is important as well. In the same interview, when asked about his process, Cantet underlines this distinction, contrasting the way he conceived Souleymane's story arc with how the rest of the film evolved:

G: I'm curious, too: I know that before you began basically the one-year process with the school and the students and the teachers, you had an initial scenario that you worked from. I wonder how closely that corresponds to the finished product.

LC: It was not a finished script. It was just the first ideas of—

G: An outline:

LC: Yes. It was Soulemane's [*sic*] story. *And all the rest came after that, from the book and from the workshop we made with the children.*

(emph. mine)

Whereas other student-characters were crafted in collaboration with the actors, often reflecting their personalities, Cantet was fully responsible for conceiving of Souleymane. For example, Esmeralda, a character who audiences may likely remember as another prominent disruptor, reflects the personality of the young actress who plays her. Cantet reflects in an interview of the relationship between this actress and her character, "As for Esmeralda, she *is* Esmeralda: monolithic, perfectly at ease with power plays and conflict" (emph. mine).<sup>20</sup> In the same interview, Cantet has noted a character called *Ming* in the novel, whose name was changed in the film to *Wei* to mirror the actor, Wey, who plays him: "Wey in the film owes a lot to the boy who plays him. In the book, Ming is very studious. He hardly spoke because he is so concentrated and because he is insecure about his French. Wey, in contrast, is supertalkative."

By contrast, Souleymane is one of only two characters whose first-name and personality does not square at all with the actor who plays them. Of the young man Franck Keita who portrays Souleymane, Cantet has remarked,

The one who went the farthest in creating his role is certainly Franck (Souleymane in the film). He's a very reserved, sweet guy, the exact opposite of the character. We had to fabricate with him this tough guy image. We totally transformed his look, to the point that, in the first fittings, he felt like he was in disguise.<sup>21</sup>

The other student whose name was changed is Khoumba, who, much like Souleymane, resists François' directives, at times disrupting the lesson. Khoumba is friends with and similar to Esmeralda in this way, but Esmeralda is white,<sup>22</sup> whereas Khoumba and Souleymane are Black. The name *Khoumba*, in fact, was one Cantet invented for a girl whose actual name is Rachel Régulier and who, like Franck Keita, Cantet has reported is "sweet and kind in real life."<sup>23</sup> In light of the prominence of these two students as troublemakers and Cantet's attachment to authenticity, this choice to change the names of the Franck Keita and Rachel Régulier is significant. The effect is to associate the two most disruptive Black students with a culture other than that of "traditional" France – that is, white, Christian and European.<sup>24</sup> Rachel is thus renamed Khoumba to associate her with African culture,<sup>25</sup> while Franck is assigned an Arabic name strongly associated with Islam.

There are other Black students in the class besides Rachel/Khoumba and Franck/Souleymane, certainly, as well as other students with Arabic names and presumably a Muslim faith – Nassim, Rabah, and Cherif, for instance – but in contrast to Souleymane, there are no clear references to their Muslim background or faith. What is particularly significant about Cantet's development of the character of Souleymane, then, is not his blackness alone but the way his nature as a resistant student prone to violent outbursts is interwoven with shots and dialogue that emphasize his identity as a Muslim immigrant. Souleymane is thus doubly

racialized as Black and Muslim. Tracing these signifiers of Muslim identity – first, through how Souleymane’s body is marked; next, through how his mother is portrayed; and last, through Souleymane’s fate, which is to be ejected from his school, from France, and from the film itself – reveals the stereotypical two-dimensionality of this Muslim version of the angry young man.

Souleymane’s identity, in fact, reflects a phenomenon whereby “Muslim” as a category has been racialized into a set of features cast as intrinsic, hereditary and alien, as the cultural critic Moustafa Bayoumi notes in writing of the U.S. after 9/11.<sup>26</sup> Bayoumi’s analysis reflects the ways that religion has, since the rise of Islamic terrorist attacks in the West in the past two decades, become a hotly politicized marker of difference. In France, the popularity of the far-right Front National’s Marine Le Pen, despite her eventual presidential defeat, suggests a resonance of this nationalism that demonizes Islam, reflecting its beginnings as a reaction to France’s loss of Algeria and fixation on safeguarding European whiteness and political power.<sup>27</sup> On one level, Cantet’s film, released in 2008, reflects this popular anxiety in contemporary western culture (and as such, could be termed a post-9/11 text, broadly speaking) but it is also a postcolonial text with deep historical roots. As Edward Said established in *Orientalism*, “Not for nothing did Islam come to symbolize terror, devastation, the demonic, hordes of hated barbarians,” speaking of Islamic medieval conquests, and concluding, “For Europe, Islam was a lasting trauma.”<sup>28</sup> This trauma echoes through the colonial and

postcolonial landscape of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, as Said has demonstrated, continuing to infiltrate western literary and visual culture.

Souleymane's characterization as Muslim begins with his body, when he bares his bicep to reveal a tattoo in Arabic that he attributes to "*le Coran*." He translates it to the class: "If your words are less important than silence, keep quiet."<sup>29</sup> This moment follows his refusal to write an *auto-portrait*, that is, an autobiographical essay, beyond the single circular sentence, "I have nothing to say about me because no one knows me but me."<sup>30</sup> Souleymane's tattoo reinforces his refusal to engage with language, in particular with the French language. Tied to his Muslim identity, his tattoo links Souleymane's recalcitrance to Islam.

All this is perplexing in light of the fact that Islam generally prohibits, or at least discourages, tattoos, especially Sunni Islam, which is dominant in Mali where Souleymane is said to have immigrated from – a prohibition associated with identity politics in the face of western cultural colonization.<sup>31</sup> Still more puzzling, the source of this particular tattoo is not actually the Qur'an, as Souleymane asserts, but a hadīth, one of the narratives passed down on the life and teachings of Muhammad. The closest verse reads, "He who believes in Allah and the Last Day must either speak good or remain silent."<sup>32</sup> A kind of murkiness surrounds this allusion to Islamic doctrine that marks Souleymane's body, whether through the inaccuracy of his attribution of the quote or the confusion around his using a tattoo to establish his identity as a Muslim in the first place. Is Souleymane rebelling

against the dominant Christian culture of France that is couched in the school's ostensibly secular culture *and* against Islamic identity politics simultaneously? And, is he getting his own religion wrong in this misattribution? Or is it Cantet who is himself confused? The latter seems more likely, but regardless, there is a mystification around this reference to Islam, one which sets Souleymane apart from the other students, who remain unmarked by any references to religious identity throughout the film. This murkiness is reflected in a visual blurriness of the physical tattoo itself, which is shot so as to be unreadable, even to viewers who *are* literate in Arabic. The tattoo serves mainly to mark Souleymane as intractably foreign, and like his tattoo, illegible – impossible to translate or understand.

Behind this angry young Muslim man is an angry Muslim mother, just as fictionalized and stereotypical, working metonymically in relation to Souleymane. This effect is achieved through a combination of her appearance, behavior, and disengagement from the French language. The associations of foreignness, intractability, and illegibility are reinforced through *Souleymane's mother* (she is given no other name), whose screen presence blends together these qualities with markers of Muslim identity, such that François appears confounded in his interactions with her at a parent-teacher conference. There, the appearance by Souleymane's mother and older brother, coupled with references to an absent father made all the more intimidating by the threats we hear he has made, reinforce the message of Muslim immigrants as unable or unwilling to assimilate. When viewers

meet Souleymane's mother and brother at his parent-teacher conference, they are the last in a series of vignettes that introduce us to the parents of Wei, the cheerful and earnest Chinese boy whom the teachers dote on, and three other sets of parents, whose meetings blend sweetness and humor with the occasional ruffled feather, as when one mother refers to the school disparagingly as "average," much to François' annoyance. That the parents resemble their children adds to the charm of this segment, but comes as little surprise, since they are played by their real-life parents.

The notable casting exception again relates to Souleymane. His filmic mother is not played by the actual mother of the student-actor Franck Keita, but instead performed by the film's only professional actor, Fatoumata Kanté. Her "role is the most fabricated," Cantet has noted, using the same word he did to describe Souleymane's character, but here calling it an "exception."<sup>33</sup> Fatoumata Kanté's performance as Souleymane's mother is purely scripted, then, rather than based on any actual parent-child dynamic, and scripted so as to suggest resentment and difference. Other parents we meet are racially diverse, including whites and Asians— and while one student, Nassim, also has an Arabic name, his father speaks French fluently, as he jokes with François, signaling his comfort in this setting. Wei's parents, as recent immigrants, struggle with French, but smile pleasantly, mirroring a stereotype of Chinese people as "model immigrants" who are agreeable and hardworking. Though there was undoubtedly some scripting of the parents' dialogue with François, these interactions between Wei and Nassim and their



respective parents appear far more at ease and at least somewhat improvisational – unsurprisingly, given the that these are the *actual* parents of the students. Souleymane’s fictional mother, by contrast, appears hostile. A long black scarf is wrapped loosely over her head and shoulders, covering her hair. When she speaks to the older brother in a language that viewers are given no subtitles to access, her tone ranges from incredulous to combative. While costuming Kanté in a headscarf has some cultural logic, given that Mali is a Muslim-majority nation, the script’s assertion that she “doesn’t understand a word of French”<sup>34</sup> does not. French is Mali’s official language – a carry-over from colonialism – making how completely unable this mother is to speak or comprehend it perplexing – or it would be were she an actual immigrant from Mali, instead of a character Cantet fabricated.

Much as Souleymane is marked as Muslim by his Arabic and Qu’ran-ic tattoo, his mother’s veil carries with it a host of western associations that include religion, but also extend beyond it. A French law in 2004, a few years before Cantet began to workshop *The Class*, banned the wearing of all religious symbols in schools, but it was widely considered to have taken aim specifically at the use of headscarves.<sup>35</sup> Six years later (and three years after the film’s release) a 2011 law banned burkhas and niqabs from not only schools, but *all* public spaces. *The Class* is bookended by this legislation that aimed to delineate schools as a secular space and a locus of national culture, in large part by attempting to erase the presence of

Muslims. This context for Fatoumata Kanté's costume design suggests at a minimum her character's ignorance of the 2004 ban, or perhaps a resistance to it.

Taking a longer view, the veil drags a particular history with it from France's colonization, as well, one Frantz Fanon has explained carried a symbolic meaning for Algerians that French colonizers misread. "What is in fact the assertion of a distinct identity, concerned with keeping intact a few shreds of national existence, is attributed to religious, magical, fanatical behavior," he notes of this disjunction.<sup>36</sup> Like Souleymane's tattoo, Cantet inserts Souleymane's fabricated mother's veil into the script, which suggests the illogic associated with fanaticism, accompanied by resistance and resentment towards western culture – at least to European or north American audiences unfamiliar with Islam and already distanced by not understanding or having access to the mother's language. Of her behavior during the conference, the French screenplay states, "The mother looks away, seeming to ruminate on her anger or her deception"<sup>37</sup> indicating her mistrust of François and everything for which he stands.

This impression of Souleymane's mother carries over to the next scene, reinforced through a photo in which she appears, still angry, still veiled. Her expression and costume have not altered. François, who spots this photo while Souleymane is showing pictures from his phone to friends before class, suggests he use them as the basis for his autobiographical essay, directing him to write *légendes*, or captions for each. Though those instructions may seem benign or even

benevolent – François appears to be offering Souleymane a creative way to complete a project that he has ignored – they effectively turn this image of Souleymane’s mother into an object to be explained away and thereby defused. Significantly, another student defines *légende* to Souleymane as “story,” and while François corrects him, the double-meaning of “fiction” and “caption” folded into the French word *légende* is apt. Fanon notes of the French’s perception of veiled women, “This woman who sees without being seen frustrates the colonizer. There is no reciprocity.”<sup>38</sup> Like the colonizer, François serves as a representative of France’s governmental institutions, which attempt to enculturate Souleymane and the other students into the French language and culture. His impulse to define through captions and thus resolve the unease he feels in the face of Souleymane’s mother mirrors this history.

Much the same could be said for Cantet, who in effect stages the image as well as captioning it, much like French photographers of old among the people they colonized. Malek Alloula’s analysis of the history of “colonial postcards” provides further insight into this parallel. Explaining the staged nature of these postcards, Alloula writes, “The photographer will come up with more complacent counterparts to these inaccessible Algerian women.”<sup>39</sup> The postcolonial director works much the way the colonizing photographers did. In hiring a professional actress to play a fierce Muslim mother (rather than using Franck Keita’s actual mother) Cantet creates a “simulacrum” that is also a “sham”:

The model will manage, thanks to the art of illusion that is photography, to impersonate, to the point of believability, the unapproachable referent: the *other* Algerian woman, absent in the photo. In her semblance on the postcard, the model is simultaneously the epiphany of this absent woman and her imaginary takeover. The perfection and the credibility of the illusion are ensured by the fact that the absent other is, by definition, unavailable and cannot issue a challenge.<sup>40</sup>

Cantet's illusion will appear to viewers doubly credible given that Fatoumata Kanté, the only professional actor and non-parent, is surrounded by the other students' real parents, propping up her false claim, an "imaginary takeover" of "the unapproachable referent" – a Muslim immigrant mother. "The "realistic" underlay allows it to obstruct the horizon of its productions," Alloula suggests of the colonial postcards, "all of which are meant to convey a 'truth' upon the colony."<sup>41</sup> The "realistic underlay" of Cantet's casting serves a similar function in representing an otherwise inaccessible subject. Of both the colonial photographer and postcolonial director, it might be said: "What he brings back from his expedition is but a harvest of stereotypes that express [...] the limits of fabricated realism." The predilection for representing veiled women as erotic and exotic, as in these postcards, has in the new millennium given way to their portrayal as either oppressed, in need of saving, or as with Souleymane's mother, threatening, in need of defusing. The mother reinforces the son's image as a ticking time-bomb, threatening to subvert the order of the classroom into chaos and violence. Her alienness and sharp manner directed

towards François work metonymically to reinforce an image of Souleymane as alienated and resentful, which will boil over in the film's climax.

What is the fate of the angry young Muslim man? Violence and exclusion, to be sure. The altercation which occurs when the student representatives repeat François's confidential assessment of the class involves many students, but it culminates when Souleymane explodes and storms out of the classroom, inadvertently injuring Khoumba when he swings his backpack. However unintentionally, Souleymane cuts his classmate's face so severely that she needs stitches, and the injury he causes as a result of his insubordination results in his hearing, the school's procedure for dealing with unruly students, which seems invariably to lead to expulsion. The hearing echoes what Michel Foucault has written of colonial tribunals, which as part of "a small penal mechanism [...] enjoys a kind of judicial privilege with its own laws, its specific offences, its particular forms of judgment." More to the point, Foucault articulates tribunals' purpose to "normalize," noting that to do so, they "trace the limit that will define difference in relation to all other differences, the external frontier of the abnormal."<sup>42</sup> Souleymane's transgression lies in how he flouts authority in his forcible rebellion against François, who here functions like an internal colonial functionary of the state. Yet beyond his behavioral offenses, what marks Souleymane as "different" such that he exists beyond "the external frontier of the abnormal" is tied to his identity as a Muslim immigrant. He must be expelled, first from the school and then

from the cosmopolitan space of Paris<sup>43</sup> in order to preserve the order established by the school as one of the institutions designed to maintain the French-ness of France. Though Souleymane has been a disruptive force throughout the film, here he appears crestfallen as the camera unites him in the frame with his mother, who no longer appears resentful, but instead desperate, then resigned. The final shot of these two highlights the sound of their footsteps echoing across the school's interior courtyard like a "dead man walking," giving this resolution the feel of an execution.

#### *THE WORKSHOP AND THE ANGRY YOUNG (WHITE) MAN*

What, by contrast, is the characterization and fate of the angry young white man, whose fair skin and Christian name signal him to be of European descent? In *The Workshop*, Cantet's portrayal of the rebellious teenaged Antoine and the fate he assigns him reflect larger trends of psychologizing and empathizing with white men with class-based grudges, in contrast to their Black and Muslim counterparts. When young men like Antoine lash out through racism, misogyny, and deliberate physical violence, they are nonetheless afforded a morally nuanced portrayal and promising ending in a way rarely afforded to an angry young Muslim man.

The premise of *The Workshop*, as I have noted, is remarkably similar to *The Class* at its start: A bourgeois well-meaning white liberal teacher attempts to teach writing to a group of multi-racial working-class students. Here, it is simply a celebrated female novelist who has agreed to run this workshop to teach creative

writing, instead of a male middle-school teacher, and these seven students are a bit older, ranging from their late teens to early twenties. *The Workshop*'s opening scene mirrors *The Class* in many ways when audiences are introduced to Olivia Déjazet, an instructor meeting for the first time with this multi-racial group of working-class teenagers, whose attitudes range from suspicious to disengaged: since *The Workshop* is more contemporary, a few are buried in their smartphones. As in *The Class*, the young people Cantet cast for *The Workshop* are also not professional actors but were found through scouting local high schools, bars, sports clubs and acting troops;<sup>44</sup> the one professional actress is Marina Foïs, who plays the famous crime novelist Olivia.

Set in the provincial town of La Ciotat, the film has a less claustrophobic feel than that of *The Class*. The camera ranges over the area, emphasizing the town's troubled history, but also its natural beauty. Where *The Workshop* pivots most strongly away from *The Class* is by shifting its angry young man Antoine to the center of the frame – literally, in the first shot of the workshop, and more broadly in the extent to which he is established as the focus of the narrative. Where Souleymane appeared laconic, Antoine's dominant mood is restlessness, and his restlessness, Cantet makes clear, stems from intelligence and creativity met with no productive outlet. Twice, Olivia remarks on his latent intelligence and in an early workshop meeting, when the others attack a scene he has written for its graphic violence, she defends it, telling them, "At the risk of shocking you, I find Antoine's

story, for a first try, quite well written.”<sup>45</sup> By contrast, audiences of *The Class* might be forgiven for wondering if Souleymane can write at all, in light of his mother’s illiteracy in French and his well-established pattern of ignoring his schoolwork.

The plot of *The Workshop* is that under the guidance of Olivia Déjazet, the students meet over the summer to collectively write a novel. During these scenes, Antoine shows himself consistently to be resistant to authority and prone to pick fights with his peers. At other moments, however, we follow Antoine in his life outside the workshop, where he plays videogames, works out, plays affectionately with his younger sister and small cousin, and hangs out with friends at night. In many scenes, all the students spar, at first with Olivia, but increasingly with Antoine, who often provokes them intentionally. In contrast to *The Class*, however, *The Workshop* soon develops the tone of a thriller due to the more explicit threat of violence associated with Antoine. In his fiction-writing, Antoine begins his story with a shipyard worker who, after the launch of a yacht, uses an AK-47 to wipe out everyone on the docks. Among his friends, we see him camouflage and conceal himself on a nighttime excursion, where they practice shooting at targets and aim at strangers from a distance. In the videos Antoine watches online, he embraces Far Right nationalist rhetoric. But it is especially in the mounting tension between Antoine and Olivia that this threat of violence is present, coming to a climax when Antoine begins to stalk Olivia: Arriving at her house unannounced one night, he



compels her at gunpoint to drive to an isolated location, though in the end he releases her, simply shooting whimsically up at the moon.

Through the in-depth portrait he paints of Antoine, Cantet effectively poses him as a problem to be solved, one that is representative of larger social issues.

Generalizing about contemporary youth, Cantet has said,

Today they are confronted with an entirely different array of problems: finding their place in a world that has little consideration for them, and the feeling that they don't have any control over how things pan out in general, not to mention the lack of control over their own lives. What's more, they have to face a violent society torn between distressing social and political issues, such as financial insecurity, terrorism and the rise of the far right. <sup>46</sup>

Gravitating toward the political Far Right, Antoine comes to reflect these issues, in particular in his attraction to violence for a sense of purpose and power and in his racism and xenophobia. The racist provocations he hurls at the three students, Malika (Warda Rammach), Fadi (Issam Talbi) and Boubacar (Mamadou Doumbia) are key in defining Antoine. The presence of these characters provides a target for his racist and xenophobic attitudes – specifically his antagonism towards immigrants, Arabs, and Islam – revealing the way he has absorbed Far Right propaganda, at least to the extent that it is what he resorts to when he feels cornered. Malika and Fadi, along with the lone Black student Boubacar, who is the most amiable of the group, serve to highlight the way Antoine lashes out through Islamophobia and xenophobia. Each of the three he baits. When Malika suggests the fictional victim of their thriller be black or Arab, Antoine scoffs at the notion

of a racist crime. After he and Boubacar argue and nearly come to blows, Antoine mutters “illegal,” prompting Boubacar to exclaim, “You’re the fucking illegal! I’m more French than you, man!” When Fadi refers to Antoine’s scene of the mass shooting with the AK-47 as “sick,” Antoine retorts, “what your pals did wasn’t? – at the Bataclan?” provoking Badi, who stands up, enraged, and calls out Antoine’s racism. In this reference to the 2015 mass shooting by French nationals of Algerian descent at the famous concert hall the Bataclan, Antoine lumps all Arabs and Muslims together as terrorists. Similarly, when Malika in a later scene reservedly expresses her upset at these killings, he suggests she is a “bad Muslim,” mockingly asking where her veil is.

The characterization and dialogue of Malika and Fadi in *The Workshop* in some ways seems a corrective to the relative two-dimensionality of Souleymane as the lone referent to Muslims in *The Class*, or perhaps simply an evolution of how Cantet perceives practicing Muslims. Malika’s family has lived in the town of La Ciotat for three generations since her grandfather immigrated from Algeria, establishing her French-ness, and she is also the strongest leader in the group, effectively steering much of the direction the collaborative novel takes – this is in part why she rubs Antoine the wrong way. Malika, more than Fadi, is confident and assertive in claiming her place in French society. A heated debate in Arabic between the two over whether they will ever be seen as truly French points to the racism they face, but also to the range of experiences and perspectives among

French Arabs, who, this scene illustrates, are not a monolith.

Yet while Boubacar, Fadi and Malika are far more nuanced characters than Souleymane, they are also far more minor figures, playing second-fiddle to Antoine and arguably there mainly to provide a target for him. By the time the film culminates in Antoine's self-imposed exile from the workshop, they have shifted to the margins, as Antoine's fraught relationship with Olivia moves to the center. Unlike *The Class*, *The Workshop* in the end is not really an ensemble piece, but evolves into a sort of game of cat-and-mouse between Olivia and Antoine. There is also a strange sort of balancing act on Cantet's part, whereby the responses of these three minority Muslim characters to Antoine are ones audiences are likely to empathize with, yet these three are ultimately less affectively sympathetic, if only because the film doesn't allow us to invest as fully in their characters. All are made to seem decidedly less individualistic and bright than Antoine. Malika may be dedicated and ambitious, but she mentions her grandfather so often that it grows tiresome to the group and likely tedious to the film's viewers, as well. She also avoids intellectually difficult subjects, whether that means sidestepping a direct representation of murder – in one incarnation of the novel, she suggests the death be accidental – or dismissively responding, “that doesn't interest me –that's all” to another member of the group who suggests they discuss radicalization because it touches them all. Boubacar, despite his geniality, mostly makes jokes and reacts to Antoine's ideas, rather than sharing any of his own. The same is true of Fadi, whose

dialogue is primarily a response to Antoine's provocations. Antoine, despite his race-baiting, is undoubtedly the best writer and so suggested to be more intelligent and original, as shown through Olivia's acknowledgment of his work's merit. Cantet himself has remarked that, faced with this group, Antoine "feels the[ir] limitations,"<sup>47</sup> again making it clear that it is Antoine who he conceived of as the most intelligent and promising.

Despite their outward racial and religious diversity, then, the other participants come to be presented as a small tribe, in contrast to Antoine's individuality. By the end of the first session, we see these others coalesce, running to catch the bus like a small herd while Antoine lingers behind, underlining his outsider status and implied superiority. Similarly, while the others begin the workshop mistrustful of Olivia, mocking her Parisian accent and affected manner, within a few meetings she appears to have won them over. Antoine is the lone holdout, and later, when he confronts Olivia, accusing her of self-interest in the workshop, his accusations may be overblown but they are also insightful and strike a nerve. In this way, Antoine's solitude is cast as a type of non-conformity born of intellectual depth, rather than social maladjustment.

Antoine is also humanized through certain segments, most of which take place outside the workshop, in a way not afforded to Souleymane or to the Muslim minority participants of *The Workshop*. These scenes are important in painting him in three-dimensional terms, morally and psychologically. In one such instance,

Cantet highlights a more appealing side of Antoine through his interaction with young children in his affectionate behaviour and playfulness with his little sister and small cousin, who looks to be about five. Antoine's solitary moments are just as important in making him sympathetic. The film's slow pacing conveys the languor of his life, whether he's basking in the sun, shooting a selfie-video of himself diving into the Mediterranean, or dancing with his headphones on in front of the mirror in a moment of sheer adolescent goofiness. These segments underline the limitations of his life and effects of his ennui.

Antoine's humanization is also achieved through an emphasis on the setting and how it confines him. In fact, if there is a second protagonist in *The Workshop*, it is La Ciotat. The town's rich history as a major shipbuilding center whose closing was met with mass protests provides material for the workshop's collaborative novel, but for Antoine the shipyard is, as another student puts it, a graveyard. To Antoine, despite the beauty of the Mediterranean, it is a place to escape from and this sense of entrapment seems to drive everything he does, from online surfing, to deliberately antagonizing his peers, to flirting with guns and eventually stalking Olivia. Much of this antisocial behavior is characterized as a kind of bucking against his own inertia and attempt to establish his identity. Cantet has said as much in the film's press kit, when he states:

I know it's cliché, but I think that boredom is the source of many problems for this generation. Especially when it is associated with the lack of prospects that prevail today. I get the feeling that an

increasing number of young people feel like their future is following a preset path, and the place that has been left for them doesn't match with their hopes.

Or, as Antoine says, “you write to escape your shit life.” This sense of ennui, born of his limited prospects, the film implies, leads to Antoine’s resentment and adoption of the Islamophobic, anti-immigrant discourse of the Far Right. Cantet notes, “He is obviously inspired by all the ‘fascist-sphere’ websites and blogs, which are frequently consulted by young people,” but Cantet also mitigates this statement by asserting that “Antoine has no ideal or ideology to guide him. He just wants something to happen that will give his life some meaning or even some depth.”<sup>48</sup>

Out of the tedium of his routine and the pervasiveness of the Internet, then, Antoine increasingly flirts with different models of masculinity. Through each, he tries on different identities but the common denominator is a model based on physical prowess and aggression towards others – what has come to be referred to as “toxic masculinity,” a concept increasingly drawn on in profiles of mass shooters and attributed to online subcultures that traffic in misogyny and racism. As a term and concept, toxic masculinity has evolved considerably since its origins in the mythopoetic men’s movement of the 1980s, where it was born in reaction to second-wave feminism as a way to describe how boys had been feminized.<sup>49</sup> By contrast, in the new millennium, it has instead come to represent “the constellation of socially regressive male traits that serve to foster domination, the devaluation of

women, homophobia, and wanton violence”<sup>50</sup> and is, at base, seen to be founded on an “emphasis on dominance over others.”<sup>51</sup> While the idea of toxic masculinity began in the U.S. in both its original and current usage, the concept has become cross-cultural, such that the international news channel France 24 titled a 2019 story, “Fighting domestic violence: ‘The French should tackle toxic masculinity’,” referring to a statement made by the French gender-based violence expert Natacha Henry, who in conversation with reporter Nadia Abdel-Massih added, “it would be worth having a [French national] campaign against toxic masculinity.” The American Psychological Association, along these lines, has acknowledged the differences in masculinity ideologies among different cultures, but has also noted, “there is a particular constellation of standards that have held sway over large segments of the population, including: anti-femininity, achievement, eschewal of the appearance of weakness, and adventure, risk, and violence.” This masculine ideal tends to shape certain behaviors, such as those noted in “Social Media Behavior, Toxic Masculinity, and Depression,” an article exploring links between internet culture and toxic masculinity.<sup>52</sup> Just as toxic masculinity is associated with certain kinds of gaming or behavior on social media, it often takes the form of militarism, as Jared Yates Sexton has described, since soldiers tend to be revered as the “pinnacle of masculinity and its resulting culture of militarism.”<sup>53</sup>

Nearly all of these behaviors are manifested by Antoine. We see him absorbed in an online army recruitment ad, working out to a bodybuilding app to

sculpt his abs, or listening to white nationalists peddling antipathy towards European Union bureaucrats and immigrants while he sketches a human skull. His attention to his physique, Cantet attributes to a “narcissism that seems to represent some form of an ideal for him and allows him to stand tall and strong,” while of Antoine’s attraction to the military, he adds:

During the writing stage, we often heard the statistics of the growing enrollment in the army. The video clip that Antoine watches (an actual clip from the French army!) uses the same codes as video games: they know how to address this generation, promising them an adventure, perhaps the only truly accessible one for many of them. Among the youngsters from *THE CLASS*, many had this project in mind and did end up joining the army or the police. It’s at once the only option available to them and a way of swearing allegiance, of becoming what is expected of them – “good young French citizens.”<sup>54</sup>

In *The Class*, Esmeralda declares her intent to join the police, in fact – her whiteness and “Frenchness” in this way folded into French nationalism – whereas in *The Workshop*, the limited prospects that fuel Antoine’s online life lead him to embrace a hypermasculine ideal that is enmeshed with racialized national identity as a form of “dominance over others.”

The virtual world of video games that feature hypermasculine heroes, notably, serves as *The Workshop*’s brief opening scene, introducing this theme before we are privy to the workshop itself. Just after the film’s title, the establishing shot thrusts viewers into a virtual landscape of mountainous terrain where we follow a warrior who unsheathes his sword, swinging it in the air; he then walks to



a cliffside, shooting his crossbow at the moon, a gesture Antoine will mirror with his gun after releasing Olivia as his hostage. Initially, audiences are not given context as to who is playing the game or the world outside the virtual one into which we are plunged, but after this sequence, the camera cuts to a long shot of Antoine floating prone in the sea surrounded by a rocky coast for a few moments before cutting away again, this time to the workshop. Antoine's floating body with his arms outstretched in the sea suggests a crucifixion, underlining through this symbolism Cantet's implication that he is a victim, or even a martyr, of the society he inhabits. The racist and Islamophobic abuse Antoine heaps on his classmates and the act of implicitly misogynistic violence he commits in abducting Olivia at gunpoint are, Cantet suggests both filmically and in interviews, merely an expression of ennui born of lack of prospects and control over his life.

All of the issues of uncertainty and belonging that Antoine faces as he comes of age, of course, are hardly limited to French citizens of European descent. In fact, it could be argued that belonging, especially in terms of national identity – what it means to be “good young French citizens” and find your way in the world – is all the more pressing a problem for minority French youths like Fadi, Malika, and Boubacar. Yet Cantet vectors these problems of purpose and identity primarily through his angry young white man, instead of treating them as irresolvable as he does with an African Muslim immigrant like Souleymane, or suggesting they are

less pressing for the marginal Muslim characters of Arab and African descent in *The Workshop* whom he sidelines in favor of Antoine.

#### CONCLUSION: THE ANGRY YOUNG MAN, EXONERATED AND EXILED

Antoine and Souleymane are in many ways mirror images of each other. Simmering with resentment, the two resist authority and provoke their peers, one through the Far Right's Islamophobic discourse and the other by wearing his Muslim identity on his sleeve – or literally inscribing it in his skin. In this way, both antiheroes suggest the threat of radicalization. Yet what makes the portrayal of Antoine troubling when juxtaposed with Souleymane, is how Antoine comes to be vindicated by the film's end, both in his mistrust of Olivia and his potential for violence, which is strongly suggested to be misguided, not intrinsic, the result of the mismatch between his intelligence and his limited circumstances. In this way, Cantet ultimately exonerates Antoine for his expressions of racist and Islamophobic sentiments (not to mention his abduction and threat of murdering Olivia<sup>55</sup>) so that the threat he seems to pose throughout the film comes to be neutralized by the end — presented as not truly dangerous or deep-rooted, but only a symptom of the degree to which he is searching for and trying on different models of masculinity in the absence of meaningful work or a sense of purpose. In attempting to explore the way a species of angry young white man is seduced by racism and violence and nearly radicalized, Cantet ultimately reverts back to a focus on the way this young

white man's prospects are limited by class and economic conditions. Cantet's narrative trajectory for Antoine in this way follows a path typical of portraits of angry young white men (both in the mass media<sup>56</sup> and fiction) as nuanced, morally complex, sympathetic and worthy of understanding and redemption. There is nothing inherently wrong with this nuance if it existed in a vacuum, but when contrasted with the two-dimensional, un-psychologized "fabricated" portrayal of the angry young Muslim man that Cantet scripted for Franck Keita (and by extension, Fatoumata Kanté), one can see its racialized Islamophobic underpinnings.

What *The Workshop* does differently (and better, in my opinion) than the film adaptation of *The Class* is to ground its overlapping racial and class dynamics in the context of France's recent history through references to the Bataclan and the 2011 attacks in Norway, as well as the backstory of La Ciotat and right-wing rhetoric Antoine flirts with online. So, too, the workshop participants refer to ISIS beheadings in the very first scene – it's not Antoine, but Boubacar who brings them up, as a way of illustrating the kind of violence to which they all are forcibly exposed via the Internet.

Bégaudeau's original novel, *The Class*, published in 2006, also addresses its early millennial context directly, but Cantet unfortunately erases these key historical references from his adaptation. One of the many debates between François and the students in Bégaudeau's novel, for instance, includes an exchange

that begins when a student asserts, “I was glad about September eleventh.” When François balks, another voice adds, “Well m’sieur what about all the dead people the Americans are making in Palestine and all.”<sup>57</sup> In response, François self-righteously asserts that he protested the invasion of Iraq, alluding to the 2004 Madrid train bombings to argue that a European who may have opposed the war like him does not deserve to die. “Yes but if the French people don’t *say* they don’t agree, it’s like they do agree,” a student retorts, adding, “Did you say that—did you tell people—that you don’t agree?” Less certain of his position, François replies feebly, “A little.” The passage concludes, “A little means nobody heard you and so there you are, the Islamists can’t know it,” thereby giving students the last word.<sup>58</sup>

In erasing such historical references to 9/11 and Madrid in his film, Cantet also erases the question of white Europeans’ complicity. Through Souleymane, traces of this context remain, but subverted, so that instead of having the last word, any voices representing Muslim immigrants are silenced. *The Class* in this way reflects an underlying affect of anxiety and ambivalence about Muslims that heightened in the new millennium following “le 11 septembre.”

In contrast to Souleymane, Antoine has the last word in *The Workshop*, and that on two fronts. The first occurs when he delivers a speech to Olivia and the others before making his departure – and in a film rife with unresolved debates, Antoine’s farewell speech is clearly meant to contain the film’s kernel of truth. Of his thinly fictionalized mass-shooter, he tells the others: “He could have shot

someone out of boredom, just for something to happen. He'd have told the cops he shot the guy for being an Arab or a Jew or gay. [...] But the victim didn't matter." Or as Cantet says, "He just wants something to happen that will give his life some meaning or even some depth."<sup>59</sup> This speech, in which Antoine serves as a mouthpiece for Cantet, mitigates Antoine's racism and violent outbursts. Whereas Antoine gets the last word among the workshop participants, Souleymane is in the end both silenced and ejected, excluded from the film's final scene of a soccer match among teachers and students that metaphorically suggests inclusion, engagement, and ongoing dialogue and debate.

*The Workshop's* denouement for Antoine, rather than being punishing or even ambivalent, is an altogether promising one. Instead of expulsion from France, the epilogue points to expansion into a greater world of possibilities, this despite the fact that there is little evidence he has grown or been changed through the workshop or any other influences in his life. We see Antoine on a cargo ship smiling as he works. He is not alone, but with another *mec*, talking animatedly in English and laughing. Looking back to the receding shore of La Ciotat, he appears to bid the provincial town farewell. Of this coda, Cantet states, "He is undoubtedly the one whom the workshop has made the biggest impression on and who will change the most as a result. In fact, that's the purpose of the film's epilogue. By embarking on a cargo ship, he takes his life in hand; he casts off, literally and metaphorically."<sup>60</sup> Perhaps it is his reaction to a "widespread feeling of social

inertia,” Cantet muses, that is “the paradoxical reason why this time I wanted my film to suggest a more uplifting ending.”

Perhaps. But in rewarding Antoine with this unearned happy ending Cantet reinforces the idea that an angry young man, when he is white and European, is not a figure to be feared but bursting with possibilities for adventure and connection, if only he is given the opportunity. In contrast, other youths who are Muslim, Arab or African in Cantet’s filmic world are shunted off-screen to endings that look much less peaceful or promising.

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<sup>1</sup> Malek Alloula, *Colonial Harem* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press), 1986.

<sup>2</sup> The phrase “angry young man” originated when the twenty-six-year old playwright John Osborne was described in those terms, having garnered attention for his play *Look Back in Anger* (performed in 1956 and published in 1957); the term rapidly expanded to include other young male British writers who felt the same postwar disaffection, as noted in “Angry Young Man,” *Merriam Webster’s Encyclopedia of Literature* (Springfield, MA: Merriam-Webster), 1995, accessed March 8, 2020, [https://go-gale-com.qbcc.ezproxy.cuny.edu/ps/i.do?p=AONE&u=cuny\\_queensboro&id=GALE|A148914764&v=2.1&it=r&sid=AONE&asid=1f2ea047](https://go-gale-com.qbcc.ezproxy.cuny.edu/ps/i.do?p=AONE&u=cuny_queensboro&id=GALE|A148914764&v=2.1&it=r&sid=AONE&asid=1f2ea047)

<sup>3</sup> Other critics’ reviews, in fact, predate my use of the phrase “angry young man” in referring to Souleymane and Antoine, namely Joe Morgenstern in “‘Class’ Goes to the Head of Docudrama,” *The Wall Street Journal*, Jan. 30, 2009, accessed March 16, 2020, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/SB123327195479530945> and Joseph Owen in *The Upcoming*, Nov. 14, 2018, accessed June 2, 2020, <https://www.theupcoming.co.uk/2018/11/14/the-workshop-movie-review/>

<sup>4</sup> Laurent Cantet, “Laurent Cantet – The Class – 11/17/08,” interview by Peter Canavese, *Groucho Reviews*, Nov. 11, 2008, accessed Mar. 18, 2020. <http://www.grouchoreviews.com/interviews/268>

<sup>5</sup> Dennis Lim, “French School as Democracy and Stage,” *New York Times*, Sept 19, 2008, accessed March 18, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2008/09/21/movies/21lim.html>

<sup>6</sup> François Bégaudeau and Laurent Cantet, “An Interview with Laurent Cantet and François Bégaudeau,” by Phillipe Mangeot, *The Class Press Kit* (New York: Sony Pictures Classics), 2008, accessed 17 July 2015, [www.sonyclassics.com/theclass/externalLoads/theclass\\_presskit.pdf](http://www.sonyclassics.com/theclass/externalLoads/theclass_presskit.pdf).

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<sup>7</sup> The *gilets jaunes*, or “yellow vests,” were so called because protesters wore high-visibility fluorescent yellow vests, which French drivers carry by law in their cars. The protests were sparked by their opposition to Macron’s planned increase of taxes on gas but morphed into a larger anti-government movement, as reported by Angelique Chrisafis in “Who are the Gilets Jaunes and What Do They Want?” *The Guardian*, Dec. 7, 2018, accessed April 27, 2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/dec/03/who-are-the-gilets-jaunes-and-what-do-they-want>.

<sup>8</sup> Ben Croll, “Laurent Cantet on France’s Yellow Vest Protests, Next Project about ‘Dangers of Social Networks,’” *Variety*, Dec. 8, 2018, accessed March 18, 2020, <https://variety.com/2018/film/global/laurent-cantet-france-yellow-vest-protests-next-project-1203085113/>

<sup>9</sup> Cantet wished to show Antoine in a “sympathetic” light, he notes in “Cannes Interview: Laurent Cantet,” by Nicolas Rapold, *Film Comment*, May 26, 2017, accessed Mar. 18, 2020, <https://www.filmcomment.com/blog/cannes-interview-laurent-cantet/>, where he remarks of the actor Matthieu Lucci, “I needed somebody who could embody that bad guy but also have the necessary sympathetic qualities and identification factors that would mean that we would also be with him.” In Cantet, “Laurent Cantet – The Class,” he implies as much about Souleymane when speaking of his choice to highlight the cruelty of Souleymane’s humiliation in a school hearing when he must serve as a translator for his mother.

<sup>10</sup> This observation is my own, but also echoes Cantet’s characterization of the film’s narrative arc in Bégaudeau and Cantet, “An Interview”: “Souleymane is first seen as merely another student of this classroom, equal to the others,” he explains. “After an hour of chronicle, a story takes shape and he is the center of it. Only in retrospect do we realize that everything was already in place before.”

<sup>11</sup> For a discussion of some of these others, see Dana Strand, “*Etre et Parler*: Being and Speaking French in Abdellatif Kechiche’s *L’Esquive* (2004) and Laurent Cantet’s *Entre les murs* (2008),” *Studies in French Cinema* 9, 3 (2009): 259-272, accessed April 8, 2017, doi: 10.1386/sfc.9.3.259/1.

<sup>12</sup> See Strand, “*Etre et Parler*,” 265, for an analysis of this exchange with the girls and François’ use of ‘street’ language, including a debate on this translation of *pétasse*. For François’ friction with other students of color, see Abdoulaye Gueye, “The Color of Unworthiness: Understanding Blacks in France and the French Visual Media through Laurent Cantet’s *The Class* (2008),” *Transition* 102 (2009): 158-71, accessed January 11, 2017, <https://muse.jhu.edu/article/371910>

<sup>13</sup> Lest 9/11 seem too distant historically or geographically to have a significant an impact on *The Class*, I would note that an unnamed student in Bégaudeau’s novel states, “I was glad about September eleventh,” touching off a heated debate with François – one I discuss in more depth in the conclusion to this paper. See François Bégaudeau, *The Class*, translated by Linda Asher (New York: Seven Stories Press), 2009, 174.

<sup>14</sup> Gueye has made this point in “The Color of Unworthiness,” 161, where he notes: “Critics have been quick to underscore the realism of *The Class*, for example *Kansas City Star* journalist Robert Butler, who writes that ‘the film oozes near-documentary realism.’ He adds that Cantet himself made his own claim to authenticity in his acceptance speech at Cannes when he stated: ‘The film we wanted to make had to be a reflection of the French society—multiple, many-faceted, complex. Sometimes also with frictions that the film does not try to cover up.’” Certainly, it is Cantet’s use of

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“real” teenagers which dominates nearly every interview Cantet has given and lends this claim to authenticity credibility.

<sup>15</sup> Cantet emphasized in the film’s press kit, for instance: “All the adolescents in the film are students at Dolto [Françoise Dolto Junior High]; all the teachers teach there, including Julie Athérol is the counselor and Mr. Simonet is the assistant principal [...] the parents in the film are those of the students in real life.” See Bégaudeau and Cantet, “An Interview.”

<sup>16</sup> Leon Sachs, “Finding ‘l’École républicaine” in the Damnedest of Places: François Bégaudeau’s ‘Entre les murs,’” *Yale French Studies* 111: 84 (2008), accessed Feb. 20, 2018, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20479372>

<sup>17</sup> That critics refer to Bégaudeau’s novel as “memoir” or use qualifiers like “semi-autobiographical account” and “autobiographical novel” is telling, revealing that Bégaudeau’s collaboration with Cantet reinforced this reading of *Entre les murs* as “real”— or at least, more authentic than most movies. See, respectively, Mariah Devereux Herbeck’s review of *Entre Les Murs*, by Laurent Cantet, *The French Review* 83, 1 (2009): 174-5, accessed Oct. 10, 2016, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/25613933>; Leon Sachs, “Finding ‘l’École républicaine’ in the Damnedest of Places”; Manohla Dargis, “Learning to Be the Future of France,” *New York Times*, Sept. 25, 2008, E1, accessed April 19, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2008/09/26/arts/26iht-26clas.16510301.html>; Gueye, “The Color of Unworthiness”; and Richard Porton, “The Cannes International Film Festival” *Cinéaste* 33, 4 (2008): 82-84, accessed Oct. 10, 2016, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41690719>. Martin O’Shaughnessy, too, reinforces this presumption of authenticity in the film, conveyed through unscripted performances, in “Thinking Contemporary Political Cinema with Cantet,” *South Central Review* 33, 2 (2016): 45-56, accessed Jan. 24, 2017, <https://doi.org/10.1353/scr.2016.0012>. O’Shaughnessy asserts Cantet “trusts his amateurs to know their own lives” since they “play parts close to their own social roles” and “relies on his performers to provide an expertise that he lacks.”

<sup>18</sup> See Bégaudeau, *The Class*, 67-8, 80, 129, 160 and 173 for these exchanges, which repeat nearly verbatim.

<sup>19</sup> Cantet, “Laurent Cantet – The Class.”

<sup>20</sup> Bégaudeau and Cantet, “An Interview.”

<sup>21</sup> Bégaudeau and Cantet, “An Interview.”

<sup>22</sup> The film ends with Esmeralda referring to Plato’s *Republic*, showing herself also to be intelligent, albeit unlikely to François because of the way she challenges him all year. Khoumba, by contrast, has no such moment and has faded from the spotlight by this last scene. *The Class (Entre les Murs)*, directed by Laurent Cantet, performed by François Bégaudeau, Haut et Court, France 2 Cinéma, and Canal+, 2008.

<sup>23</sup> Bégaudeau and Cantet, “An Interview.”



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<sup>24</sup> Gueye analyses racial representation astutely in “The Color of Unworthiness,” 163, noting Cantet’s pattern of associating white and Asian students with intelligence and ambition, whereas the Black students defy authority or eschew learning. Along these lines, he writes:

The role that crystallizes prestige and/or authority — the teacher’s — is monopolized by people of European descent, so much so that whiteness appears to be the embodiment and benchmark of power and worthiness. The teaching staff is exclusively white, and the highest rank within this profession, the school head, is held by a white male.

My analysis builds on Gueye’s, which takes as its focus race, but not religion.

<sup>25</sup> Her name recalls, for example, *Tales of Amadou Koumba* (1947) one of the earliest attempts to record African oral tales, by Birago Diop, who hailed from Senegal. Lewis C. Seifert’s, “Birago Diop (1906-1989)” in the *Greenwood Encyclopedia of Folktales and Fairy Tales*, edited by Donald Haase (Westport, CT: Greenwood), 2007, 267, notes that Diop is “author of the best-known collections of Western African folktales in French,” and is “chiefly known for three volumes,” *Les contes d’Amadou Koumba* (*The Tales of Amadou Koumba*, 1947), among them.

<sup>26</sup> Moustafa Bayoumi, *This Muslim American Life: Dispatches from the War on Terror* (New York: New York University Press), 2015, 190.

<sup>27</sup> Paul Hainsworth’s *The Extreme Right in Europe and the USA* (London: Bloomsbury Academic Press), 2016, provides much useful background. On this point, Hainworth notes, “Le Pen and others confronted post-war decolonization and loss of empire” as a “national defeat and humiliation,” responding with an “elevation of xenophobia and racism as the panacea for the evils of modernity.” Burrin, qtd. in Hainsworth, *The Extreme Right in Europe and the USA*, 31. See also Harvey G. Simmons, *The French National Front: The Extremist Challenge to Democracy* (London: Routledge), 1996, and Peter Davies, *The National Front in France: Ideology, Discourse and Power* (London: Routledge), 1999. The section “Immigration: The Islamic ‘threat’” in Davies’s book on 187–94 is especially relevant.

<sup>28</sup> Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage), 1978, 59.

<sup>29</sup> English translations are taken from the American screenplay, François Bégaudeau, Laurent Cantet and Robin Campillo, *The Class* (New York: Sony Pictures Classics) 2008a, 53, accessed July 17, 2015, [www.sonyclassics.com/the-class/externalLoads/the-class\\_script.pdf](http://www.sonyclassics.com/the-class/externalLoads/the-class_script.pdf). I have included the original French dialogue in the endnotes throughout. Here it reads: « Si ce que tu as à dire n’est pas plus important que le silence, alors tai-toi ». François Bégaudeau, Laurent Cantet and Robin Campillo, *Le scénario du film ‘Entre les murs,’* (Paris: Gallimard), 2008b, 74.

<sup>30</sup> Bégaudeau et al., *The Class*, 51. « Je m’appelle Souleymane et j’ai rien à dire sur moi car personne me connaît sauf moi » in Bégaudeau et al., *Le scénario du film ‘Entre les murs,’* 72.

<sup>31</sup> Sunni Muslims adhering to the *Shafi’i* school of law argue that “tattooing causes impurity, that tattoos are prohibited by the prophet Muhammad,” though some gap exists between “theory and practice,” as noted by Göran Larsson in “Islam and Tattooing: An Old Question, A New Research

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Topic,” *Scripta Instituti Donneriani Aboensis* 23, 1 (2014): 241. See Larsson for a deeper dive into this subject, which is truly a fascinating one.

<sup>32</sup> Al-Imâm Nawawi (b. Abu Zakariya Yahya), “The Book of Prohibited Actions” in *Riyâd-us-Sâliheen*, Vol. 2, translated by Dr Muhammad Amin Abu Usamah Al-Arabi bin Razduq (Riyadh, Saudi Arabia: Darussalam Publishers), 1998. 1<sup>st</sup> ed., 1135, Hadīth 1511.

<sup>33</sup> Bégaudeau and Cantet, “An Interview.” Cantet never refers to Cheick Baba Doumbia, the actor playing Souleymane’s brother, but since he, too, has a different last name from Keita, it’s likely the two are also not related.

<sup>34</sup> Bégaudeau et al. *The Class*, 59. « Sa mère ne comprend pas un mot de français. » Bégaudeau et al., *Le scénario du film ‘Entre les murs’*, 82.

<sup>35</sup> In addition to Muslim headscarves, the law prohibited Sikh turbans, Jewish skullcaps and large Christian crosses, but the public understanding was that the law primarily targeted Muslims. The ledes of reports from the *New York Times* and *Guardian* reflect this understanding. It is “certain to deepen resentment among France’s large Muslim population,” reports Elaine Sciolino in “French Assembly Votes to Ban Religious Symbols in Schools,” *New York Times*, Feb. 11, 2004, accessed March 18, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2004/02/11/world/french-assembly-votes-to-ban-religious-symbols-in-schools.html>. The *Guardian*’s lede in turn refers to it as “a ban on Islamic veils in state schools, despite new warnings from religious leaders that the law would persecute Muslims and encourage fundamentalism.” See Jon Henley, “French MPs Vote for Veil Ban in State Schools,” *The Guardian*, Feb. 11, 2004, accessed March 18, 2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2004/feb/11/schools.schoolsworldwide> and for sociologists’ and Muslim leaders’ statements on the law’s stigmatizing effect.

Human Rights Watch, as well, issued a statement, which gets at the heart of the matter, headlined “France: Headscarf Ban Violates Religious Freedom: By Disproportionately Affecting Muslim Girls, Proposed Law is Discriminatory,” *Human Rights Watch*, Feb. 26, 2004, accessed March 18, 2020, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2004/02/26/france-headscarf-ban-violates-religious-freedom> :

“The proposed law is an unwarranted infringement on the right to religious practice,” said Kenneth Roth, executive director of Human Rights Watch. “For many Muslims, wearing a headscarf is not only about religious expression, it is about religious obligation.”

International human rights law obliges state authorities to avoid coercion in matters of religious freedom, and this obligation must be taken into account when devising school dress codes. The proposed prohibition on headscarves in France, as with laws in some Muslim countries that force girls to wear headscarves in schools, violates this principle.

<sup>36</sup> Frantz Fanon, “Algeria Unveiled (1965),” in *A Dying Colonialism*, translated by Haakon Chevalier (New York: Grove Press), 1994, 41.

<sup>37</sup> The original French reads, « La mère regarde dans une autre direction, semblant ruminer sa colère, ou sa déception. » Bégaudeau et al., *Le scénario du film ‘Entre les murs’*, 60. The English

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screenplay doesn't include this specific directive (the translation is mine), but it similarly describes her as "angry" and "curt"—see Bégaudeau et al., *The Class*, 84.

<sup>38</sup> Fanon, "Algeria Unveiled (1965)," 44.

<sup>39</sup> Alloula, *Colonial Harem*, 17.

<sup>40</sup> Alloula, *Colonial Harem*, 64 and 17, emphasis in original.

<sup>41</sup> Alloula, *Colonial Harem*, 29.

<sup>42</sup> Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, translated by Alan Sheridan (New York: Vintage), 1977, 177–78, 183.

<sup>43</sup> If Souleymane is expelled, his father will send him back to their village in Mali, Khoumba reports, in urging François to forgo the hearing, an appeal that carries all the more weight since it was Khoumba whom Souleymane inadvertently injured.

<sup>44</sup> "We conducted a sort of 'open casting' where we went to sports clubs, theater groups, bars, and waited outside high schools... It was a way to meet a few hundred young people from the area among whom I chose the actors," Cantet said in Laurent Cantet, "The Workshop: Press Kit," 2017, accessed June 2, 2020, <https://medias.unifrance.org/medias/150/205/183702/presse/the-workshop-presskit-english.pdf>, which offers an English translation of Cantet's statements. For the original French, see Cantet, *L'Atelier: Dossier de presse* [press kit], 2017, accessed June 25, 2018, [http://diaphana.fr/wp-content/uploads/2017/04/latelier-dp\\_web.pdf](http://diaphana.fr/wp-content/uploads/2017/04/latelier-dp_web.pdf)

<sup>45</sup> All English translations are taken from the film's subtitles. The original reads, « Pour risquer de vous choquer, je trouve que le texte d'Antoine, pour un premier jet, est plutôt bien écrit ». *The Workshop (L'Atelier)*, directed by Laurent Cantet, performed by Marina Foïs and Matthieu Lucci, [Archipel 35], France 2 Cinéma, Canal+, and Ciné+, 2017, film.

<sup>46</sup> Cantet, "The Workshop: Press Kit."

<sup>47</sup> Cantet, "The Workshop: Press Kit."

<sup>48</sup> Cantet, "The Workshop: Press Kit."

<sup>49</sup> Michael Salter, associate professor of criminology at the University of New South Wales, argues against using the term for this reason, maintaining that even though its meaning is vastly different as it is used today, it tends to universalize and essentialize the root causes of male violence, rather than accounting for cultural differences or the particular economic circumstances of communities and offering more targeted solutions. For more on the term's evolution over time. See Michael Salter, "The Problem with a Fight against Toxic Masculinity," *The Atlantic*, Feb. 27, 2019, accessed March 18, 2020, <https://www.theatlantic.com/health/archive/2019/02/toxic-masculinity-history/583411/>.

<sup>50</sup> Kupers, qtd in Salter, "The Problem with a Fight against Toxic Masculinity."

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<sup>51</sup> Parent, Mike, Teresa Gobble and Aaron Rochlen, “Social Media Behavior, Toxic Masculinity, and Depression,” *Psychology of Men & Masculinity*, 2018, accessed June 13, 2018, doi: 10.1037/men0000156.

<sup>52</sup> Parent et al., “Social Media Behavior, Toxic Masculinity, and Depression.”

<sup>53</sup> Jared Yates Sexton’s book *The Man They Wanted Me to Be: Toxic Masculinity and a Crisis of Our Own Making* (Berkeley, CA: Counterpoint), 2019, 87, is a blend of memoir and cultural analysis set in the U.S., but this and many points resonate with much of western culture and certainly applies to Antoine’s attraction to French military recruitment ads.

<sup>54</sup> Cantet, “*The Workshop*: Press Kit.”

<sup>55</sup> A deeper dive into the gender dynamics of these two films extends beyond my focus, but it’s worth noting that the behavior of both white male protagonists Cantet centers is tinged by misogyny.

<sup>56</sup> There can be a relentless desire to humanize these guys. The *Washington Post*, after a mass shooting at a music festival in 2017, for instance, ran the headline, “Las Vegas Gunman Stephen Paddock Enjoyed Gambling, Country Music, Lived Quiet Life before Massacre.” After widespread criticism, the *Post* revised it to “Las Vegas gunman Stephen Paddock was a high-stakes gambler who ‘kept to himself’ before massacre.” The original lives on, however, having been widely promulgated by smaller newspapers like the *Philadelphia Inquirer*, *Tulsa World* and the *Providence Journal*. A search still brings up the *Post* story first, though now with its newly sanitized headline: see Barabara Liston, William Wan, Sandhya Somashekhar and Aaron C. Davis, “Las Vegas gunman Stephen Paddock was a high-stakes gambler who ‘kept to himself’ before massacre,” *Washington Post*, October 2, 2017, accessed April 19, 2018, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/post-nation/wp/2017/10/02/las-vegas-gunman-liked-to-gamble-listened-to-country-music-lived-quiet-retired-life-before-massacre/?utm\\_term=.6af389c3be12](https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/post-nation/wp/2017/10/02/las-vegas-gunman-liked-to-gamble-listened-to-country-music-lived-quiet-retired-life-before-massacre/?utm_term=.6af389c3be12) . For an example of the original headline, see William Wan and Aaron C. Davis, “Las Vegas gunman Stephen Paddock enjoyed gambling, country music; lived quiet life before massacre,” *Philadelphia Inquirer*, October 2, 2017, accessed April 19, 2018, [http://www.philly.com/philly/news/nation\\_world/las-vegas-gunman-stephen-paddock-enjoyed-gambling-country-music-lived-quiet-life-before-massacre-20171002.html](http://www.philly.com/philly/news/nation_world/las-vegas-gunman-stephen-paddock-enjoyed-gambling-country-music-lived-quiet-life-before-massacre-20171002.html)

<sup>57</sup> François Bégaudeau, *The Class*, 174.

<sup>58</sup> Bégaudeau, *The Class*, 195. In the original novel, François Bégaudeau, *Entre les murs* (Paris: Gallimard), 2006, 191-193, the French dialogue reads:

— «Moi j’étais contente le 11 septembre, » [...]

— « Eh m’sieur faut voir aussi tous les morts les Américains ils font en Palestine et tout), ...

— « Oui mais sil les Français ils dissent pas qu’ils sont pas d’accord, c’est comme si ils sont d’accord. Vous l’avez dit, vous, que vous êtes pas d’accord ? »

— « Un peu. »

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— « Un peu ça veut dire personne vous a entendu et voilà les islamistes ils peuvent pas savoir ».

<sup>59</sup> Cantet, “*The Workshop*: Press Kit.”

<sup>60</sup> Cantet, “*The Workshop*: Press Kit.”

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