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Diasporic Belgian Cinema: transnational and transcultural approaches to Molenbeek and Matonge in *Black* (Adil El Arbi and Bilal Fallah, 2015)

Since the terrorist attacks that took place in Paris (13th November 2015) and Brussels (23rd March 2016), the Brussels suburb of Molenbeek and the diasporic communities of Belgium – and in particular, Brussels – have been frequently analysed in European and Western media outlets.<sup>1</sup> Two days before the tragic events in Paris, the (francophone) Belgian film *Black* (Adil El Arbi and Bilal Fallah, 2015) was released to Belgian audiences. The film achieved critical valorisation after winning the Discovery prize at the Toronto international film festival, prior to its screening at film festivals in Belgium, namely the Ghent film festival (in Flanders) and the Festival International de Film Francophone (FIFF) in Namur (Wallonia). The contextual backdrop of terrorism and Islamic fundamentalism has led to a synchronic interpretation of *Black* as a potentially radical and subversive film. For instance, interviews with the two filmmakers adopted a greater level of topicality, with a stronger international and national spotlight received by Belgium's Moroccan diasporic community and Molenbeek. Crucially, francophone Belgian film criticism and newspaper articles have placed little emphasis on the action unrolling in Molenbeek, instead focusing on the level of screen time afforded to Matonge – the largely Congolese-Belgian neighbourhood in Brussels.

As *The Guardian* outlined, French cinemas refused to exhibit the film, along with *Made in France* (Nicolas Boukhrief, 2015) – a film that dealt more directly with Islamic fundamentalism, extremism and disenfranchised youth – and *Salafistes* (François Margolin and Lemine Ould M. Salem, 2016) as a result of the terror attacks in Paris (Agence France Press, 2015). *Black*, however, remained the only fictional feature film to be overlooked for cinematic distribution and exhibition in France, and the reasoning was primarily predicated on the film's setting in Molenbeek – the location of the terrorist cells – along with the violent subject matter (Ibid.). In the days leading up to the terror attack in Paris, Denis contended that *Black* was fiercely polemical with little political correctness (2015, 4), perhaps portending the bans and restrictions to follow on the film. Due to the 'current context' in the words of the distributor, Paname Distribution stated on the 18th February 2016 that the film would not be released in cinemas in France. Belgium's linguistic neighbor represents a crucial film market for French-language Belgian films as I have analysed previously (Steele, 2015). According to the French newspaper *Le Figaro*, the film arrived only in small and little known French cinemas on the 16th March 2016 (Gausserand, 2016) as well as it received a delayed online release on 24th June 2016 (Paulet, 2016). The film, therefore, received only a modicum of distribution in France. The limited distribution of the film is particularly problematic for this production, with the filmmakers noting that their filmmaking style is peculiarly cinematic (Bouras, 2015).

Since the terror attacks in France and Belgium, the documentary *Molenbeek, génération radicale?*

(José-Luis Peñafuerte and Chergui Kharroubi, 2016) was filmed in the Brussels suburb in order to nuance interpretations of the area's population. This is reminiscent of the critical and media attention experienced by the French *banlieues* in light of the riots in the 1990s and early 2000s.<sup>2</sup> The televised debate in a local primary school, that bookended the documentary's screening on the francophone Belgian TV channel RTBF, recalls the TV series *Écran Témoin*.<sup>3</sup> *Molenbeek, génération radicale?* provides an important intervention in terms of a balanced representation of the diasporic communities residing in Brussels' suburbs. This is set against the backdrop of 'deep social anxieties' linked to the growing Muslim population in Brussels (Fadil, 2014, p. 315). It is precisely these inflections that have coalesced into a reading of films like *Black*, which unroll only fleetingly in Molenbeek. The location has become a discussion point, alongside the diasporic community and the 'ghettoising' principles that have impacted on this development and geographic concentration of a minority group.

### **Cinematic Transnationalism and Diasporic Belgian Filmmaking**

The notion of Belgian identity is multifaceted, particularly since '(t)he abandoning of Belgium's neutrality [after WWII] has led to the influx of a great many people from a range of different countries, ethnic groups and social strata, each with their own legitimate identity. The large number of European civil servants adds a further foreign presence.' (Spaas, 2000, p.8) Despite the tradition of post-WWII migration, Belgian cinema's diasporic filmmakers have been largely overlooked in academic and scholarly consideration, except for Chantal Akerman and, to a lesser extent, Michel Khleifi. These two filmmakers, one of Jewish and the other of Christian Palestine origin, constitute case studies for Naficy's (2001) oft-cited concept of 'accented cinema'. Alternatively, Mosley highlights the fraught and tense relationships between the native and immigrant populations in francophone Belgian cinema in the 1990s, against the backdrop of increasing 'global labour mobility' and a lack of employment opportunities (Mosley, 2002, p.164).

Saeyes presciently argues that second-generation diasporic filmmaking arrived around twenty years after the 'banlieue film's' emergence in France, observing that Belgium's first arrived after the millennium with *Au delà de Gibraltar/ Beyond Gibraltar* (Mourad Boucif and Taylan Barman, 2001) (2009, p.351). Beyond this transnational cinematic reference point, two newspaper articles in the press – one in *La Libre Belgique* and one in *Le Soir* (Denis, 2015, pp.4-5; Manche, 2015b, pp.4-5) – use the term 'beur' in order to refer to the filmmakers and the characters in *Black* of Moroccan heritage. Denis (2015, p.4) and Manche (2015b, pp.4-5) both foreground the 'Black-Beur' dynamic of the film, which is clearly reminiscent of the Black-Beur-Blanc triptych of the aforementioned *La baine*. The concept also emerges dialogically in the non-diegetic soundtrack, *Du plomb dans les ailes* [literal translation 'Lead in the Wings', however idiomatically it pertains to 'Weakened'] by Belgian

hip-hop group CN199, accompanying the sequence in which Mavela and Marwan are arrested for separate petty crimes. However, it is salient to note that the Moroccan-Belgian characters avoid the use of the loaded term in the film. The use of '*beur*' furthers the dialogue between French filmmaking of the late 1980s and 1990s – in addition to requiring nuance. Whilst these terms are applied liberally in film criticism, it is important to acknowledge the rejection of the '*beur* filmmaker' and '*beur* cinema' labels by diasporic filmmakers, 'because these set them apart from “unmarked” practitioners and, explicitly or implicitly, identify them as (albeit authentic) voices who can and must speak (only) about and for their communities.' (Berghahn and Sternberg, 2010, p.18)

Higbee and Lim's concept of 'critical transnationalism' provides a key critical approach in terms of deciphering diasporic filmmaking in Western European cinema. In so doing, the concept 'understands the potential for local, regional and diasporic film cultures to affect, subvert and transform national and transnational cinemas' (2010, p.18). The 'flows and exchanges' (Ibid.), therefore, pertain to people and populations within the nation that may have allegiances and senses of identity that lie beyond the nation's borders. Within this problematising of the national cinema context, power relations emerge that articulate centre/margin, insider/outsider, local/global, and host/home binary oppositions (Higbee and Lim, 2010, pp.9-10).

In the context of so-called 'world cities', Hannerz (1996) articulates the power dynamics in operation between populations in the city and diasporic communities. According to Hannerz, 'the cent[re]-to-periphery flow, at the cent[re] itself, whatever passes for a native culture frequently seems to view itself as beleaguered or invaded by the local representations of the people [...] These are the people of the cent[re] wanting the periphery to go away from their doorstep, or at least to show up there only discreetly, to perform essential services.' (Hannerz, 1996, p.134). In cinematic terms, Naficy interprets diasporas in relation to 'a long-term sense of ethnic consciousness and distinctiveness, which is consolidated by the periodic hostility of either the original home or the host societies towards them.' (2001, p.14) This hostility, therefore, plays a role in the formation of the collective along ethnic lines due to a lack of integration within the 'internal diversity'.

The primary line of inquiry in this chapter considers the first three binaries, as outlined by Higbee and Lim (2010), with the question of host/home in *Black* in particular being markedly absent. The question of host/home is fleetingly viewed in *Black* with the character 'X's subjective flashback to the horrors of the Congolese civil war in the late 1990s and early 2000s, which suggests that the character was traumatized by experiences as a child soldier. The instance of perceptual alignment with the character of 'X' highlights the film's multiple subjectivity, beyond the two central characters of Mavela and Marwan, who function primarily as representatives for the two dominant diasporic communities. As a result, 'transnational cinema is most “at home” in the in-between spaces of culture, in other words, between the local and the global, it decisively problematizes the

investment in cultural purity and separatism' (Ezra and Rowden, 2006, p.4). The exploration and analysis of interstitial spaces is, therefore, key in unlocking references beyond national borders. It also allows for a nuanced interpretation of individuals whose sense of identity is not neatly pigeonholed and challenges the rather myopic perceptions of national homogeneity.

### **Competing nationalisms, excluded communities and hip-hop quotations:**

In Belgium, language lies at the foundation of Belgian nationalism. Mosley, drawing his ideas from the oft-cited sources of Anderson (1991) and Gellner (1983), posits that 'the proponents of Belgian nationalism sought to manufacture as appropriate a cultural identity through language and more specifically through the production of literary texts', which leads to a 'bourgeois' perception (2001, p.17). The elitist and bourgeois forms of Belgian nationalism were primarily configured in French, within which 'the Flemish people long remained a purely latent force.' (Ibid. p.17), i.e. historically sidelined. The nationalist split predicated on linguistic grounds leaves two competing national identities according to regions and linguistic communities. Hayward posits that within new Western nationalisms and cultures 'there has been a foregrounding of the margins of nation-space of which so-called marginal cinema is but one manifestation.' (2000, p.94) The argument is later furthered with reference to the flexibility of the nation as a construct, offering that '[b]ecause the fact that nations are invented and fictional means that they can be re-defined and re-appropriated by actors – in other words, a re-possession of the nation by excluded groups is possible.'<sup>4</sup> (Hayward, 2000, p.99) From this premise, new Western nationalisms work through fragmentation and understanding notions of group identity on a local and regional level (Elsaesser, 2005, pp.116-117); and those who have been historically and are presently excluded. Moreover, for Elsaesser, region, religion and lifestyle generate allegiances and forms of community outside and within the state boundaries of Western Europe (Elsaesser, 2005, p.117). In Belgium, this is evidenced in this case by Flanders' increasing claims for separatism and at the level of the sub-state in political terms.

Firstly, Flanders is politically considered Right-leaning, whereas the francophone populations are generally viewed as Socialist and Left-leaning (Cerulus, 2015). The political turn to the Right has subsequently seen the exclusion of the francophone Socialists from the national Belgian government for the first time since 1988 (Ibid.). Since the terrorist attacks in France (and later Belgium) and the revealing of the terrorist cells in Molenbeek, the New Flemish Alliance (N-VA), a conservative Flemish-separatist group led by Bart De Wever, have gained an increased role in the national Belgian political structures, thereby 'pushing Belgium to the [political] Right' (Cerulus, 2015).<sup>5</sup> Both the 'extremist party Flemish interest (*Vlaams Belang*) and the separatist party New Flemish Alliance [...] represent the Flemish Movement politically and advocate for an independent and monolingual Dutch Flemish state that includes the capital of Brussels.' (Verheul, 2016, p.322). The interior

minister Jan Jambon, another outright Right-wing politician, outlined the requirement to 'clean up' Molenbeek (Cerulus, 2015) with the 'Plan Canal' project (Belga, 2016) in discourse that pertains to issues of stigmatisation. Much of the discourse surrounding these policies, mandates and events concerned the question of immigration. The question of Western European nationalism is marked by a political turn to the Right, which has been gradually building towards its peak at the time of the 2015-2016 terrorist attacks. 2016 has become a watershed, with increased levels of fear in the context of symbolic emasculation and fear of the perceived Other amongst a rise in terror attacks in Western Europe and the USA. As a result, a far-Right ideology has gained greater traction in the media and popular consciousness, witnessing the election of Republican Donald Trump in the USA (with policies including the construction of a wall between the USA and Mexico), the UK's decision to leave the European Union (amongst strong support from UKIP [United Kingdom Independence Party]) in 2016, and Marine Le Pen of the Front National receiving the second-largest percentage of the French presidential votes in 2017.

In 2014, whilst analysing the Belgian film *Les barons*, Orlando (2014) sees an increasing liberalism in a political and ideological sense in Europe, beyond Right-wing ideas of cultural homogeneity. For Orlando, these 'hardline ideas about nationhood and nationalism [...] seem incongruous in today's multicultural societies' (2014, p.164). Instead, Hayward posits that national identities are pluricultural rather than multicultural, since separation arises in the context of competing nationalisms (2000, p.94). In *The Guardian*, Adil El Arbi and Billal Fallah discuss the racism and prejudice that they suffered during their teenage years, suggesting that it is even worse now than in 1995 when Kassovitz produced *La haine* (Rose, 2016), particularly since 9/11 and the subsequent paroxysm of terrorism in cities across the globe. This is further articulated by sociologists Demart and Robert, who interpret the representations in *Black* as 'stigmatised, minoritised and raced', with the representation of gang violence – formed along ethnic lines and ethnic difference – as a backward step, 'taking us back by 20 years' (2015, p.50).

Secondly, in terms of the diasporic communities, the hip-hop allusions and African American cultural appropriation for the Congolese, and to a lesser extent the Moroccan-Belgian community in Belgium, connect with wider discourses of black nationalism. This form of nationalism is not contained within geo-political boundaries, since Androutsopoulos and Scholz posit that, for hip-hop and rap culture, 'appropriation is the productive use of an originally imported cultural pattern.' (2003, p.465) As Hardt and Negri contend, 'black nationalism names precisely the circuits of self-valorisation that constitute the community and allow for its relative self-determination and self-constitution.' (2000, p.108) However, through its 'homogeneity and 'uniformity', it offers only 'de facto representatives of the whole' (Ibid.) Hip-hop, as a form of nationalism, is inclusive of a certain strata of the community, who 'were either disillusioned by the

racial hostilities brought on by the participation in the societal mainstream or dislocated from the centre of social and economic life altogether.' (Watkins, 2001, p.381) The dislocation is epitomised in hip-hop and rap music by the disenfranchised and 'disadvantaged populations' of the USA's 'inner cities' and France's *banlieues* (Quittelier, 2015). Instead, the use of hip-hop, in particular, offers an alternative form of representation for excluded communities and for youth cultures.

It is precisely 'a new articulation of the nation' (Elsaesser, 2005, p.114) along local lines and smaller forms of community that the hip-hop allusions gain greater valence in *Black*, with a sense of collective and group identity forged in relation to their neighbourhood and district in the Belgian capital, Brussels.<sup>6</sup> At the same time, the hip-hop iconography and sampled rhythms and beats, infused within *Black*, interact with both the local and the global. The relevance of hip-hop in Belgium to questions of Belgian nationalism is limited, primarily by virtue of rap music and hip-hop's limited popular appeal in the country, with the exception of Stromae [*verlan* for Maestro] (Mertens et al., 2013, p.93). Instead, in this study, Congolese-Belgian hip-hop - to which Romano Daking's music in the film adheres - is more invested in post-colonial memory and challenging the obfuscation of Belgium's violent and fraught colonial history in Africa (Ibid.). To this end, hip-hop and rap music as a mode of expression offers a competing form of nationalism to excluded groups in contrast to a sense of Belgian national identity. El Arbi describes Belgian national identity as inherently 'artificial' (El Arbi, 2017) and, therefore, returns to Mosley's (2001) initial problematic interpretation of Belgian nationalism. In the case of Belgian hip-hop, linguistic difference has left at least half of the nation 'marginalised' and 'silenced', with its articulation in French, as opposed to Dutch (Mertens et al., 2013).

As Brooks and Conroy posit, 'whereas hip-hop may continue to be associated with minority cultural expression, it exists now in global context and allows for the possibility of new kinds of cross national identity.' (2011, p.8) The Belgian hip-hop culture is nothing new, with Quittelier positing that 'it has existed in Brussels for more than 30 years.' (Quittelier, 2015) Its cultural development has existed in relation to its predecessors and contemporary articulations in the USA and its discernible presence in France in the 1980s and 1990s (Ibid.) As Mertens et al. assert, Belgian hip-hop, of a Congolese-Belgian inflection, re-affirms that '[s]ince national identities – the Belgian as well as the Congolese – are closed to these immigrants, hip-hop artists identify with the city and the districts that they live in.' (Mertens et al., 2013, p.96). The use of hip-hop enters into a pattern of shorthand references to urban life and youth subcultures that connect the local and the global whilst transgressing the national.

The allusions to hip-hop culture also resonate with films like *La haine* (Mathieu Kassovitz, 1995) in France and the representation of an 'international ghetto youth culture', inspired by 'American ghettos as the future world order: a growing underclass of *exclus*, in which "old-

fashioned” divisions of class and race are irrelevant’ (Vincendeau, 2000, p.324). Ezra and Rowden summarise *La haine* as a film in which ‘young second-generation immigrants from North Africa, West Africa, and Eastern Europe reject the traditional values of their families in order to embrace a “French” youth culture inspired by the global fashion for violent Hollywood films and rap music’ (2006, p.8).<sup>7</sup> There is also a certain aestheticism and a ‘polished look’ to the film, which both Higbee (2006, p. 70) and Vincendeau (2000, pp.316-319) recognise in *La haine*, that emerges through cinephilic and intertextual allusions. For Spence, *La Haine's* citation system in film is concomitant with hip-hop culture more generally, which demonstrates its ‘reverence for and homages to past masters’ (2017, p.104) and is, therefore, full of ‘borrowed material’ (Ibid., p. 109). The hip-hop culture evoked in *La haine* is not unique to Kassovitz’s film, since McNeill (2017) critically analyses the musical allusions and pop culture references in French film *Girlhood/ Bande de Filles* (Céline Sciamma, 2014). McNeill (2017) frames her approach to the film as both cohering with the conventional gaze of the camera and rap music’s patriarchal, male and ‘normative’ ideological concerns at the same time as ‘queering’ the diaspora and its female characters in the lip-syncing sequences.

In the context of local districts, Steffens (2007) outlines the variation of terms used in the suburb of Brussels, which differs from its official name *Molenbeek-Saint-Jean* in French. In 2005, Steffens noted that ‘it is striking to see the *1080*, *Molen* or *Molem* tags written in great numbers on the façades of houses in the Eastern part of the borough. This is reminiscent of the practices of the *hip-hop* culture of disadvantaged youth in the first inner cities of North America, and then in European towns, that arose in the 1980s.’ (Steffens, 2007, p.4). The salience of hip-hop and North American urban culture reverberates through El Arbi and Fallah’s *Black*, with the Molenbeek-based gang referring to themselves as 1080, the suburb’s postal code, as well as the inclusion of *Bruxellois* rappers on the non-diegetic soundtracks by La Smala, Rival CN119 and the late Romano Daking. The gang based in Matonge also alludes to US gang culture with the name ‘Black Bronx’.

### **Black (Adil El Arbi and Bilall Fallah, 2015): Gangs and Stereotypes**

The primary point of difference between Mourad Boucif, Nabil Ben Yadir and the two filmmakers Adil El Arbi and Bilall Fallah concerns notions of community identity. The latter filmmakers grew up in the Northern Belgian region of Flanders, in the cities of Diegem (on the outskirts of Brussels) and Antwerp/ Anvers, producing their first short film *Broeders/ Brothers* (Adil El Arbi and Bilall Fallah, 2011) and feature film *Image* (Adil El Arbi and Bilall Fallah, 2014) in Dutch.<sup>8</sup> As a result, the first feature film was only circulated in Flanders and one cinema in Brussels, leaving the film ‘totally absent from cinemas in Wallonia’ (Van Dievort, 2014). Filmmakers Mourad Boucif and Nabil Ben Yadir, however, grew up in and around Brussels in francophone immigrant communities (certainly

miscegenated in the case of Boucif), whereas El Arbi and Fallah are considered 'outsiders'.

As Adil El Arbi and Billal Fallah note, Belgium currently has an issue with 'ghettoising' immigrant communities onto the margins of the city (Rose, 2016) – as evidenced by the film's setting in both Molenbeek and Matonge. Steffens notes that the district of Matonge in Ixelles pertains to a neighborhood in the capital of the Democratic Republic of Congo, Kinshasa (2007, p.6). From this premise, the naming of the district is created in relation to the immigrant population living in the area, which, as Steffens observes, can have potentially xenophobic undertones (Ibid.). The issue of racism emerges within denunciative analyses of the film in francophone Belgian and French film criticism. Moreover, in Belgium, the notion of Flemish nationalism and recognition of the ethnic sub-grouping remains an important political question.

In *Black*, the notions of difference operate on four levels, between francophone Belgian, Flemish, Moroccan-Belgian and Congolese-Belgian senses of identity. Baumann posits that the articulation of language and linguistic plurality in the film serves as the only instance of cultural and national nuance (Baumann, 2016, p.49). The use of language primarily highlights the notion of a Belgian identity riven by linguistic allegiances and communities that extend beyond the French-Flemish divide. Moreover, Flemish adopts increased importance in terms of articulating majority and minority positions. The dominance of French in the film is predicated on 'realism', since 'Flemish Dutch is the language of the rich, not the street' (El Arbi, in Mastorou, 2015). The film's linguistic shift is particularly salient since the books - on which the film is based – were not translated into French (Bouras, 2014). A certain hierarchy is also established between the representation of ethnically white Belgian characters and diasporic Belgian characters. The former roles are primarily lensed in the context of the police. After Marwan and his brother's (Nassim) first arrest, the two white, Flemish policemen adopt an aggressive stance against the two young men. In this case, the policemen provide information in Dutch, with Nassim pleading for the use of French. Power dynamics are established between the two men arrested on linguistic grounds, positing an inferiority predicated upon linguistic and group identity. In *Les barons* (Nabil Ben Yadir, 2009), Orlando contends that similar interactions are primarily articulated on linguistic rather than ethnic grounds, whilst still foregrounding political issues between the two/ three Belgian regions of Brussels-Wallonia and Flanders (2014, pp.173-174).

The image of a multi-ethnic Belgium – in a post-colonial context – is uneven in terms of its focus on miscegenation and its diasporic communities. For instance, the Moroccan-Belgian characters are viewed in a more sympathetic light, as troubled teenagers from a disenfranchised background, who fall into petty crime and gang culture to form a sense of belonging and group identity. The gang culture steps away from the nation, offering the characters of Marwan and Mavela an alternative form of collective identity. As El Arbi posits,

*Black* highlights the fact that for those young people, they feel they do not belong in Belgium. They will never be Belgians, they will never be accepted. On the other hand, they will never be Moroccans either, drop them in their country of origin and they won't belong. So they are in between two worlds, looking for an identity. A gang is something clear, in a gang you have an identity (1080 or Black Bronx), you are something instead of nothing. (El Arbi, 2017)

As El Arbi evokes, the sense of identity and solidarity emerges on a microcosmic level, within the confines of the small neighbourhoods and districts. These subcultures articulate a competing form of collectivity that nuances and works against the dominant nationalisms and ideologies expressed in politics and in the media. Marwan, in particular, seeks change in terms of social mobility (working as a mechanic), despite his brother's assertions that it is not possible due to his ethnicity. Denis proposes that the members of 1080 are more inclined to 'escape their milieu, their social determinism.' (2015, p.4) These aspirations facilitate a reading of the film that pertains to 'social realism' as opposed to a genre-based approach to which *Black* most closely adheres.

The Moroccan-Belgian community is not foregrounded to the same extent as the Congolese diaspora, despite the filmmakers' Moroccan-Belgian identity and heritage. There is a greater narrative focus and screen time afforded to Mavela and her gang, the Black Bronx. Differing from *Kamel* – in which women are distinctly absent (Royen, 1997: 33) – *Black* focuses on the breakdown of a relationship between a mother and daughter and the hardships experienced by young women in Belgium's *banlieues*. The depiction of violence is heightened in the gang of the Congolese diaspora, particularly in terms of the representation of sexual violence against women, as this chapter explores in the following section. Demart and Robert are critical of *Black*'s racial stereotypes, which continue 'a postcolonial racism and threaten an already fragile social bond [between Belgium's different ethnic groups]' (2015, p.50). Despite the lack of ethnic reference, the concluding image from the film provides evidence for this analysis, noting that 'Since 2002, 23 people have been killed in youth gang fights in Brussels'. The elision of poverty and delinquency with the ethnic groups in the film demonstrates that 'dystopian imaginaries of the city are often also deeply racialised' (Fadil, 2014, p.316). In particular, the film's articulation of ethnic difference through representations of space harks 'back to the colonial endeavor, which was organised around the necessity of spatially marking the differences between the self and the Other.' (Ibid.) As a result, *Black* marks a return to the exploration of institutional racism and systemic discrimination articulated in the French *banlieue* films of the 1990s, contrasting radically with *Les barons* – also set in Molenbeek – and which intended to show a positive depiction of the Moroccan-Belgian second-generations (Orlando, 2014) or, in Ben Yadir's words, 'another image of Molenbeek' (Mouton, 2013, p.14).

*Black* and spatial dynamics in the Brussels *banlieue*:

In terms of a transnational cinephilic approach, *Black* has been compared to the French *banlieue* film *La haine* in film criticism (Les Inrocks, 2016; Robertson, 2016; Rose, 2016). In the Belgian version of the glossy, popular culture magazine *Elle*, the filmmakers even claim that they considered Dirk Bracke novels *Black* and *Back* as ‘notre *La Haine*’ [our *La haine*] (Fralon, 2015) as well as citing Kassovitz’s film as a key source of inspiration (Delpature, 2015). The two filmmakers first encountered the books at school, since they are widely circulated amongst young people in Flemish schools (Bouras, 2015).

Eschewing the local and the culturally specific articulations of *La haine*, the cinematic reference primarily arises from the affinity to Anglo-American cultural forms to represent and highlight a sense of dissent. The importance of rap music and hip-hop culture to the films shines through in particular with *Black* releasing a CD for physical purchase, download and streaming. On online streaming services, such as Youtube, the songs included within the film include scenes from the film in their music videos. The non-professional actors (in lead roles in *Black*) have since appeared in rap music videos, creating a further extratextual link to the film, such as Martha Canga Antonio (Mavela) as a member of Soul’Art and Aboubakr Bensaidi (Marwan) in Sosa Gang. This is particularly reminiscent of *La haine*, which led to the release of two CDs, ‘one of the film’s soundtrack and one of rap music’ (Vincendeau, 2000, p.310).<sup>9</sup> In a francophone Belgian context, this is a well-worn pathway, since Boucif and Barman’s first feature-length film *Au delà de Gibraltar* produced ancillary CD products for further distribution.

*Black* is essentially structured through three musical set pieces, which provide the film with its impetus and drive forward. The film is marked by a tight causality, rapid montage cutting and editing that is engendered through (the MTV) music video style sequences. This set-piece is, therefore, compressed into a three to four minute sequence, articulating a story that drives the narrative forward in its linear progression. The first movement coincides with CN119’s *Du plomb dans les ailes*, which foregrounds Mavela and Marwan’s first meeting as they both commit petty crimes in the City 2 shopping mall. The sequence elides the two *banlieues* with petty crime, with the non-diegetic track intensifying with its beats at the moment in which Mavela grabs the bottles of alcohol. The tight framing of the thefts alongside the non-diegetic tracks distances the individuals from their actions, articulating that they are paradigmatic examples of a wider social concern.

The second ‘movement’ pertains to Romano Daking’s *Problèmes*, which operates as the Black Bronx gang’s music of initiation and ritual. The diegetic music and hip-hop song, played through the gang’s boombox, becomes symbiotic with the gang’s rape of young women. The titular sequence includes the music alongside the screams of an unknown female, depicting the rape of first Loubna,

as a symbolic act of gang violence against both women and the Moroccan-Belgian 1080 gang, and second Mavela, the young member of the Black Bronx. The differences in the two sexual violence sequences (Loubna and Mavela) is discernible, since the gang's rape of Mavela is articulated graphically. The continuity of the editing style further highlights the sheer violence of the scene, with Mavela's washing the blood away in a shower.

Within the influences of these hip-hop aesthetics, an expression of post-colonial trauma rises to the surface in its most raw form. The title of Mambu's (2015) article 'Why Mavela and not Loubna' attests to why the difference is drawn by the filmmakers to not show the rape of Loubna but to graphically depict Mavela in the same circumstance. For Mambu, the ethnically Congolese-Belgian women are conceived as 'victim-objects' in which 'the black female body has always attracted looks, even when put in a position of repulsion [...] it [the film] did not lack in its description of its contents in its photographs and writings, thus contributing to an erotic imagination that appeals to Western fantasies' (Mambu, 2015). Demart and Robert adopt the same position, articulating that 'the collective rape of the young Arab girl [Loubna] is translated with a certain modesty [...] the camera erotises the rape of the young, Black girl' (2015, p.50), primarily through fetishising close-ups. At this point, the camera adopts a voyeuristic position, objectifying and pacifying Mavela. It adopts an imperialistic and colonialist view of her body, which is forcibly rendered passive and punished for her agency. In Orlando's analysis of *Les barons*, the scholar contends that 'the interstices of the hyphen' as a strand of 'schizophrenic identities' that are caught between two poles (2014, p. 177). In this instance, Mavela's enforced subjugation articulates the male gang members' 'schizophrenic' mindset of the colonialist position on indigenous populations (in this case Belgium's extremely violent colonial rule of the Congo), re-acting and projecting symbolic historical colonial abuses in the present in Belgium.

The remix of Amy Winehouse's *Back to Black*, as the third movement, epitomises this stylistic feature, and resonates with Kassovitz's use of *Nique la Police/ Non, je ne regrette rien* by DJ Cut Killer in *La haine*. Whereas Cut Killer's remix is articulated in French, re-appropriating NWA's original, this version of *Back to Black* retains the use of English despite the re-writing of the song by Flemish singers Oscar and the Wolf and Tsar B. Oscar and the Wolf's cover is syncretic, complementing the film through its infusion of jazz, with its African American origins, the use of English lyrics, and Tsar B's vocals reflect the artist's 'feeding on world music' (Aïnouz, 2016). The song evokes hip-hop allusions to 'past masters' as well as pastiching popular culture. In the context of postmodernity, Jameson (1991) foregrounds the presence of the pastiche is part of a wider system of frequent allusions, borrowings, and recyclings. As the singer further posits, 'When I sing, I do not use the entire Western range, but instead [I use] the Arab system, which has a lot more notes.' (Tsar B, Ibid.) These descriptions of the film's selected music dialogically echo Berghahn's assertion that

'soundtracks of diasporic youth films [...] consist of Western and World music, underscoring the cultural hybridity of the protagonists.' (2010, p.249) The non-diegetic music, in this case, is concomitant with the action, the spaces, and the identities of the individuals included on screen. The hybridity of the sound mix evokes the cultural hybridity expressed through the characters' lack of national belonging. This is particularly the case of the inclusion of Marwan driving alone alongside the canal that acts as a symbolic border between the centre of Brussels and the Molenbeek periphery (Figure 1). The discernible pause between the end of the non-diegetic *Back-to-Black* and the long shot of the canal echoes the end of a music video, which similarly appears during the 'Girlhood' theme in the contemporaneous French film *Bande de filles/ Girlhood* (McNeill, 2017, p.5).

Figure 1: The brief pause on the canal after the 'Back to Black' sequence, a border between Molenbeek and Brussels' centre.

The 'Back-to-Black' sequence marks a rapid descent for Mavela, following her rape, into a world saturated by drugs, physical, psychological and sexual violence, and crime. However, whilst the sequence focuses on Mavela and her decline, the pastiche of Amy Winehouse's song re-joins the phallogocentric and patriarchal concern of hip-hop. The opening line of the song evidences this, stating 'He left no time to regret, kept his dick wet'. The camera's gaze on Mavela – in the two musical set-pieces of *Problèmes* and 'Back to Black' is inherently male and pre-occupied with re-asserting a dominant patriarchal positioning, which is echoed by the provocative lyrics of Romano Daking (and his local version of US gangsta rap) as well as Oscar and the Wolf's pastiche 'Back to Black'. Daking's *Problèmes* is invested with terminology that pertains to the circulation of capital – which is posited through criminal activities – with a male-driven gang mentality. McNeill posits that in the case of *Bande de filles* the camera's gaze and the lyrics of the 'Wop' music sequence re-affirm 'rap's objectification of women' (2017, p.9), which suggests that the sequences are primarily male-orientated and (hetero-)normative in terms of their mass appeal and ideological positioning (McNeill, 2017, p.13).

As with the lead protagonist Kamel in *Kamel*, the snorting of cocaine functions as the

initiating factor that instigates his/her decline. Drug-taking and delinquency represent thematic signifiers for disenfranchisement and a spatial vortex that originates in the city's peripheries. *Black* and *La haine* feature striking parallels in terms of how the sequences commence. In *La haine*, Hubert, representing a generalized sub-Saharan African diaspora in France, cuts and prepares marijuana before rolling and smoking a joint in his bedroom. This recalls the opening to the sequence in *Black* in which a line of cocaine is cut and then snorted by Mavela. The representation of the Moroccan diaspora is reduced at this point, with Marwan operating as a counter-point and symbolic of multi-racial Belgium and Brussels. The shots of Marwan fleetingly capture his journey around the city as he searches for Mavela, articulating his intention to eschew gang violence and petty crime as an alternative economy. His hope and search is counter-balanced by exaggerated moments of violence between Mavela, her gang and an Arabic shopkeeper and Mavela's unprovoked attacks on passers-by.

In a francophone Belgian context, cinematic reference points, similar to those of *La haine*, highlight the differences within a variegated diasporic filmmaking environment. For instance, Boucif and Barman in *Kamel* and *Au delà de Gibraltar* create a transnational stylistic dialogue with Ken Loach (*Goodfellow*, 2002, p.26), whereas in the case of *Black*, the two filmmakers draw on similar reference points, showing a greater affinity with Post-Classical Hollywood filmmaking, the 'hood' film, and independent American filmmaking from the 1980s and the 1990s. El Arbi notes that when they were growing up and honing their filmmaking craft, the filmmakers were not interested in the films of the Dardenne brothers (fellow Belgian filmmakers), but were instead pre-occupied with the work of Spike Lee, Martin Scorsese, Steven Spielberg, Michael Mann and Quentin Tarantino (Bouras, 2015). Berghahn proposes that the notion of 'the "hood"' is not directly transferable to the French banlieue [...], the ghettocentric and its use of hip-hop and rap music has had a discernible influence' (2010, p.237). As a result, *Black* operates within the interstices of 'generic templates' and 'aesthetic strategies' (Berghahn and Sternberg, 2010) emerging from the USA and the *banlieue* film in France.<sup>10</sup> Stylistic filiation is composed of a 'genre style of filmmaking: accelerations and explosive action scenes, dramatic slow motion, passionate love-making scenes without artifice, and the energetic casting of non-professionals.' (Mambu, 2015). This style of filmmaking is concomitant with the 'action genre' (Bouras, 2015). By drawing heavily on the semantic and syntactic, to adopt Altman's (1984) terms from genre theory, of the gangster genre, Baumann contends that *Black* references a series of clichés from the genre, leading to the conclusion that it is a '*mauvais polar*' [a bad thriller] in a denunciative analysis (2015, p.49). The lack of a coherent genre appellation applied to the film attests to its generic fluidity and transnational genre template.

Spatial dynamics engender a further nuanced understanding and interpretation of social marginalisation and social polarisation, which operate as two key thematic concerns. The

representation of Molenbeek in *Black* is limited to the brief shots of the Belgian youths of Moroccan descent gathered in public spaces and the brief scene in which the group throw Molotov cocktails at a police car in Molenbeek. In the case of the Moroccan diaspora, the first generation is overlooked in the narrative, with the youths making no reference to their parents, their cultural heritage or the 'homeland'. As a result, the film adheres more closely to theories of diasporic cinema than to migrant cinema. The Molenbeek apartments - in which Marwan and his elder brother Nassim reside – are not included, eschewing an analysis of a *mise-en-scène* that may evoke Naficy's (2001) typologies of claustrophobia and loneliness. The binary opposition, underpinning a structuralist approach to genre criticism, between the 'claustrophobic home vs. the "cool places" where youths hang out' (Berghahn, 2010, p.250) is discernibly absent, focusing instead solely on the latter notion, the streets and 'non-places'. This also coheres with Vincendeau's (2000: 313) interpretation of *La haine*'s *mise-en-scène* and on-location shooting, which is decontextualised and, therefore, lacks sociological depth. *Black*'s *mise-en-scène*, therefore, contrasts with Boucif and Barman's *Kamel*, which offers an authentic 'gaze' into the dated and cramped Molenbeek apartments and stairwells, which recalls Dridi's construction of apartments laden with tactile objects, creating a nostalgic connection to the 'homeland', in *Le Panier*, the multicultural district of Marseilles in *Bye-Bye*.<sup>11</sup>

For instance, *Black*'s opening sequence sketches out the film's spatial dynamics, outlining and ossifying a centre-periphery model that maps onto the city's geography. The sequence incorporates the three primary spaces, articulating a balance between the perceived centre and the *banlieues* of Molenbeek and Matonge on the city's margins. The characters' entry into the centre is, however, an alienating experience, leading to their arrests, since they operate as spaces of petty crime. Moreover, Marwan's theft of an ethnically white, Belgian lady's handbag from her car emphasises the perverse side to one of Brussels' most well-known cinematic backdrops from the elevated point of the Palais de Justice. The phone booth sequence in the Brussels-based comedy *Dikkenek* (Olivier Van Hoofstadt, 2006) is the most obvious and memorable example. The hierarchal construction of space comes to the fore, with Marwan travelling in a (physically) downward direction from the 'centre' to the margins of Molenbeek. The evocation of power dynamics, of an insider/ outsider dynamic is exposed spatially. The street elevator at Palais de Justice, therefore, operates as a physical and symbolic border, since it is the point at which the Flemish passer-by stops his pursuit of Marwan (Figure 2). Drawing on the documentary *Molenbeek, génération radicale?*, it posits that tourists remain in the city's historic centre, visiting landmarks such as the Palais de Justice, the Grand Place and the Bourse [Stock Exchange], but never venture into the suburbs. This is equally implied by Marwan's comment to the police, on patrol in Molenbeek, that 'foreigners' were involved in the theft, attesting to Molenbeek's population as perennial suspects. The term, in particular, makes a knowing reference to Brussels' transnational composition, which falls between the two categories outlined by Hannerz

of an 'managerial and entrepreneurial class' and 'Third World populations' viewed primarily as 'labour migrants' (1996, pp.128-132). The 'centre' remains the hub for the cosmopolitan elite – tourists, businessmen, Eurocrats – whereas the excluded diasporic communities are restricted to the urban peripheries.

Figure 2: Marwan escapes from the historic centre with the stolen handbag beneath the Palais de Justice.

Whereas the opening theft sequence coheres with intensified continuity editing – a form of editing in line with Post-Classical Hollywood action films – the introduction to Molenbeek adopts a style and tone that evokes Post-War European art cinema. In Molenbeek, El Arbi and Fallah opt for a long take with fluid and nervous camera movement, occurring for 85 seconds. Although El Arbi and Fallah ludically articulate their eschewal of European auteurs at film school, the use of the camera in *Black's* set-up creates this reference point. As Marwan returns to the suburb from the centre by car, the camera continues with the horizontal direction initiated by the movement of the car. Shochat and Stam contend that '(t)he diverse directionality of the scripts of different languages – that fact that Hebrew and Arabic are read “horizontally” from right to left [...] can inflect camera movements over script' (1985, p.36). During the spectator's first introduction to Molenbeek, the horizontal movement from right-to-left as the camera enters the district populated largely by Moroccan-Belgian subjects is evocative of and 'inflects' the direction of Arabic writing. Although the enunciating subjects speak only in French, the movement of the camera frames the public space of Molenbeek through a direction that interacts with the characters' cultural hybridity, i.e. Moroccan-Belgian. The presence of written Arabic also emerges in the promotional material for Mourad Boucif and Taylan Barman's *Au delà de Gibraltar*, which includes the language between the framing of the Moroccan-Belgian Karim and the native Belgian Sophie. To this end, the use of written language functions as a form of (cultural) difference, forming a symbolic boundary. The camera movement – which glides at a fast-pace – also evokes the excitement and adrenaline rush that the youth are experiencing as delinquents, introduced to the spectator *in medias res*. The first image draws attention

to a rock, clasped in Marwan's hand, and the three Adidas stripes down the side of his jogging bottoms. Immediately, the dialogue with *La haine* is instigated through the inclusion of 'hip-hop iconography' in the form of branded fashion (Higbee, 2006, p.77).

The introduction to Molenbeek coheres with what Higbee (2001, p.55) describes as a 'discursive chain', in which the suburb is collapsed alongside the theme of delinquency. The set-up, therefore, demonstrates a tight unity of action, which encourages such a reading, and contrasts with the developed and nuanced set-ups of the social realist *Kamel*, which hints at, but does not reveal, substance abuse until half-way through the film. It is, from this point, that the film has received denunciative responses, since it does little to de-bunk Molenbeek's associations with crime and delinquency. The shift in location from one margin in Molenbeek to Matonge is articulated through a sound bridge, shifting from the strings of North African beats evoked non-diegetically, to the Anglo-American style rap music, originating diegetically from a boombox, of the Black Bronx gang on a basketball court. Through the dialectical composition of editing, the two spaces are differentiated along ethnic lines, resonating with Berghahn's 'ghettocentric imagination' (2010, p.237). Molenbeek becomes shorthand for the Moroccan-Belgian community, and Matonge for the Congolese diaspora. The 'internal diversity' of each of the suburbs is overlooked according to this premise. The choice of hip-hop music is, thus, concomitant with the surrounding location and its enunciating subjects. The articulated mise-en-scène pays lip-service to films such as *Boyz n' the Hood* (John Singleton, 1991) and *Do the right thing* (Spike Lee, 1989), since the representation of the two suburbs is reminiscent of the, as Higbee argues in the case of *La haine*, of the 'racially segregated ghettos of urban America' (Higbee, 2006, p.83). For El Arbi, these brief allusions articulate a sense of 'not belonging' that 'connects the struggling neighbourhoods of France, Belgium, The Netherlands and the USA.' (El Arbi, 2017) Similar to hip-hop's previously discussed homages and allusions, *Black's* references to the aforementioned US films through the inclusion of American-style basketball courts in Matonge in the opening sequence – operates as a simple quotation and shorthand for black, urban life that is marginalised from the dominant forms of society and nation (as represented by the police). As a result, the form of quotation serves to articulate a new sense of belonging and collective formed primarily at the local level, particularly for excluded groups, that reaches out to global discourses for purposes of allegiance.

### **Black's 'non-places' and 'centre-periphery models':**

*Black* is generally preoccupied with the city's 'non-places', which contrasts with discursive debates around the film invested in the depiction of Molenbeek. For Feuillère (2015), the Brussels metro operates as a 'neutral space' for the two gangs. They are not invested with the aforementioned ghettoising principles, as represented by the Molenbeek and Matonge districts. The notion of a

perceived 'neutral space' can be interpreted as misleading, since it connotes a space where tolerance between the different ethnic groups is possible. The church clearly offers this possibility for Marwan and Mavela, operating as an in-between and clandestine meeting space where they can express their love for one another as human beings. Instead, the 'non-places' are locations where the city's 'internal diversity', to adopt Hannerz's terms, is represented, but, as Orlando foregrounds, it is a space where 'cross-cultural exchange' between ethnically white and immigrant communities does not take place (2014, p.173). Hardt and Negri (2001) similarly consider these spaces within a inside-outside dialectic in the context of postmodernity. In this case, '(t)he urban landscape is shifting from the modern focus on the common square and the public encounter and the public encounter to the closed spaces of malls, freeways, and gated communities.' (Hardt and Negri, 2001, p.188) The malls represent an 'outside' that prevent the socialisation of the subjects, resulting in themes of alienation and isolation. As a result, Ezra and Rowden outline the significance of interstitial locations and Augé's 'non-places', such as airports, highways, malls and hotels, that 'problematize national or cultural identity' (2006, p.8). In *Black*, the Brussels metro, Bruxelles-Nord/ Brussels North train station, and the City 2 Brussels shopping mall represent these prominent 'non-places'.

By drawing on familiar and easily recognisable spaces (in an international context), these 'non-places' also pertain to the film's universalising aspect. Whilst these places and locations are identified for the purposes of this chapter, they do not function as regional or local anchoring devices for the action. In so doing, they could be easily substituted in different national contexts. The use of the City 2 shopping mall as the backdrop for the concurrent thefts, by Marwan, Nassim and Mavela, becomes readable only to local and particular spectators who have an understanding of the location outside the confines of the film. Although both representatives of the two diasporic communities are within the shopping mall concurrently – collapsing space and time through the use of parallel editing – they do not interact with the 'interaction' and potential 'socialisation' (drawing terms from Hardt and Negri [2001, p.188] with the dominant, white ethnic Belgian community prevented through representations of control, such as the police. The enunciating subjects are drawn to these public spaces to obtain forms of capital, since these spaces 'are increasingly becoming privatised' (Hardt and Negri, 2001, p.188), yet the subjects are held at a distance from a sense of community through limited group interactions and their own limited means (i.e. capital through theft) (Figure 3).

Figure 3: Outside the City 2 Shopping mall in Brussels, Marwan and Nassim are amongst a crowd, yet isolated through no interactions.

The 'City 2' shopping mall sequence also positions the enunciating subjects within a local-global context, based in a shopping mall in Brussels but able to purchase/ steal circulated goods – pertaining to capital – from across the globe. The objects obtained by Marwan and his brother Nassim pertain to an Americanising and universalising tendency, purchasing caps emblazoned with NYC, Pittsburgh Steelers and Chicago Bears (two NFL teams) and Batman logos, and Nike trainers. The sequences that unroll on the Brussels metro further evidence this dialogue with the USA. Names and locations of the Brussels stations, such as Heysel, are glimpsed in the background, but the violence occurring in a predominantly plain and nondescript subterranean setting evokes the New York subway system.

As *Black*'s final sequence evokes, they constitute the locations within which violence erupts and unfolds between the two diasporic groups, in this case the Brussels-North train station. The film's dénouement – which deviates from the two original source texts (Bouras, 2015) - collapses into the context of Hollywood-style filmmaking, culminating in a 'Mexican stand-off', between the character 'X' and Marwan of the two rival gangs. This also coheres with Kassovitz's ending of *La haine*, borrowing from 'the international noir territory of Scorsese, Tarantino, Woo et al.' (Vincendeau, 2000, p.323). Manche posits that the final sequence is quintessentially 'à la Scorsese' (2015b, p.4-5). The use of slow motion at the moment of X's gunshot at the much younger, innocent looking and weapon-less Marwan echoes Hong Kong director John Woo's extended 'stand-offs' in Hollywood cinema of the late-1990s, particularly *Face/Off* (John Woo, 1997). The final shot perfectly captures the sentiments of Belgium's minorities, and their sense of belonging and 'integration'. The aerial shot encompassing the arrests of representatives of the two diasporic groups as well as the Romeo-and-Juliette style suicidal deaths of the two lead characters emphasises a distinct lack of hope and the need for change in contemporary Brussels. The filmmakers perfectly

capture the plight of the two major ethnic groups in Belgium, and on a microcosmic level in Brussels and its suburbs, and the failings of a desire for 'internal diversity'. The collective punishment – by death or by arrest – is evocative of the two diasporic communities' place in the Belgian nation. It represents a failure of 'integration', re-affirming the antiquated ghettoising policies of the 1960s.

### **Conclusion:**

*Black*'s dénouement provides an instructive way of concluding this chapter, since it epitomises Hayward's previously explored notion of the 'pluricultural' (2000, p.94) in terms of broaching nationalisms in Western Europe. It represents the futile hope of a multicultural understanding of Belgian nationalism, as it reinforces the separation between excluded groups. The 'non-places' of the malls and the historic centre remain closed-off for the film's enunciating subjects, whereas the public spaces of Matonge and Molenbeek offer a controlled form of socialisation for its subjects. A group sense of belonging is constructed in a local context, with the neighbourhoods of Molenbeek and Matonge providing a starting point for forms of allegiance. The representation of the districts highlights key themes of social marginality and social polarisation amongst the diasporic communities in Belgium, as well as addressing the continued sentiments of 'ghettoisation'. In the conclusion to Orlando's analysis of *Les barons*, the scholar posits that the film works to move beyond 'postcolonial paradigms' to offer a nuanced interpretation of a 'worldly' and de-centred *Frenchness* where miscegenated, diverse and integrated communities are the dominant and normative mode (2014, p.177). However, these strict lines between Moroccan and Congolese ethnic groups and white Belgians does not place *Black* within the context of an evolving theoretical debate on a de-centred 'cinéma-monde' (Gott and Schilt, forthcoming). The pastiche of US gangsta rap and popular music in *Black*'s set-pieces transgresses Belgian nationalism, forming new senses of belonging for excluded communities through a dialogue with the local and the global. By including the musical set-pieces 'Problèmes' and 'Back to Black', *Black* conforms to the hip-hop and rap genre's patriarchal concerns, creating a fetishistic look on the female body and a voyeuristic perception of the two districts and articulating the characters' hybrid identities. In essence, the foregrounding of hip-hop culture in the margins connects the film with its counterparts in the USA and France to offer new forms of group identity that sit within and beyond the nation in political terms.

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