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PETTY (Sheila), « *Qui fait la France ?*. Reconstructing French Identity in Louiza Benrezzak's *Terre Mère* »

RÉSUMÉ – Ce texte analyse comment la réalisatrice française d'origine maghrébine Louiza Benrezzak adopte un “style accentué” dans *Terre Mère* (2015) pour aborder la construction identitaire et sa relation avec la société, la culture et l'histoire européennes. Le film reflète les questions de citoyenneté et d'appartenance ainsi que les droits fondamentaux dans la vie comme dans la mort. Le style de Benrezzak est un mélange novateur d'autobiographie, de performance, de fiction et de documentaire.

MOTS-CLÉS – *Terre mère*, accentué, performatif, identité, diversité, dialogue

PETTY (Sheila), « *Qui fait la France ?*. Reconstruire l'identité française dans *Terre Mère* de Louiza Benrezzak »

ABSTRACT – This essay analyzes the ways in which Maghrebi-descended French filmmaker Louiza Benrezzak cinematically portrays, through an “accented style,” identity construction and her complex relationship with European society, culture and history in *Terre Mère* (2015). The film reflects issues of citizenship and belonging and fundamental human rights in both life and death. Benrezzak's authorial method is an innovative blending of the autobiographical and performative, of fiction and documentary.

KEYWORDS – *Terre mère*, accented, performative, identity, diversity, dialogue

QUI FAIT LA FRANCE?

Reconstructing French Identity in Louiza Benrezzak's *Terre Mère*

Over a decade ago, Tunisian writer Albert Memmi claimed that there is still “work to be done in describing the interaction between former colonizers and the formerly colonized”¹. Since the 1980s, France has struggled with a rapidly-changing population that is challenging the nation’s myth of secular and egalitarian Republicanism and social, cultural and political integration. The Franco-North African community is the largest ethnic minority in an increasingly ethnically diverse France, and it has produced activists, writers, artists and filmmakers prepared to challenge the French *status quo* in pursuit of more equitable treatment than that shown to their parents. Mounting police violence and racist attacks against “Arabes de France” in the 1980s led increasingly frustrated North African-descended youth to begin organizing cultural events and demonstrations, a turning point in the sociopolitical consciousness and cultural production for the new generation.

In this essay, I will explore possible modes of filmic self-representation and constructions of identity within a system ill-equipped for census reporting or vocabulary descriptors beyond the two categories of “French or foreign”². These categories, argues Caroline Trouillet, are constructed according to specific historical, social and economic contexts and the politics of hospitality³. These categories or labels are built to be static and fixed, with spaces and distances set up in Manichean fashion between “French” and “not really French” and “immigrant” and “not

1 Memmi, Albert, *Decolonization and the Decolonized*, Translated by R. Bononno, Minneapolis / London, University of Minnesota Press, 2006, p. xiii.

2 Reeck, Laura, *Writerly Identities in Beur Fiction and Beyond*, Lanham, Lexington Books, 2011, p. 3.

3 Trouillet, Caroline, “Les dérives sémantiques de l’immigration”, *Africultures, La Marche en héritage*, n°97, 2014, p. 83-93, p. 84.

really immigrant.” The spatial and social segregation created by these polarities forces occupants back into static spaces of ethnic origin and sets up the desired category of belonging (“appartenance” as a “Français de souche”) to the French nation as the immigrant’s (“Français issus de l’immigration”) ultimate achievement⁴. By the mid-1980s, however, the descendants of North African immigrants began to force a reassessment of established forms of French republicanism for the whole nation and to advocate that “all live together with our differences”⁵.

More specifically, the essay will analyze the ways in which North African-descended French filmmaker Louiza Benrezzak cinematically portrays her complex relationship with European society, culture and history. Benrezzak’s 2015 performative documentary, *Terre Mère*, reflects issues of citizenship and belonging and fundamental human rights in both life and death as she stages her own funeral as a Muslim in France to investigate the ultimate form of integration through disintegration of one’s body in one’s new home – the cemetery. I contend that her film (like many others) underscores that “place and origin are no longer exclusive markers of identity, even if they still play vital roles in many people’s self-reading”⁶. Identity is a state of mind that often manifests as a performative act or journey.

CINEMATIC BACKGROUND AND MODES OF EXPRESSION IN CONSTRUCTING IDENTITIES

Following WWII, immigration from the Maghreb resulted in the creation of France’s largest minority population and family-based immigration resulted in North African family groups whose descendants would be “French by birth and external cultural situation and North African by heritage and family ties”⁷. Alison Levine has argued that

4 *Ibid.*, p. 84.

5 Reeck, Laura, *Writerly Identities in Beur Fiction and Beyond*, *op. cit.*, p. 2-5.

6 Eze, Chielozone, “Rethinking African Culture and Identity: the Afropolitan Model”, *Journal of African Cultural Studies*, vol. 26, n° 2, 2014, p. 234-247, p. 238.

7 Levine, Alison J. Murray, “Mapping Beur Cinema in the New Millennium”, *Journal of Film and Video*, vol. 60, n° 3-4, 2008, p. 42-59, p. 43-44.

the housing policies employed by many cities in France have resulted in a form of “topographical segregation” that has slowed the process of assimilation “into mainstream (French) society”⁸. Generally housed in outlying suburban areas, and “designated by various French euphemisms such as ZUP (*zones à urbaniser en priorité*) or ZUS (*zones urbaines sensibles*),” these developments concentrated immigrants in specific areas, creating a seeming separation between racial groups but also enforcing a strong sense of self-identification within such immigrant groups⁹. Carrie Tarr supports such an interpretation, suggesting that the second generation found themselves negotiating the space between their French educations (and enforcement of French cultural values) and their elders who “continued to practice their own language, customs and religion (Islam)”¹⁰. Plagued by high unemployment and crime and raised with “higher expectations than their parents of their future role in French society,” this generation would produce activists, writers, artists and filmmakers prepared to challenge the French *status quo* in pursuit of more equitable treatment than that shown to their parents¹¹. Nadia Kiwan has shown that in contemporary France from 2002 to 2005, cultural discrimination is more of a determining factor in higher unemployment trends of Algerian-origin youth than those of other cultural groups because of lingering memories of the Algerian War of Independence as well as a general discomfort with Islamic cultures¹².

While the 1970s saw a rise in racist attacks and murders of North African immigrants and the founding in 1972 of the *Front National*, a populist, anti-immigrant nationalist political party, the early 1980s witnessed an increase in police brutality and killings of North African youth. By the 1980s, the second generation of North African immigrants “came to be known by the neologism “*Beurs*”; following the paradigm of the French back-slang *verlan*, *arabe* inverted, with an apocope”¹³. The

8 *Ibid.*, p. 42-43.

9 *Ibid.*, p. 42-43.

10 Tarr, Carrie, *Reframing Difference: Beur and Banlieue Filmmaking in France*, Manchester, Manchester University Press, 2005, p. 27.

11 *Ibid.*, p. 27.

12 Kiwan, Nadia, “Equal Opportunities and Republican Revival: Post-Migrant Politics in Contemporary France (2002-2005)”, *International Journal of Francophone Studies*, vol. 10, n° 1-2, 2007, p. 157.

13 Levine, Alison J. Murray, “Mapping Beur Cinema in the New Millennium”, *op. cit.*, p. 44.

neologism provoked a number of permutations such as “beurgoisie” and “Beurette”¹⁴. The labels have been asserted, co-opted and then resisted by writers and cultural producers as mainstream media and political entities appropriate these designations: “immigrant born in France,” “écrivain de banlieue,” Beur, post-Beur. “Beur” and “banlieue” cinema came into prominence during this time starting with short films and documentaries produced in artisanal conditions outside normal production and distribution circuits¹⁵. In 1985, with the sponsorship of renowned filmmaker Costa-Gavras, Mehdi Charef produced the award-winning feature film, *Thé au harem d'Archimède*. This led the way for an explosion of films, bringing North African immigrant and second-generation experiences to the world. By the late 1980s, the *Beur* movement splintered into factions due to differing opinions on the best model to follow: French republican integration or multiculturalism¹⁶.

Beur and *banlieue* cultural production brought world attention to a form or mode of literary and cinematic expression but it also resulted in entrenched labels which served to gloss over religious, ethnic and national differences leading many to understand the community as homogenous. One unifying factor, however, among these practitioners is that experiences were being expressed from within immigrant communities and *via* perspectives on the French society that were unavailable elsewhere in mainstream venues¹⁷. Dominic Thomas has suggested that a major concern of *beur* cultural production initially was the representation of “bi-cultural upbringing” as well as the place of Islam and Frenchness in French society¹⁸. The focus on issues of belonging would complicate relationships as second generation French citizens must negotiate both their parents’ cultural heritage and their own French citizenship status¹⁹. Rather than homogenous, the experiences are multiple and are not simply about the impoverished suburbs, but are about ways of

14 Reeck, Laura, *Writerly Identities in Beur Fiction and Beyond*, *op. cit.*, p. 19.

15 Tarr, Carrie, *Reframing Difference: Beur and Banlieue Filmmaking in France*, *op. cit.*, p. 10.

16 Reeck, Laura, *Writerly Identities in Beur Fiction and Beyond*, *op. cit.*, p. 6.

17 Thomas, Dominic, “Documenting the Periphery: The Short Films of Faïza Guène”, *French Forum*, vol. 35, n° 2-3, 2010, p. 191-208, p. 192.

18 *Ibid.*, p. 192.

19 Gavarini, Jehanne-Marie, “*Cité's* Architectural, Linguistic and Cinematic Frontiers in *L'Esquive*”, in éd. R. Merivirta, K. Ahonen, H. Mulari, R. Mähkä, *Frontiers of Screen History: Imagining European Borders in Cinema, 1945-2010*, Bristol / Chicago, Intellect / University of Chicago Press, 2013, p. 155-173, p. 165.

transcending periphery spaces to occupy centre stage. Furthermore, the appellation, “banlieue” infers “outsider” existing on the fringes of something. Contemporary cultural practitioners look to centre their experiences and identities, not on the borders of something, but wholly and completely within French space. This space must accommodate the “double-belonging” of their bi-cultural upbringings, but it must also allow for exploration of its interstitial properties for true integration to occur.

Peter J. Bloom²⁰ and Mireille Rosello and Richard Bjornson²¹ argue for a revisiting of questions of space to provide the most fruitful analyses of immigrant-descended cinema. They borrow Homi Bhabha’s notion of “third space” to transcend colonial binarisms. Both Rosello and Bloom contend that filmmakers evoke topographic articulations of space as evidenced through journeys, borders, boundaries, walls, and architecture. These are structuring metaphors that are staged through the mise-en-scène of poetic realism or the frantic camera of montage aesthetics to depict changing identity positioning of North African-descended cinema within the larger parameters of French cinema. For example, in his 2013 film *Fièvres / Fevers*, Hicham Ayouch shoots many scenes in closed form, using blue and grey filters, with characters trapped in bleak prison-like spaces between the vertical lines of the HLM (*habitation à loyer modéré*, i.e. low rent housing) buildings, but often reframes to link the character space of father and son as they begin the process of bonding and exploring difference in a space beyond the binary.

In his influential work on “accented cinema,” Hamid Naficy describes how films, made by the generation of directors who have grown up in the *banlieues* or are descendants of immigrants to France, evoke an “accented style” which arises from feelings of displacement and an inherent sense of memory of “the traditions of exilic and diasporic cultural productions that preceded them”²². The filmmakers acquire two sets of voices from their heritage and lived experiences. Such an approach

20 Bloom, Peter J., “The State of French Cultural Exceptionalism: the 2005 Uprisings and the Politics of Visibility”, *Frenchness and the African Diaspora: Identity and Uprising in Contemporary France*, in Charles Tshimanga, Didier Gondola, Peter J. Bloom (éds.), Bloomington / Indianapolis, Indiana University Press, 2009, p. 227-247.

21 Rosello, Mireille, Richard, Bjornson, “The ‘Beur Nation’: Towards a Theory of ‘Departenance’”, *Research in African Literatures*, vol. 24, n°3, 1993, p. 14-24.

22 Naficy, Hamid, *An Accented Cinema: Exilic and Diasporic Filmmaking*, *op. cit.*, p. 22.

is driven by aesthetic and narrative ingenuity, including “self-reflexivity and autobiographical inscription, historicity, epistolarity” and “multilinguality” and “resistance to closure”²³. According to Naficy, spaces of mobility and transition are paramount—borders, train stations, seascapes, airports—, as are tropes of journey. He contends that “journeys of identity” are “the most important” and go beyond the mere physical to the “deeply psychological and philosophical” becoming “a performance of identity”²⁴.

For Laura Reeck, performing identity is inextricably linked to performing authorship. In discussing the films of French author and filmmaker Rachid Djaidani, she maintains that knowledge, experience and personal histories are “embodied” within the performative documentary mode originally outlined by Bill Nichols²⁵. Presentation of the world as experienced and lived in by the filmmaker is determined by a cinematic style that is defined as more subjective and akin to fiction filmmaking than objective. Through subjective camera work and editing, the filmmaker makes her or his subject position known to the viewer, even drawing the viewer into the narrative quest in some cases. Unlike the observational mode of documentary, in which the omniscient narrator is disconnected from the subject matter in an attempt to convince the viewer of its historical accuracy, in performative documentary emotive connection to the subject matter is as important as exposing hard facts. Nichols has argued that the self-reflexive role played by the filmmaker in performative documentaries works to generate tension between “the embodied and disembodied. This suggests that while performative documentary might possess historical grounding, the aesthetic goal is not to provide a description of history, but rather an evocation of it”²⁶. This is clearly the case of Fatima Sissani’s 2011 feature-length performative documentary, *La Langue de Zabra*, about which she has declared, “*Ce n’est pas un film sur ma mère, c’est un documentaire sur l’émigration à travers l’histoire de ma mère*”²⁷. The film is not about choosing between France

23 *Ibid.*, p. 131.

24 *Ibid.*, p. 5-6.

25 Reeck, Laura, *Writerly Identities in Beur Fiction and Beyond*, *op. cit.*, p. 141.

26 Nichols, Bill, *Blurred Boundaries: Questions of Meaning in Contemporary Culture*, Bloomington / Indianapolis, Indiana University Press, 1994, p. 100.

27 Addar, Djamil, “Le Kabyle : la langue de Zahra”, *berberes.com*, <www.berberes.com/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=3414:le-kabyle-la-langue-de-zahra&catid=41:

and Algeria, and it does not seek to hybridize cultures, rather, it explores new possible ways of looking at questions of minority language (kabyè), culture and identity that could potentially greatly contribute to our understanding of history and histories as living documents.

Performing authorship means taking responsibility for the construction of one's identity and destiny and enterprising cultural practitioners would indeed take matters into their own hands in order to demonstrate that change would have to come from within. For example, in 2007, a collective of *banlieue* artists known as *Qui fait la France ?*, fed up with being "acted upon" by French society, published a manifesto stating: "*nous refusons de demeurer spectateurs des souffrances dont sont victimes les plus fragiles, les déclassés, les invisibles*"²⁸. Dominic Thomas writes that one of the collective's main objectives, at the time, was to call out imposed inaccurate stereotypes of the *banlieues*²⁹. The collective also strove to centre their artistic expression firmly within French space rather than on the fringes of society looking in. This positioning, along with the stated desire that all rights and privileges of the Republic be equally applied to all French citizens, was not meant as a homogenizing gesture. It would underscore what author Mohamed Razane would describe as "different readings of the world"³⁰. It would serve to open up spaces and allow a new generation to create their individual inflections of "Frenchness" while also engaging with migration and globalization, thus allowing for the flourishing of a whole new state of mind.

THE FINAL JOURNEY – A PERFORMANCE OF IDENTITY

It is this state of mind that Louiza Benrezzak explores in her debut film *Terre Mère* (2015, 52'). Her authorial method is an innovative blending of the autobiographical, performative, fiction and documentary. She creates delocalized, fluid spaces in which character identities are

culture&Itemid=62>, 2012, consulté le 20 mars 2014.

28 Thomas, Dominic, "Documenting the Periphery: The Short Films of Faïza Guène", *op. cit.*, p. 195-196.

29 *Ibid.*, p. 195.

30 Reeck, Laura, *Writerly Identities in Beur Fiction and Beyond*, *op. cit.*, p. 174.

shaped by selective and multiple affinities to colonial culture, ancestral culture, and adopted cultures. Identities are no longer constructed in opposition to, or in reaction to, another force, but are highly-inflected with openness to diversity and dialogue. Benrezzak, who identifies herself as a French *and* (emphasis mine) Algerian filmmaker, explores this ideological terrain even further in her current documentary film project, *Trace(s)* which she is shooting in Paris and which she describes as a patchwork film in which “several artists explore the notion of territory and creative expression”³¹.

Born in France in Chaumont (Haute-Marne) to parents of Algerian origin who immigrated to France, Benrezzak’s youth was a cosmopolitan one. She lived for five years in Prague and three years in Iceland. She studied contemporary history and the rise of fascism in the 1930s. She has worked as an author, journalist, consultant and filmmaker. She co-founded the not-for-profit, *L’Asso du Phoenix*, which much like the *Qui fait la France ?* collective, is:

[...] an association whose mandate is to promote participatory art projects focussing on notions of citizenship and reconciliation and living together within the founding principles of the Republic”³².

The subtitle of *Terre Mère* could very well be “*Le dernier voyage / The Final Journey*”, as she describes it on the Asso website:

One calls it this without realizing that everyday many bodies travel hundreds of kilometres by plane or by boat. For deceased immigrants, repatriation is customary, or it is the deceased’s last wish that his or her close relations try to respect. But what about for their children born in France?³³

31 (“avec la participation de nombreux artistes sur la notion de territoire et sur l’acte créatif”) *L’Asso du Phoenix*, 2018, *Facebook*, <www.facebook.com/pg/lassoduphoenix/about/?ref=page_internal>, visited on 19th February 2018.

32 *L’Asso du Phoenix*, 2018, *Facebook*, <www.facebook.com/pg/lassoduphoenix/about/?ref=page_internal>, visited on 19th February 2018. (“...une association qui a pour but de fédérer les gens autour de projets artistiques et participatifs. Ses projets s’inscrivent fortement dans une démarche citoyenne et de réconciliation autour des principes fondateurs de la République et du vivre ensemble”).

33 Personal conversation by email, 19th February 2018. (“On l’appelle ainsi, sans se rendre compte que quotidiennement de nombreux corps parcourent des centaines de kilomètres par avion ou par bateau. Pour les immigrants décédés, le retour au pays se fait par coutume, ou par la volonté du défunt que les proches s’efforceront de respecter. Qu’en est-il pour leurs enfants nés en France ?”).

She sets off on her quest and undertakes a fictive journey as a corpse and explores her options for burial in the Chaumont cemetery and in the family plot in the Béni-Saf cemetery in Algeria. This is her personal story, but it is also the story of many others. Like other accented films, it is built on “a set of personal and social experiences” and is both an individual and collective story³⁴. Her journey can be interpreted in many different ways and although it is about Benrezzak’s search for a final resting place, it is also a debate about identity, a debate in which the filmmaker invites the viewer to participate.

Benrezzak joins the ranks of other accented filmmakers such as Yamina Benguigui, Samia Chala and Fatima Sissani who document aspects of double-belonging and the construction of identities in their films. Leslie Kealhofer-Kemp has argued that Yamina Benguigui’s monumental feature documentary, *Mémoires d’immigrés, l’héritage maghrébin* (1997) foregrounds a collective memory of North African immigration to France and that several documentaries by Fatima Sissani, Djamilia Sfaxi, Soraya Nini, Yasmina Kherfi and Rahma Benhamou El Madani that follow this pioneering work, still refer to the collective experience but focus more specifically on “the memories and experiences of the directors’ mothers, thus problematizing the very idea that there exists a collective trajectory or set of experiences with regard to Maghrebi migrants in France”³⁵. More recent work than that discussed by Kealhofer-Kemp provides interesting points of comparison to *Terre Mère* on the treatment of identity construction in present-day France. Benguigui’s *Le Plafond de verre* (2004) focuses on employment discrimination faced by young French college graduates who are immigrant-descended. Benguigui draws on the documentary form she employed in *Mémoires d’immigrés* and intercuts close-up shot interviews of youth and other experts with archival footage of key moments in human rights activism and archival photographs of the interviewees, which then act as reference points and historical support to the content of the interviews. Samia Chala’s 2013 performative documentary, *Madame la France, ma mère et moi*, falls more clearly in line with the performative stylistic choices made in *Terre Mère*.

34 Naficy, Hamid, *An Accented Cinema: Exilic and Diasporic Filmmaking*, *op. cit.*, p. 26.

35 Kealhofer-Kemp, Leslie 2013, “Mothers, daughters, and the transmission of memory in documentaries directed by women of Maghrebi origin in France”, *Studies in French Cinema*, vol. 13, n° 3, p. 227-240, p. 229.

In her film, Chala narrates her double-belonging through her own voice-over. Following two static shots of the Marianne statue, Chala is framed in extreme-high angle, seemingly crushed into the wooden floor as she looks up at the statue and begins her narration: “Madame la France, this film is the story of our encounter”³⁶.

She goes on to state that they have lived together for almost twenty years and that her story is similar to those of other “*Arabes de France*.” And although the collective experience of Maghrebi women being stereotyped in France is an important aspect of the film, Chala’s personal journey stands out. For example, in a scene in which she dons a veil and gazes at herself in a mirror, the two gazes lock in a medium close up shot as France’s national anthem, “*La Marseillaise*,” plays on the soundtrack, underscoring the irony and futility of trying to separate out “authentic” French and Algerian facets of her identity.

Benrezzak’s film stands apart from these earlier works through its thematic content (which is less concerned about describing discrimination than earlier works) as well as its use of both the documentary form and narrative mode of docu-fiction. The strategy of creating a hybrid between documentary and fiction allows for viewer participation and engagement with those elements of representation they feel most comfortable with³⁷. Mediating truth becomes a joint project between filmmaker and spectator. Benrezzak stages events and scenes, most notably her “death” and repatriation to Algeria, and her exploration of cemeteries in France, but also films witnesses explaining the process of repatriation of a deceased person and her friends musing about their identities and final wishes for their own burials.

The film begins with an extreme close-up shot of a man talking on a telephone, “One metre, eighty-three centimetres? Was he bulky?”³⁸ His voice-over continues over long shots of the Canal Saint-Martin area of the 10th *arrondissement* in Paris. We later learn that this is Ahmed Bencheikh, director of a Muslim funeral home in this neighborhood where Benrezzak lived for five years during the filming of *Terre Mère*. Traditionally a working-class area of Paris inhabited by many immigrants,

36 Original quote: “Madame la France, ce film est l’histoire de notre rencontre”.

37 Landesman, Ohad, “Lying to Be Real: The Aesthetics of Ambiguity in Docufictions”, ed. D. Marcus, S. Kara, *Contemporary Documentary*, Oxon / New York, Routledge, 2016, p. 9-25, p. 9.

38 Original quote: “Un mètre, quatre-vingt-trois?! Est-ce qu’il était fort de taille?”.

it also includes the Place de la République with its statue of Marianne, the personification of French republicanism and the three statues surrounding it symbolizing liberty, equality and fraternity. Benrezzak's voice-over eventually provides clarification for the action that has unfolded so far, "just as you have to find the right shoe for your foot, you have to also find the right coffin to fit your body."³⁹



FIG. 1 – Benrezzak gazing across the sea.

We get our first glimpse of Benrezzak in a medium shot as she stands with her back to the camera, gazing out at the sea as her voice-over continues, "once while visiting the village cemetery during a vacation in Algeria, my father told me that that he will be buried there, beside his father"⁴⁰. The next shot is a beautifully-framed long shot of what appears to be the Béni-Saf cemetery in Algeria.⁴¹ Presented in a framed pictorial perspective with trees casing the left and right borders of the frame, this shot, in deep focus, demonstrates the centrality of Islam to

39 Original quote: "comme on trouve chaussure à son pied, il faut chercher un cercueil à sa taille".

40 Original quote: "un jour ordinaire de vacances en Algérie en visite au cimetière du village, mon père me dit que c'est ici qu'il sera enterré auprès de son père".

41 Benrezzak was not able to film in Algeria and shot all the North African footage in Casablanca. The images are meant to evoke Algeria (email conversation with Benrezzak, February 19, 2018).

Benrezzak's quest and identity. Graves occupy the foreground and the village mosque is in the background perfectly centered in the frame between the two trees in the foreground. Leaves rustle as the call to prayer is heard faintly in the background. Benrezzak's voice-over continues, "Right away, I think of my own situation."⁴²



FIG. 2 – A family cemetery in Casablanca, Morocco, similar to that of the family plot in Béni Saf, Algeria.

This bucolic setting is abruptly disrupted by a blunt cut that shifts the image to a medium-long shot of a dilapidated garden hut surrounded by lush vegetation as an elderly man exits the hut and washes his hands in a large rain barrel. The viewer would logically believe this image to be related to the image of the Muslim cemetery. However, the use of jump cuts and Benrezzak's continuing monologue introduce a nagging doubt:

In my imagination as a young girl, I'm afraid the spirits won't let me return to Algeria. I, who was born in France. My father tried hard to reassure me that the spirits speak all languages, but I'm not convinced by his answer. I wonder what mystery is hidden beneath my identity⁴³.

42 Original quote : "Immédiatement, je pense à mon propre cas".

43 Original quote: "Dans mon imaginaire de petite fille, j'ai peur que les esprits ne me laissent pas rentrer en Algérie. Moi, qui suis née en France. Mon père aura beau me dire

The image transitions abruptly back to shots of Canal Saint-Martin as the opening credits are superimposed, “Terre Mère... un film de Louiza Benrezzak/Motherland... a film by Louiza Benrezzak.”

In the first three minutes of the film, Benrezzak shares with the viewer much of the landscape that has defined her life both in France and in Algeria. As Benrezzak performs her quest within these landscapes, they become characters interacting with the protagonist throughout the narrative. As she leans against her coffin on a small foot bridge over the Canal Saint-Martin, she declares: I’m going to leave on the journey following my own deceased body,⁴⁴” and she begins her quest.



FIG. 3 – Benrezzak posing with her coffin on Canal Saint-Martin, Paris.

She describes how her generation works hard to become homeowners but is not really thinking about the logistics of organizing their final resting places. In fact, she cannot recall any Muslim steles in her home village cemetery. Where is everyone, she muses? She thus decides to embark on a parallel quest concerning her own roots and identity, and

que les esprits parlent toutes les langues, mais je ne suis pas convaincue par sa réponse.
Je me demande quel mystère se cache derrière mon identité”.

44 Original quote: “Je vais partir en voyage sur les traces de mon propre cadavre”.

consults three friends who are all North African-descended like Benrezzak in order to get their opinions. Witness accounts by Émile, Kader and Sonia are woven into the fabric of the film at various intervals and accompany Benrezzak throughout her journey. Émile's father was born in Issy Lévêque in the Morvan region of France and his mother was born in Hammam-Bouhadjar, not far from Oran in Algeria. His parents and grandparents have discussed repatriation of their bodies, but he has never been interested in the topic. Sonia discloses that one side of her family fought for France during the Algerian War of Independence while the other side fought for Algeria, and this always made for heated discussions during family dinners. Kader's father belonged to the "*Amicale des Algériens*" which, among other things, had as its mission to facilitate the repatriation of deceased Algerians from Europe to Algeria. He acknowledges that he is a mixture of cultures but considers himself a French Muslim and wants to be buried in France, but not with a Christian cross or in a box. He wants his body to decompose in the earth and give back nutrients to nature. Both Sonia and Émile opt for cremation: Sonia wants to be close to her parents and Émile wants his ashes scattered in both France and Algeria, so they can wander.⁴⁵ They all conclude that reflecting on their final journey has forced them to think about their identities in life.

Interestingly, although the three friends speak directly to the camera, Benrezzak never directly addresses the audience; we never see her face. Her voice-over provides the performative anchor, the "narrative thread" making it embodied, because it is Benrezzak providing the knowledge through commentary, but also disembodied rather than absent, from a specific subject position. She is therefore able to locate her quest in accented, interstitial spaces such as the shots of her looking out over the sea which punctuate the film in several places. The second time this shot occurs after the opening credits, Benrezzak muses in voice-over, "*Mes parents viennent donc de là-bas, et moi, je suis née ici*"⁴⁶ This statement does not set up a binarism of here and there. Rather, it works together with accented cinema's imperative to deterritorialize spaces and journeys. With *Terre Mère*, it also functions to deterritorialize identity and promote choice. The children of Algerian immigrants have viewed integration as an aspect of the French colonial policy their parents endured because

45 Original quote: "pour que ça se balade".

46 Original quote: "my parents come from there, and me, I was born here".

they had no choice. The new generation looks to protect their own individuality, but also take part in universalism, as French citizens. This double belonging, termed “double-imperative” by Laura Reeck, has significant ramifications for republicanism and “*qui fait la France?*”⁴⁷

In *Terre Mère*, Benrezzak explores the socio-philosophic, religious and organizational issues around repatriating one’s body to Algeria. But this is presented as one of several options. She also visits, by gliding ephemerally in and out of shots, her hometown cemetery in Chaumont, the Colombey cemetery where Général de Gaulle and his family are buried, the first publicly owned cemetery in France reserved solely for Muslims which opened in Strasbourg in 2012 (“*est-ce qu’il y a de la place pour moi?*”, she asks rhetorically), and officials of the Mayor’s offices in Strasbourg and Chaumont who explain the logistics of acquiring Muslim portions within conventional public French cemeteries open to persons of all religious faiths as well as atheists and agnostics. We learn that in France, national cemeteries are secular and the mayor authorizes the creation of faith-based plots. Other interesting bits of information and statistics are provided throughout the journey. For example, Benrezzak’s body arrives to Algeria by plane and in a box for security and health reasons. Yet, as devout Muslims buried in their homeland, her ancestors would have been wrapped in a shroud and placed on their sides facing Mecca. The steles we see in the Béni-Saf cemetery are numbered and simple in appearance, in contrast with the Muslim steles in the French cemeteries which are more elaborately decorated, in contradiction to the hadiths of the prophet Mohammed in ancient Islam. This, however, is an interesting example of double-belonging or blending of cultures. Even in death, one can construct one’s own identity.

One of Benrezzak’s original goals was to initiate a debate around the issues presented in the film and screenings and debates have been held at venues such as the Centre Culturel Algérien in Paris in 2016 and at the Centre d’études ethniques des universités Montréalaises in the “*Morts en contexte de migration*” programme in 2017⁴⁸. Near the end of the film, Benrezzak concludes that:

47 Reeck, Laura, *Writerly Identities in Beur Fiction and Beyond*, *op. cit.*, p. 6.

48 The issue of identity in death has become explosive in Quebec, especially after the Quebec City mosque shooting in January 2017 when the bodies of the majority of those killed were repatriated mainly to Algeria. In July 2017, a referendum was held concerning

“Identity only exists in your head. That’s why I can’t situate it geographically. I don’t know what the final destiny will be for the children of immigrants, but my own Republic is secular.”⁴⁹

She glides into the frame from behind the camera and moves towards the gardener’s hut that we saw at the beginning of the film. She enters the hut and the image shifts to a long shot of the gardener tending to his plants⁵⁰. The camera pans left revealing the Viaduc de Chaumont in the background. Benrezzak is back in her “*terre-mère*” but not without conceding that today the concept of French national identity is ever-shifting and “blurry.” Benrezzak’s very interesting cinematic signature underscores this concept as the visual images are often shot in closed form, as in pictorial and architectural traditions, but with loose framing, allowing both characters and viewers space to construct and perform their own identities, strategies reminiscent of those employed by Hicham Ayouch and Rachid Djaidani. The freedom to choose one’s identity in life is also about the freedom to choose one’s identity and final resting place in death.

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the creation of a Muslim-owned and run cemetery in Saint-Apollinaire, Quebec in the Quebec City region. The proposal was defeated by a vote of 19 (against) to 16 (in favour).

49 Original quote: “L’identité n’existe pas autrement que mentalement. Voilà pourquoi je n’arrive pas à la situer géographiquement. Je ne sais pas quel sera le destin identitaire des enfants d’immigrés, mais ma République à moi est laïque”.

50 Benrezzak revealed to me in an email conversation that the gardener is her own father in his garden in Chaumont (February 19, 2018).

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