

**From the holdings of the Department of Special Collections , Princeton University Library,
Princeton, NJ**

These documents are either in the public domain, or can only be used for educational and research purposes (Fair use) as per U.S. Copyright law (text below). By accessing this file, all users agree that their use falls in the public domain or within fair use as defined by the copyright law. We do not charge any permission or usage fees for the publication of images of material in our collections, including those provided by Princeton University Library, via our website, catalog, or directly from staff. For more information regarding copyright, credit, and citation please review the information on the Copyright, Credit and Citation Guidelines page of our website.

<https://library.princeton.edu/special-collections/policies/copyright-credit-and-citation-guidelines>. If you have any questions, including how to order higher-quality images from the collection, contact Special Collections Public Services via our Ask Us! Form. <https://library.princeton.edu/special-collections/ask-us>

Doctoral Dissertations, 2011-2026

French and Italian

2022

HUMORING PATHOS: COMEDIC DISCOURSE AND ITS PARADOXES IN CONTEMPORARY FRANCOPHONE LITERATURE AND CULTURE

Ravi, Sonali

Princeton, NJ : Princeton University

<http://arks.princeton.edu/ark:/88435/dsp018k71nm25q>

U.S. Copyright law: The copyright law of the United States (Title 17, §108, United States Code) governs the making of photocopies or other reproductions of copyrighted material. Under certain conditions specified in the law, libraries and archives are authorized to furnish a photocopy or other reproduction. One of these specified conditions is that the photocopy or reproduction is not to be used for any purpose other than private study, scholarship, or research. If a user makes a request for, or later uses, a photocopy or reproduction for purposes in excess of fair use that user may be liable for copyright infringement. This institution reserves the right to refuse to accept a copying order if, in its judgment, fulfillment of the order would involve a violation of copyright law. <https://www.copyright.gov/title17/title17.pdf>

HUMORING PATHOS:
COMEDIC DISCOURSE AND ITS PARADOXES IN CONTEMPORARY FRANCOPHONE
LITERATURE AND CULTURE

Sonali Ravi

A DISSERTATION
PRESENTED TO THE FACULTY
OF PRINCETON UNIVERSITY
IN CANDIDACY FOR THE DEGREE
OF DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

RECOMMENDED FOR ACCEPTANCE BY
THE DEPARTMENT OF
FRENCH AND ITALIAN

Adviser: André Benhaïm

May 2022

© Copyright by Sonali Ravi, 2022. All rights reserved.

Abstract

From black face, sexist jokes, anti-Semitic caricatures to anti-Muslim cartoons, comedic discourses have targeted minority groups. The aim of this project is to demonstrate how minorities – who have been targets of jokes – have in turn themselves become its creators, using humor as a medium to deal with complicated questions of identity. This dissertation therefore explores the place of humor in the articulation of postcolonial and diasporic identities in modern France. To do so, it will examine varied practices of humor in contemporary novels, comic books, stand-up comedy and film by authors (Dany Laferrière, Alain Mabanckou, Leïla Sebbar), graphic novelists (Joann Sfar) and stand-uppers (Fellag, Gad Elmaleh, Jamel Debbouze, Shirley Souagnon and Fary). Humoring pathos – in the double sense of rendering comical but also establishing complicity – I ask how postcolonial creation plays with the very hegemonic tropes and types that it rejects.

Of interest in this project is not humor writ large, but comedic play whose hallmark is a sense of ambivalence – the cultural productions at the core of this dissertation deal with issues of gravity with a sense of levity; they simultaneously coopt yet subvert colonial representations of alterity. I examine literary mechanisms like irony, parody, and satire, which allow humorists to establish distance from the colonial models that they repeat, thanks to their methods that are rife with scorn, mockery, disdain, and exaggeration. The dissertation will also examine forms of humor in which humorists do not separate themselves from their targets. We contend with acts of self-derisory, grotesque and carnivalesque humor, which blur the distance between the subjects and objects of laughter. I argue that humorous play with official discourses allows French authors, artists, and comics not only to delegitimize simplistic Metropolitan representations of alterity, but also to furnish ludic alternatives in their place. By using humor in postcolonial creation, these humorists laugh at misery and play with images of cultural alterity without propagating them. I show that these artists reappropriate colonial rhetoric in humorous ways, such that they offer critiques of colonial enterprises themselves, while also transforming them to reflect the contemporary diversity and heterogeneity of modern France.

Table of Contents

Abstract	3
Acknowledgements	5
Introduction	6
Chapter 1	26
Irony, Literary Identity and Postcolonial Authorship	
Chapter 2	61
Mabanckou's Carnavalesque World	
Chapter 3	101
Mimicry and its Mottled doubles: Representing North Africa and its Orientalist Fictions	
Chapter 4	151
Drawing the Line: French Stand-up and its Limits	
Conclusion	201
Works Cited	205

Acknowledgements

I am deeply grateful to Princeton University's Department of French and Italian, for its generous support over the course of my Ph.D.

Thank you to Nick Nesbitt, Christy Wampole and Simon Gikandi for agreeing to be part of my dissertation committee and for reading my work. Nick's insights and courses have shaped and enriched my thinking and have culminated in a dissertation that I am proud of. I am immensely thankful to Christy – the conversations we have had about everything from writing, jobs, teaching to professional development have given me strength and concrete advice that I have drawn from during my time at Princeton. Thank you to Simon, for his enlightening courses and generous conversations, which have offered me invaluable insights and helped me become a more well-rounded scholar.

To my friends Renée Altergott, Robert Decker, Irina Markina and Chloé Vettier – thank you for your friendship. They have transformed my time at Princeton and made it the home it has become.

I am immensely grateful to my advisor and mentor, André Benhaïm. His generosity over the past eight years have helped me blossom into a confident thinker and scholar. I owe the directions that my research has taken to his insights and unwavering support. The course that we created and taught together shaped me as a pedagogue and will be an experience that I will fondly remember. Thank you for your humanity and kindness, which have taught me about so much more than research.

My deepest gratitude to my parents and sister, who taught me to fly high – this journey would not have been possible without you. To my husband and partner, thank you for soaring with me. Your boundless support and faith in me have been an immense pillar of strength.

Finally, to my son Niev – this project and everything I do, is for you.

Introduction

In a page-long sequence of *Le Chat du Rabbin, Jérusalem d'Afrique* (2006), the French graphic novelist Joann Sfar pokes fun of a host of colonial stereotypes. In this parody of a familiar comic book character, the protagonist – a rabbi from 1930s Algiers – and his companions encounter “un jeune reporter très sûr de lui” (67) when traveling through Belgian Congo.¹ An ostentatious reference to Hergé’s *Tintin au Congo*², this reporter is none other than the Franco-Belgian comic artist’s recognizable globetrotting hero. This unnamed reporter is accompanied not only by his equally recognizable dog Milou, but also by his hallmark racism and colonialist paternalism. While showing the Algerian rabbi and the sheikh Sfar “le journal dans lequel j’écris” (67), the journalist assumes that his visitors, in their ignorance, would take this act of writing literally. Consequently, he proceeds to make a pedantic clarification: “enfin, je n’écris pas moi-même. Nous utilisons une invention qui s’appelle l’imprimerie” (67). Amplifying the condescendence with which Hergé’s Tintin often lectures his African interlocutors, Sfar’s Tintin instructs his visitors not only on technology but also on hygiene: “Vous voyez, je me lave au moins une fois par jour,” he explains. “Ça me préserve des maladies et des poux. Se laver, ce n’est pas juste un jeu. C’est excellent pour la santé” (67).

¹ An excerpt of this introduction is due to appear in the following article: Ravi, Sonali. “Humor in French Postcolonial Literature and Culture: A paradox?,” *Contemporary French & Francophone Studies*. Vol. 26, no.1, 2022.

² First published in black and white in a serialized version of the Belgian newspaper *Le Petit-Vingtème* in 1930-1931, then as a collected album in 1931, it was published in a substantially revised, colored version in 1946.

Image 1

Content removed due to copyright concerns

Joann Sfar, *Le Chat du Rabbin 5. Jérusalem d'Afrique*. Page 67. © Dargaud 2002

If Hergé constructed the African Other as a “bête sauvage” in need of the civilizing influence of European colonization, Sfar makes a laughingstock of such racist representations that permeated the work of Hergé – who is often dubbed as the father of modern Western comics. In fact, Sfar exaggerates and amplifies all that is problematic about Hergé’s original text.³ In light of

³ In addition to being colorized, the 1946 version of *Tintin au Congo* published by Casterman, differed markedly in form and content from the 1931 version. In this version, Hergé adopted his signature *ligne*

his excessive paternalism, Tintin is transformed into an object of ridicule, whose attitude of superiority renders him utterly derisory. Indeed, what is striking in this scene is the silence with which Tintin's African interlocutors behold him, as the journalist carries on his monologue with no regard for the participation of his audience. This muteness, along with the characters' stunned facial expression, is as humorous as it is telling. They demonstrate just how egregiously racist Tintin's discourse is, without even his interlocutors' need for speaking out or speaking back. Instead of serving as a reflection of those that his pedantry is aimed at, Tintin's malevolence and absurdity in a sense "speaks for itself." This comical single-page sequence suggests the power of humor as a response in and of itself to racism.

Indeed, the central premise of this project is that humor plays a powerful role in negotiating and navigating unequal relations of power. Often, humor itself acts as a formidable response to systems of oppression. Questions of who employs humor, to joke about whom, to what ends, and how humor mediates asymmetrical matrices of power in post- and neocolonial French contexts is at the heart of this dissertation. In fact, as Jimmy Carr and Lucy Greeves argue in *The Naked Jape: Uncovering the Hidden World of Jokes* (2007), "without foreigners and foreignness, there would be far fewer jokes," so much so that "a regional, social or ethnic group [...] stereotype[d] in our jokes [...come to stand in] as a kind of shorthand for an undesirable comedy trait" (qtd. in Ervine

claire style and revised large parts of his work that were criticized for its violence and its racist representations of Congo.

3). What this goes to show is that humor has for long been a (neo)colonial discourse, often wielded by the powerful, to tell dehumanizing tales about the subaltern.

From black face, sexist jokes, anti-Semitic caricatures to anti-Arab cartoons, comedic discourses have often targeted minority groups. The aim of my dissertation, however, is to demonstrate the ways in which minorities who have been *targets* of jokes, have in turn themselves become its creators, using humor as a medium to deal with complicated questions of identity. By exploring how Francophone Maghrebi, Caribbean and sub-Saharan African writers and comics repurpose colonial stereotypes directed against them, the dissertation explores the myriad ways in which these very minority groups themselves become *agents* of humor. According to Simon Gikandi, such forms of mimesis drive postcolonial writing itself, as “colonized writers, always limited by their conditions of production as citizens and subjects, had no choice but to deploy inherited forms toward their own goals” (311). The goal of this project, then, is to examine what new forms are created and born in this space between (seeming) complicity and reappropriation. Of interest, therefore, is not humor writ large, but comedic play of a particular type – the kind that is simultaneously powerful against despair, but also has no *a priori* place for laughter. In other words, the kind of humor that, like the *Chat du Rabbini* sequence discussed above, coopts and yet subverts colonial representations of alterity, such that colonial discourses become “simultaneously part of an inherited tradition and sites of its reimagination” (Gikandi 311). In short, ambivalence is itself the hallmark of the type of humor that this project grapples with.

Humor and Ambivalence: A Short Introduction

Humor has historically been a slippery concept to pin down, not least because of the difficulty involved in defining the phenomenon. Signaling to Pierre Daninos’ adage ‘l’humour,

calvaire des définisseurs,’ Jean-Marc Moura fittingly declares that “il semble impossible de réduire théoriquement ce qui incarne un ‘je-ne-sais-quoi’ de l’esprit sans le détruire du même geste” (1). Perhaps because explaining a joke is a surefire way to kill it, any attempt to elucidate the theories and mechanics behind humor (present study included) seems destined to become a self-defeating endeavor, which guarantees the demise of the very act it seeks to shed light on. Unsurprisingly, then, Moura concludes that “l’humour, en tant que phénomène clairement identifié et généralement accepté, n’existe pas” (1).

However, humor is an ambiguous phenomenon not only because there is no single definition of the concept, but also because from its origins, the notion of humor has inextricably been linked with that which is not comic. As Fernand Baldensperger explains in *Études d'histoire littéraire* (1907), the French term “humour” originated from the medieval doctrine of *humeurs*, a concept developed by the Ancients to describe the idiosyncratic character of individuals. According to this theory, an individual is either *sanguine*, *phlegmatique*, *bilieux* or *mélancolique*, depending on the corresponding element – *sang*, *lymphe*, *bile* or “l’humeur noire” – that is predominant in one’s body (176). During the Italian Renaissance, *umore* was defined as an individual’s idiosyncratic temperament – “une spéciale qualité de nature par laquelle on est disposé à telle chose plutôt qu’à telle autre” (qtd. in Baldensperger 177). As the scope of the term expanded beyond a pseudo-medical sense, an affinity began to develop between the notion of *humeur* as a particular temperament and between that of a singularity of mind and character.

It was in Elizabethan England that the term began to take on this latter, literary significance. By the 17th century, the term came to characterize a particular kind of language use in writing and conversation – one that springs spontaneously and that originates less from common sense and more from a particular sense. On the other side of the English channel, however, *humour* continued

to be used in the original meaning of *humeur* well into the 17th century, so much so that a humorist in the French context was someone “qui a de l’humeur et qui ne le cache pas, qui est donc maussade et grondeur” (Baldensperger 182). Thus, humor for the English meant a disposition towards joy, and in stark contrast, for the French meant a tendency towards irritability. What becomes evident from these competing conceptions is that ambivalence is integral to the notion of humor itself, constitutive of its very etymological origins.

In light of this paradox, we cannot speak of humor without also talking about pathos. Indeed, this doubleness becomes evident in numerous historical attempts to define humor: when Flaubert extols the “grotesque triste,” when Blaze de Bury speaks of “la plaisanterie mélancolique, la gaîté qui pleure,” or when Samuel Beckett writes about “le rire sans joie” (qtd. in *Le Sens littéraire de l’humour* 66). If this oxymoronic simultaneity between the serious and non-serious is intrinsic to humor, it is all-the-more pronounced in its literary manifestations. In order to understand why, we must look to traditional conceptions of humor, which have theorized the affect elicited by humor, namely laughter, as an essentially spontaneous and profoundly social phenomenon. In *Le Rire* (1940), one of the first major philosophical treatises on humor and laughter, Henri Bergson suggests that “le rire doit répondre à certaines exigences de la vie en commun” (6). In other words, the experience of people coming together – social life itself – is essential to laughter for Bergson. A further complication is added when we take into account Freud’s theorization of laughter as a phenomenon that is devoid of intellectual engagement: he argues that “the exposure of the psychic automatism belongs to the technique of the comic” (56). According to Freud, then, what is humorous is the product of processes that are absent of conscious reflection. While the Bergsonian and Freudian theories of humor are apt in describing, as Jonathan Ervine argues, how “one-liners and pithy puns” work (9), they do not adequately explain how

humor functions in literature, which calls for a more rigorous mode of intellectual engagement than do punchlines. How, then, can we explain how humor operates in, or is even possible in literature, since reading, in stark contrast to “le rire d’un groupe” (Bergson 5), consists of a profoundly individual, isolated and intellectually-engaged activity?

Moura posits a possible explanation. He suggests that when it comes to humor in “la littérature comique” (248), the text is a medium that facilitates a “relation *in absentia* entre un auteur et un lecteur” (59). The humorist is, in other words, not in direct contact with the audience that he or she seeks to make laugh, because the text mediates the relation between reader and writer. Consequently, the emotion elicited by a text is different from that produced by humor in more direct, face-to-face social interactions. He explains:

Seul, ne partageant pas forcément toutes les valeurs du texte parcouru, ayant tout loisir de reconnaître les significations complexes de l’œuvre, le lecteur n’a pas du tout la réaction spontanée qu’il aurait au sein d’un groupe de rieurs. Il s’amuse du texte mais d’un rire qui ne l’envahit pas tout à fait, auquel il a la liberté de réfléchir et qu’il peut nuancer *ad libitum* (59).

While the laughter occasioned by communal comic processes demonstrates a frank hilarity and corporeal impulse, humor in literature lacks this social dimension and spontaneity that characterizes traditional comic processes, thereby demonstrating the limits of Bergson’s and Freud’s theories of humor, particularly in their application to literature. In the absence of this openness and free expression of the mind and body occasioned by social laughter, Moura argues that humor in literature provokes a more subtle emotion, one that is more aptly termed a “sourire” rather than a “rire,” for it is characterized by a certain “retenue” and “fermeture” (61). In light of this, he goes on to suggest, echoing Jules Renard, that even the term “sourire” is inaccurate,

proposing instead the term ‘soupleurer’ (60). Given this definition of literary humor as straddling the “pleurer” and the “rire,” it is easy to see the intersections between pleasure and pathos, laughter and sorrow in the specific ways that humor operates in literature.

In fact, it is particularly apt to speak of the paradoxes of humor given that the corpus that concerns this dissertation is Francophone postcolonial literature, namely the body of writing and thought that contends with the history and ongoing impact of French colonization and imperialism. If the title of Henri Lope’s 1982 classic – *Le Pleurer-rire* – is any evidence, conveying the anxieties and bitter disillusion of postcolonial socio-politics with humor is an enterprise that takes on a significance of its own in postcolonial literature and culture. This novel, like so many other cultural productions that this dissertation explores, “met du « rire » dans la *re*-présentation du drame socio-politique,” to borrow Lawson-Hellu’s formulation (124). In this sense, humorous play with hegemonic discourses is a serious enterprise in the postcolonial literary corpus – it is often a means to expose, if not critique and contest the quotidian realities of an unjust status quo. The oxymoronic worlds that Francophone postcolonial works create thereby exemplify the ambivalence of literary humor, as they make it possible to “dissoudre l’opposition jusque-là stricte du sérieux et du non-sérieux” (qtd. in Simédoh 2).

This study will thus explore the place of humor in the articulation of postcolonial and diasporic identities in modern France. To do so, it will examine various practices and uses of humor in contemporary novels, comic books and stand-up comedy by authors (Dany Laferrière, Alain Mabanckou, Leïla Sebbar), graphic novelists (Joann Sfar) and stand-uppers (including Fellag, Gad Elmaleh, Jamel Debbouze, Shirley Souagnon and Fary). The primary question guiding this dissertation will be: what role do creative practices of humor play in resisting and transforming French colonial representations of otherness? In answering this and other questions, this project

contends with the capacity of humor in decolonizing French imperial constructions surrounding racial, gender and ethnic alterity. The cultural productions that this dissertation is concerned with use various forms and modes of humor to deal with subjects that do not obviously lend themselves to comic treatment: they deal with questions of slavery; violence and colonial history; decolonial, feminist, antiracist and anti-imperialist strategies of resistance; approaches to linguistic and identitarian reappropriation. They use humor, therefore, to interrogate important and urgent socio-political questions, from which arises the first paradox that is at the basis of this study: in French postcolonial literature and culture, humor is linked not only to that which is ludic, but also to the tragic.

The Paradoxes of Humor

This ambiguity gives rise to two caveats when it comes to humorous play, which the introduction will briefly outline, but the rest of the study will continue to grapple with. The first conundrum stemming from the humorous treatment of tragic subjects is a moral one. Tricky both in its performative dimension and as an object of analysis, dealing with serious and painful subjects with humor is an ethically risky enterprise, which can be considered insensitive at the best of circumstances, and immoral and irreverent at its worst. In her essay, “L’humour (juif), arme des désarmés,” Judith Kauffman warns that “connoté non sérieux, associé à une certaine légèreté irrespectueuse, [l’humour] suppose une forme d’anesthésie affective et morale, une incongruité inacceptable dans la représentation des situations extrêmes” (93). Indeed, humor that is linked to tragedy is a delicate matter, for ever-present in it is the danger not only of broaching sensitivities in a seemingly blithe manner, but also of reducing serious matters to the frivolity that is often associated with comedy. However, in the same essay, Kauffman goes on to argue that

l'humour figure parmi les tactiques traditionnelles de résistance qu'oppose à la société dominante une collectivité minoritaire, marginalisée et fragile [...] L'humour, qui s'oppose à l'esprit de sérieux, est joueur et libre, irrespectueux et frondeur. En développant une modalité du *penser à-côté* qui sape les représentations reçues, il ébranle les évidences intellectuelles, affectives et éthiques, qui guident nos existences. L'humoriste – le praticien de l'humour – joint à ces qualités l'art de mettre en forme sa vision oblique et critique des hommes et des choses (93-94).

It is clear, then, that humor is not only a means to entertain, but also a tool to explore and confront personal, political and social issues, and ultimately to challenge traditional beliefs and attitudes associated with them. Given this power of humor as a vector of socio-political critique and commentary, perhaps most well-known in the context of Jewish humor, it is safe to say that humor is far from a frivolous medium. Particularly for those that colonial and imperialist systems have subjected to a history of oppression and marginalization, it is a tool that provides not only comic relief when suffering becomes unbearable, but also a means to mock the oppressor and to thereby take charge of one's suffering. Accordingly, the works that I address in this dissertation are harbingers of a surprising comic potential, despite portraying harsh realities. They engage with issues of race, identity, and inequality with levity, and they feign complicity with the very colonial discourses that they contest – which brings us to the second caveat of humor that the dissertation contends with.

All the works in question in this dissertation involve some kind of humorous play with colonial stereotypes, clichés and other representations of alterity. From Montaigne's "Cannibales" to Delacroix's "Femmes d'Alger," if French writers and artists across centuries employed (and/or denounced) reifying clichés to represent "the Other," these tropes today serve Francophone

postcolonial writers and artists as springboards from which to interrogate and intervene in these problematic colonial constructions. However, much like treating the tragic in the comic mode, humor that recycles and exploits stereotypes is a slippery act, which could just as easily be offensive as it can be subversive. In fact, Linda Hutcheon warns that for all their transgressive potential, the act of parodying colonial discourses can be “a threatening, even anarchic force,” but that these “transgressions ultimately remain authorized” – because even in mocking hegemonic discourses, such play “inscribes mocked conventions onto itself, thereby guaranteeing their continued existence” (qtd. in Simek 253). In fact, the *Charlie Hebdo* controversy – ignited by the French newspaper’s publication of satirical cartoons of the Prophet Muhammed in 2015 – and tragic events that followed in its aftermath – including the shooting of its journalists and the beheading of Samuel Paty – offer visceral manifestations of the power of stereotypes and caricature. These incidents of violence and tragedy are testament to the explosive potential of humor that exploits discourses surrounding racial and ethnic otherness.

In light of these realities, this dissertation will be particularly sensitive to the power relations that mediate and are mediated by humor. It will develop parameters to evaluate whether humorists reinforce or critique the discourses that they imitate and pay close attention to the linguistic, visual, and ideological tools with which humorists signal their proximity to or distance from hegemonic discourses. Because jokes are not uttered in a vacuum, it will consider the particular context – social, political and ideological – in which humor exists. The same joke – depending on who tells it, to whom, to what ends and how – can have different results; what is funny in one context, is not necessarily so in another context, with another audience. Attending to this contingent nature of humor, the dissertation will consider the relation between three elements that, according to Moura, structure any instance of humor: “le rieur” (the humorist or the one doing

the joking), “le risible” (the target of the joke or the element provoking laughter and the audience for which the humor is intended (33). We will examine the literary and humoristic tools that allow postcolonial humorists to separate themselves from the “risible” – often colonial history, its actors and codes. Of interest will be mechanisms like irony, parody and satire, using which authors, artists and performers mark their distance from colonial systems with which they establish a simultaneously proximity that nevertheless signals mockery. We will see that their methods are often rife with scorn, disdain, and exaggeration, which allow humorists to establish a sort of detachment and distance from the models that they repeat. The dissertation will, however, also examine forms of humor in which humorists do not separate themselves from the “risible,” instead poking fun at and implicating themselves in their humor through self-abasing comedic practices. We will explore questions of self-derisory, grotesque and carnivalesque humor, whereby the distance between the object and subject of laughter blurs and the “rieurs” themselves become the “risible.”

Thus, this project is interested in postcolonial humor that situates itself in an ambiguous position with relation to the binaries of comedy/tragedy, complicity/subversion. It will focus on literature and performance in which humorists deal with issues of gravity with a sense of levity; in which they at once establish proximity to and maintain distance from colonial systems of representation that marginalize minority groups in French society. These paradoxes are, in turn, at the heart of the question that drives this project. Humoring pathos – in the double sense of rendering comical but also establishing complicity – how does postcolonial creation play with the very hegemonic tropes and types that it rejects? I argue that humorous play with official discourses allows French authors, artists and comics not only to delegitimize simplistic Metropolitan representations of alterity, but also to furnish ludic alternatives in their place. By using humor in

postcolonial creation, these humorists laugh at misery and play with images of cultural alterity without necessarily propagating them, instead reappropriating them in ways that more accurately reflect the contemporary diversity and heterogeneity of modern France.

The literary and cultural materials with which this project is concerned deal with, in one way or another, the postcolonial Francophone world. This postcolonial era that they either directly or obliquely depict was initiated by the independence of French colonies and the subsequent immigration of the formerly colonized to the colonial land, which led to the formation of significance and visible North African, sub-Saharan African and Caribbean diasporas in France. This postcolonial, modern French society is characterized at once by robust and thriving cultural contacts and the resulting intra- and inter-community tensions that punctuate this diverse society. Writers and filmmakers like Cheikh Hamidou Kane in *L'Aventure ambiguë* (1962) and Ousame Sembene in *La Noire de...* (1966) articulated the shock and *bouleversement* of hopeful diasporas in postcolonial French society, while authors like Assia Djébar (*L'Amour, la fantasia* (1985)) and Abdelkebir Khatibi (*Amour bilingue* (1990)) portrayed the personal and political dimensions of alienation in the aftermath of independence. However, towards the end of the twentieth- and beginning of the twenty-first centuries, we observe a turn towards a more light-hearted mode, even as writers continued to grapple with subjects of postcolonial alienation and marginalization. Contemporary writers like Dany Laferrière, Alain Mabanckou and Leïla Sebbar, graphic novelists like Joann Sfar, and a young generation of comedians inspired by American-style stand-up comedy began to interrogate what it means to be French, values upon which the nation is built, the history of colonization, and the experience of diasporic and immigrant communities in modern France, all with an increasing sense of levity. This project will thereby examine four case studies that raise significant questions about humor and alterity in contemporary French postcolonial literature and

performance. It will facilitate comparisons between different forms, devices, and discourses of humor, while implicitly lending itself to an understating of how North African, West African and Caribbean French diasporas have been received and represented in contemporary French society.

Chapters 1 and 2 explore selected works by Haitian-Canadian author Dany Laferrière and French-Congolese writer Alain Mabanckou, primarily novels that deal with writers writing about writing. In these multi-layered narratives, Laferrière and Mabanckou foreground the act of authorship in complex moves of *mise-en-abyme*, which constitute self-reflexive and self-conscious reflections on authorial practices of writing. The principle that underlies these chapters is the notion that understanding how black postcolonial authors think about authorship and the act of writing is key to understanding how they use humor to appropriate reductive colonial discourse about racial otherness. The question that drives the first chapter is the following: how do Laferrière and his author figures draw from colonial stereotypes, caricatures and clichés in humoristic treatments of the postcolonial self, even while ideologically contesting them? I contend that Laferrière's author-protagonists use irony to strike back at structures and systems that perpetuate degrading ideas of blackness.

This chapter therefore examines the paradoxes inherent in ironic play, as the works in question incorporate the conventions that they seek to ridicule and distance themselves from. In caustic satires aimed at Anglo-Saxon society's racist discourses, Laferrière's novels exhibit a paradoxical mode of intertextuality, which establishes proximity with the very discourses that they critique. I show, however, that these texts cite not to signal similitude, but to create critical distance. Using Linda Hutcheon's work in *Irony's Edge: The Theory and Politics of Irony* (1994), I will analyze how irony functions in two ways in Laferrière's texts: semantically and pragmatically. We will see that the trope of irony functioning within his texts at both a semantic

and pragmatic level allows these works to accomplish two things: first, to create a critical distance from the problematic stereotypes and conventions that they cite (through irony's function of semantic inversion and distancing). And second, to ideologically contest the stereotypes that they incorporate textually (thanks to irony's negative evaluative function). I show that the mechanism through which Laferrière and his author-protagonists subject hegemonic discourses to critical judgment is quite paradoxical. Through a logic of rhetorical exaggeration, they amplify colonial discourses to a point of absurdity. However, in so doing, these authors transform the subjects of their critique into at-once laughable and derisory objects of ridicule.

Chapter 2 continues this exploration of author figures, but turns to novels in Mabanckou's corpus that deploy the figure of the self-derisive author-protagonist. It studies the use of self-effacing humor, particularly as it operates through tropes of the excreting human body reminiscent of Rabelaisian folk comedy. Since no one laughs more heartily at tragedy than does Rabelais, carnivalesque imagery of the kind that pervades *Gargantua and Pantagruel* will be at the heart of this second chapter. Using Bakhtin's work on Rabelaisian humor and the carnivalesque, I investigate how Mabanckou depicts the suffering of the black body in his novels in resolutely excretory terms – as a function of practical, lower-order bodily realities like defecation, urination and orgasming, expressed in familiar 'marketplace' speech. In doing so, this chapter will illustrate how Mabanckou draws laughter from the dreary realities that afflict the black African body.

This chapter will further signal how such self-deprecating humor that carnivalizes the drudgery of existence is highly ambivalent – it destructs and expels, even as it regenerates and empowers. While degrading the self and body, this humor also frees: the self-abasing expression of suffering in carnival idiom of the material body and its lower stratum liberates the self-deprecating hero from the "norms of etiquette and decency" characterizing conventional society

(Bakhtin 7). Further, I show that this self-effacing expression of suffering is paradoxically transgressive even as it participates in one's own abasement. In a highly ambivalent gesture, such auto-derision allows the self-deprecating protagonists to not only survive oppression, but to also render it comprehensible and even quotidian, as it transforms pain and suffering into a function of practical and scatological realities.

Chapter 3 forays into the visual dimension of comedic discourse by examining Joann Sfar's *bandes dessinées* (graphic novels) and Leïla Sebbar's novels. Of particular interest in this chapter are the images of cultural alterity, propagated by 20th century Orientalist art and literature. I compare each author's visual and textual aesthetic, analyzing how both authors emphatically borrow from Orientalist tropes and imagery in their depiction of the Maghreb, Algeria specifically. This chapter will investigate the varied ways in which these authors repeat Orientalist discourse, ranging anywhere from ostentatious reproductions of Orientalist paintings to more subtle appropriations of Orientalist aesthetics in image and text.

The chapter uses Homi Bhabha's conceptions of colonial mimicry to think through Sebbar's and Sfar's Orientalist borrowings as strategic forms of cultural and literary mimesis. We will see that that these authors coopt gendered Orientalist tropes in humorous, yet ideologically productive ways, thanks to the ambivalence implicit in the very logic of mimicking colonial discourses. I argue that through acts of flawed and distorted colonial mimicry, these authors parody Orientalism's "politics of exoticism" (Behdad 8), conveying humoristic counter-narratives to Orientalism's oft-repeated visions of the Maghreb, despite borrowing from its fictions. I contend that both authors deform and distort rather than faithfully reproduce familiar colonial models, thereby creating humorously mottled mimics that become agents of serious ideological critique. I further hypothesize that these grotesque doubles exemplify what constitutes a quintessential

ambiguity of colonial mimicry: by adapting and appropriating Metropolitan narratives, mimicry's mottled doubles do not so much parrot colonial culture as they dialogue with it in order to create hybrid identities that resist categorization. Through their comical dissonance from the original, these colonial mimics strip the colonial models of their normative value, thereby dislocating the facile images through which Orientalism has defined Maghrebi history and culture.

The final chapter assesses the ambiguous nature of such humorous play with official discourses by signaling the limits and ethical risks inherent in humoring stereotypes. It transitions from the literary to the popular culture imaginary to look at the variegated landscape of humor primarily in stand-up comedy, and to a smaller extent, in film, and other performative and public contemporary media. In this chapter, I am particularly interested in how stand-up comics combine autographical fiction and storytelling in their humor in ways that are socio-politically relevant (and perhaps irreverent). I show that by using their lives as subject, they demonstrate the inextricability of autobiography and politics; bring to the fore issues of national identity, diversity and multiculturalism that are deeply contested in France; and broach with levity taboo subjects surrounding the strained racial relations of contemporary France, in a society that maintains an official blindness to social categories like race, class, religion and ethnicity.

The chapter closes by investigating how humorous play with stereotypes can go wrong by examining two fraught cases studies – that of the comedian Dieudonné and of the *Charlie Hebdo* controversy. Born to a Cameroonian father and French mother, Dieudonné rose to fame as he humorously exploited stereotypes in his stand-up pieces that were applauded for their perspicacity. As he became more and more well-known, he began to establish connections with far-right leader Jean-Marie Le Pen and became friends with Holocaust denier Robert Faurisson. Soon, the ideologies resulting from his social and political alliances spilled over into his stand-up comedy

and films, which became increasingly racist and antisemitic, even leading to various antisemitism-related prosecutions. Using the same platforms of humor, stand-up comedy and cinema, Dieudonné now propagates the very discourses that he contested. Although this and the well-known *Charlie Hebdo* controversy triggered by the newspaper's publication of cartoons depicting the prophet Mohammad, both represent extreme instances of humorous play gone wrong, they raise important questions. These questions will in turn inform the chapter's concluding reflections: what are the dangers inherent in humoring stereotypes, even if done so to subversive ends? When authors and comics recycle hegemonic tropes, through what mechanisms – literary, oral and performative – do they signal to audiences that they are doing so critically, instead of repeating them unproblematically? When does humorous play with stereotypes go too far and upset audiences? Where do humorists, be it in literature, film or stand-up comedy, draw the line between subversive and offensive play? And finally, what does it mean to cross this line?

By means of the following case studies, this project intervenes in the longstanding social scientific and humanistic traditions that have examined humor. As Jerry Palmer argues, “Humour and comedy are studied in most human science or humanities disciplines: there is an anthropology of humour, a sociology and psychology of it, theorising it is basic to modern Freudianism, and to film and literary criticism its study is as central as the study of tragedy or realist narrative” (qtd. in Ervine 12). Given this abundance, what is surprising is the lack of its study in the specifically postcolonial perspective, particularly the Francophone one. Few and far-apart are book-length studies⁴ whose principal subject is humor in French postcolonial literature. This project, however, offers a critical counterpoint to the Euro-American biases of postcolonial literary studies, which

⁴ See for example, *Rira bien: Humour et ironie dans les littératures et le cinéma francophones* (2008) ; *L'humour et l'ironie en littérature francophone subsaharienne : Des enjeux critiques à une poétique du rire* (2012) ; *Rires en francophonie* (2013).

have marginalized the complex uses, and in fact, the very existence of humor in the subset of French Studies that we often designate as “Francophone” literature. From slavery, colonization, civil war, corrupted dictatorships, to fatal crises of identity, a focus on gravity and tragedy has prevailed when it comes to scholarship that deals with the literary worlds of Africa, the Americas and the Caribbean, while humor and levity have been relegated to the sidelines. This mood of alienation and sobriety is, of course, understandable in some ways. Humor seems to have no *a priori* place when it comes to studying a corpus that is tasked with exposing the grim socio-political realities ushered in by colonization and its aftermath. Furthermore, introducing humor in research that seeks to better understand systems of oppression perpetrated by colonial and imperial systems could rightly be considered provocative: it could very well involve a certain measure of wantonness that might undermine the very socio-political aims with which such study sets out.

By privileging stories of death and violence, however, academic literary critique and analyses promote the myth of the postcolony as an “archive of death” (Chakravorty 543). Such monochrome accounts of desolation fail to do justice to the complex realities of human experience in Francophone postcolonies and their diasporas. In doing so, we contribute on the one hand to providing single-sided representations that flatten the complex social terrain and lived experience of postcolonial society. On the other hand, the risk of such monochrome accounts is that postcolonial Francophone worlds will remain a foil for Western self-assurance and complacency – a vision of impermanence, instability and violence against which to measure Western stability, development and progress.

An attention to humor, however, works against these stereotypes of postcolonial societies as what Achille Mbembe terms “deathworlds” (1). The goal of this dissertation, then, is to offer an alternate aesthetic lens through which to study literature and culture of the modern Francophone

world. In doing so, the four case studies that follow will provide insights into both historical and contemporary colonial discourse, representations of alterity in French society, and how it has evolved over time. More importantly, perhaps, it will provide a way to assess how in minority and subaltern contexts in modern France, authors, artists and performers have engaged with these representations and used it as catalysts to negotiate, reconfigure, and sometimes to reinforce hegemonic conceptions of Frenchness and French national identity. Finally, the chapters that follow will shed light on how comedic discourses and practices are deeply ambivalent – the ways in which humor and pathos overlap and what comes of this; how they are at once destabilizing and liberating, as they coopt the very colonial representations that they seek to reimagine.

Chapter 1

Irony, Literary Identity and Postcolonial Authorship

Introduction

Questions surrounding identity, sameness and cultural difference have occupied French thought for centuries – for as long as humans have left their own confines and come into contact with cultural alterity and difference. In his *essai* “Des cannibales” (1580), Montaigne offers what is arguably one of the earliest reflections on the subject of identity politics, when he discusses practices of cannibalism in the Tupinambas of Brazil. Positing that “nous n’avons autre mire de la vérité, et de la raison, que l’exemple et idée des opinions et usances du pays où nous sommes” (392), Montaigne argues in favor of cultural relativism and respect for cultural difference that would become familiar and acquire nuance in postcolonial and postmodern philosophy. Indeed, French writers and philosophers like Lacan, Levinas, Derrida, Irigaray, Badiou, Cixous, Kristeva and Glissant have written entire treatises on the subject. And yet, the question of the Other is a deeply contested one, teetering between two ethical poles – that of universality and sameness on the one hand and of specificity and difference on the other – with the latter occupying a privileged position in contemporary French thought.

However, critiques of identity politics are as numerous as the considerations that deal with ethics of the Other. In his book *Ethics: An Essay on the Understanding of Evil* (2001), Alain Badiou offers one of the most impassioned critiques of what he variously calls “ethics of difference,” “culturalism” and “cultural difference” (26). As if in a direct response to Montaigne’s argument in “Des cannibales,” Badiou contends that the very ethics of identity “rests on a vulgar sociology, directly inherited from the astonishment of the colonial encounter with savages” (26).

Dismissing it as “a tourist’s fascination for the diversity of morals, customs and beliefs (26), Badiou rejects the very basis of identity politics. Why? He offers the following explanation:

The problem is that the ‘respect for differences’ and the ethics of human rights do seem to define an identity! And that as a result, the respect for differences applies only to those differences that are responsibly consistent with this identity (which, after all, is nothing other than the identity of a wealthy – albeit visibly declining – ‘West’). [...] It might as well be that ethical ideology [...] is simply the final imperative of a conquering civilization: “become like me and I will respect your difference” (24-25).

Badiou rejects Otherness and the ethics of difference upon which the notion is founded as a product of imperialist desire for distinction and classification, which further excludes those already marginalized and thereby works to reinforce the Western, imperialist status quo. He goes on to reach the unapologetic conclusion that “all ethical predication based on recognition of the other should be purely and simply abandoned” (25).

In the Francophone literary field, which is often framed around questions of identity, Badiou’s contention seems anathema. And yet, it is these very echoes that we find in the work of an acclaimed French postcolonial author – Dany Laferrière. Associated with a literary corpus that is testament to a certain preoccupation with, even anxiety regarding questions of identity and the politics surrounding it, Laferrière has more than once displayed his frustration with this tendency. While Badiou’s and other philosophical critiques of identity politics are characteristically steeped in a certain heavy-handedness and density, Laferrière brings a certain lightness to these questions. The following comment, which Laferrière made during an interview at the biannual *Festival America de Vincennes*, exemplifies this principle:

Depuis cinquante ans on nous emmerde avec l'identité, c'est l'expression à la mode. On dirait qu'on a été pris en otages par une bande de psychologues, de psychiatres ou de psychopathes. Quel que soit ce que vous faites, c'est une question d'identité. En Haïti, on a un surplus d'identités" (Leménager).

Although tinged with a note of frustration, it is difficult to miss the characteristically tongue-in-cheek quality of Laferrière's remark. In fact, by bringing humor to his writing and thought, Laferrière stakes positions on issues that are far more serious than they appear at first glance. In this case, Laferrière's sardonic declaration calls attention to the preoccupation with identity that has riddled contemporary French postcolonial writing and thought. Without doubt, questions of identity, in one form or another, have consumed authors of what Deleuze and Guattari have called "littérature mineure"⁵ or what Casanova has called "littérature marquée" or "périphérique."⁶ In fact, central to questions of identity for French-language postcolonial authors is the question of authorship itself. Are there specific conditions for writing or prerequisites to be considered an "author?" What is the connection between identity and authorship? How do markers of race, class, ethnicity and nation inform the ways in which minority authors are perceived, received and consecrated in the literary world? These are questions that time and again haunt postcolonial authors, who are often relegated to the sidelines of the French literary tradition, often because of the very racial and ethnic subject positions that they occupy. Inhabiting a position of marginality, or even domination in relation to the Hexagon, they demonstrate a deep suspicion of Western readerships, publication houses and critical establishments, which tend to overemphasize the postcolonial author's biography – not only in practices of reading and interpretation, but also in

⁵Deleuze, Gilles and Félix Guattari. *Kafka : Pour une littérature mineure*. Paris: Editions de Minuit, 1975.

⁶Casanova, Pascale. *La République mondiale des lettres*. Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1999.

circulating and consecrating their work. As a result of this preoccupation with cultural and biographic positions, postcolonial authors paradoxically fixate on – or in Laferrière’s words, are held hostage by (“pris en otages par”) – the very questions of identity and authorship that they seek to escape. Indeed, a sense of individual and collective anxiety marks the writing of *littérature mineure*, one that theorists have variously characterized as “tourment de langage” (Glissant),⁷ “surconscience linguistique” (Gauvin)⁸ or “littératures de l’intranquillité” (Pessoa).⁹ Even a cursory survey of contemporary Francophone literature yields an impressive list of works that cements this idea: from Khatibi’s *Amour bilingue* (1990), Derrida’s *Le Monolinguisme de l’Autre* (1966), Bernabé, Chamoiseau and Confiant’s *Eloge de la créolité* (1989), Condé’s *Penser la créolité* (1995), Kateb’s *Le Polygone étoilé* (1997), Mabanckou’s *Le Sanglot de l’homme noir* (2012), Sami Tchak’s *La Couleur de l’écrivain* (2014), to name a few. These works invoke questions of authorly identity and its relation to geographic and cultural identifiers such as origins, nationality, race, ethnicity and language, to animate the image of the postcolonial author as an “écrivain maudit” (Tchak)¹⁰ or as “l’auteur en souffrance” (Chancé),¹¹ who is “condamné à penser la langue” (Gauvin 15).

This preoccupation with authorial identity is nowhere more evident than in Dany Laferrière’s literary corpus. Born in Port-au-Prince, Laferrière spent what he often describes in his novels as an idyllic childhood in Haiti, before fleeing to Montreal to escape persecution at the

⁷ Qtd. in Gauvin, Lise. "Ecriture, surconscience et plurilinguisme: une poétique de l'errance." Ed. Christiane Albert. *Francophonie et identités Culturelles*. Paris: Editions Karthala, 1999. 17.

⁸ Ibid. 13-29.

⁹ In the article cited above, Gauvin borrows this concept from Fernando Pessoa’s seminal book *Le Livre de l’intranquillité* (1982).

¹⁰ Tchak, Sami. *La couleur de l’écrivain*. Paris: La Cheminante, 2014.

¹¹ Chancé, Dominique. *L’auteur en souffrance : Essai sur la position et la représentation de l’auteur dans le roman antillais contemporain (1981-1992)*. Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 2000.

hands of the Duvalier regime.¹² As a result of this exile and immigration, Laferrière, as Bonnie Thomas argues, “occupies a literary space between an older generation of writers [...] whose work is dominated by the experience of exile and a younger generation that has grown up outside Haiti” (266). This in-betweenness of his literary aesthetic has culminated in two seemingly disparate sets of works that are often grouped into his “cycle haïtien” and “cycle nord-américain,” which teeter between a nostalgia for Haiti on the one hand and the cynicism of life as an exile and immigrant in North America on the other. These experiences, which have had a marked influence on his work, have gained him various labels, including those of “écrivain québécois,” “écrivain franco-caribéen,” “écrivain haïtien,” “écrivain immigré,” etc – all labels that he has loathed because of their tendency to link complex acts of authorship to simplistic biographic determinisms. However, despite being vexed by readers and literary critics that seek to typecast him, this is precisely the subject that has formed the core of many of his most acclaimed works. From his ironic declaration in *L’Odeur du café* (1991) that he is “un écrivain primitif,” to his exasperated assertion that *Je suis un écrivain japonais* (2008) in his eponymously titled novel, to his earnest writing philosophy captured by the title of his book *J’écris comme je vis*¹³ (2000), his identity as a Haitian-Caribbean-Quebécois-Canadian-Afro-American-French writer (*J’écris* 116) is a perennial feature of his writing and thought. This compulsion with his “identité littéraire” (Meizoz 18) is further evident from the figures of writer-protagonists that abound in his work. Often doubles of Laferrière, these writer-figures closely resemble the author himself: from the meandering black writer in *Comment faire l’amour avec un nègre sans se fatiguer* (1985) who seeks comfort in his Remington 22; to

¹² Succeeding his father François Duvalier, Jean-Claude Duvalier served as the president and *de facto* dictator of Haiti from 1971-86, following his father’s 14-year reign. With the help of the paramilitary force called the *Volontaires du Service National*, more commonly known as *Tonton Macoutes*, both dictators instituted a reign of terror, characterized by violence, repression and executions of politics critics and opponents.

¹³ An interview published with Bernard Magnier.

the wildly popular author of *Je suis un écrivain japonais* who caused a stir with the title of his novel (which Laferrière himself has done time and again with his provocatively-titled fictions), the examples are many and span the breath of genres that Laferrière has produced. These protagonists often serve as pretexts for the author to reflect on his identities as a black man and author, and how these two intersect to inform his writing. In turn giving rise to a “métadiscours sur l’écriture,” (Gauvin 18) these figures become the basis for self-conscious and self-reflexive deliberations on what it means to be a postcolonial author in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries.

While the image of the “écrivain maudit” anguished by questions of identity evokes a sense of *gravitas*, Laferrière’s writer-protagonists are, however, deeply cynical in their engagement with the subject, which consequently infuses his novels with a ludic imaginary. These writer-figures are often black men who strive to succeed as authors in societies that marginalize black voices. Distrustful of Western readerships, they nevertheless refuse to call themselves authors, instead positioning themselves as idle philosophers, who themselves caricature racial identity and belonging. In all these ways, Laferrière’s author-protagonists are comic figures, whose cavalier façades hide deeply ironic attitudes towards the act of writing. In what follows, I will explore the role that irony plays in Laferrière’s vision of black Otherness and its relationship to postcolonial authorship by focusing on two of Laferrière’s most iconic works – *Comment faire l’amour avec un nègre sans se fatiguer* (1985) and *Je suis un écrivain japonais* (2008). Because irony relies on a repetition of the very conventions that it seeks to distance itself from and ridicule, it serves as a privileged tool for self-reflexive contemplation about race, authorship and identity in Laferrière’s novels. Indeed, the two novels in question have as their uniting logic the figure of wanton black authors, who are not only irreverent towards the act of authorship but also resort to reductive

colonial stereotypes about race in their writing. Despite their superficially dismissive attitude towards authorship, these figures harbor deep anxieties about the act of writing, heavily conditioned by a French literary tradition that casts suspicion upon black authors' capacity for literary talent.¹⁴ Valorizing the unsettling effects that irony has on the codes that it repeats, this chapter posits that it is by way of ironic play that these writer-figures dislodge the very Metropolitan accounts that they reproduce. Thanks to what Linda Hutcheon calls irony's critical "edge" or "bite,"¹⁵ Laferrière's author-protagonists deride and laugh at racial clichés even as they play with colonial stereotypes, and in doing so, they challenge the over-determinism of nation, race, and class in the reading and reception of postcolonial literary texts. In drawing from diverse sources including postcolonial and literary theory, this chapter will illustrate Laferrière's anxiety surrounding authorship and the role that his humorous style plays in challenging a Western literary tradition that regards black artistic creation as inherently suspect.

The Author Under Trial

Laferrière's preoccupation with authorship is not a novel one. Many writers and philosophers in the French literary tradition have debated and contested the notion of the

¹⁴ It is important to note the popular and critical acclaim that black French authors have achieved despite this cultural gatekeeping. René Maran became the first black author to win the Prix Goncourt for his novel *Batouala* (1921); Léopold Senghor was the first black person inducted to the prestigious Académie française in 1983, with Dany Laferrière becoming the second person to achieve this recognition in 2013. More recently, black French authors like Patrick Chamoiseau, Alain Mabackou and Marie Ndiaye have attained widespread recognition, culminating in these authors receiving the highest distinctions and prizes in French literature. French authors and academics have, however, questioned whether such recognition has amounted to an earnest effort against a tradition of French literary gatekeeping. In his preface to Frantz Fanon's *Les Damnés de la Terre* (1961), Jean-Paul Sartre alludes to René Maran's consecration, mocking it as a gesture of mere tokenism. ([Nous] ne trouvâmes pas mauvais, une fois, de décerner le prix Goncourt à un nègre" (18)). See "Pour une "littérature-monde" en français" (2007) for more on the marginalization of French authors from "the periphery."

¹⁵ See her book *Irony's Edge: The Theory and Politics of Irony*. New York: Routledge, 1994.

primordial relationship between the author and his/her identity, perhaps most famously by Barthes in “La mort de l’auteur” (1968). In this essay, Barthes laments reading practices that seek to “déchiffrer” un texte” (65) by regarding an author’s work as a window into the writer’s mind, or even worse, by treating it as a reflection of an author’s biographical and historical context. He urges an end to this “culture courante qui est tyranniquement centrée sur l’auteur, sa personne, son histoire, ses goûts, ses passions” (66), instead calling for a relationship between readers and texts that is independent from authors. In other words, he advocates – ironically, but understandably – for the “death of the author.” Liberating a text from its author is meant to, on the one hand, restore interpretive agency to its readers. Without the need to “decode” an author’s intentions in attempts to “reveal” a text’s authorized meaning, readers are free to draw from their own interpretive lens to engage with the text’s richness and the multiplicity of meanings it furnishes. On the other hand, freeing a text from its author is also meant to restore creative agency to its writer by privileging the “moi créateur” (Meizoz 28) – the author’s fictional, intellectual and creative capacities – rather than the “moi social” (Meizoz 28) – the author’s biographic situation – as the veritable agent of literary creation. This move away from the “méthode biographique” towards a focus on the author’s creative authority goes hand-in-hand with, as Meizoz explains, the “sécularisation du concept théologique de la création” dating back to the Renaissance (37). With this transformation, the power of creation, no longer solely an act of God, is attributed to the Renaissance man – to the artist and writer – who creates worlds through his art. This concurrent and somewhat paradoxical “divinisation” (Meizoz) of the *auteur* that accompanies the secularization of the notion of creation is closely linked to the etymological origins of the term. According to Antoine Compagnon in “Qu’est-ce qu’un auteur,” the French word “auteur” traces back to the Middle Ages’ concept of the *auctor*, which in turn owes its origins to the Latin root *augeo* – “promouvoir, augmenter” (12).

Following Emile Benveniste,¹⁶ Compagnon explains that to possess *auctoritas* – a concept that he defines as possessing “le pouvoir d'initiative,” and that we have loosely come to understand as having “authority” – is inextricably linked to the process of authorial creation, namely, “ce don réservé à peu d'hommes de faire surgir quelque chose et - à la lettre - de produire à l'existence” (cited in Compagnon 13). In its very etymology, then, to be an author means to exercise a profound creative authority – almost a divine one – to create (fictive) worlds and bring them into existence through the power of words. It is in light of this that we must understand Barthes’ and now Laferrière’s call to divorce literary creation from biography, a conflation that threatens to deny authors their *auctoritas* – that fundamental capacity of the auteur to *create* – by confounding literary talent with mere reflections of a writer’s biographical situation. The author must thus “die,” so to speak, for his/her text to come alive.

But despite such critiques that have proposed alternate methods of literary analysis and interpretation, dominant reading practices continue to link authors’ text to their biography, particularly when it comes to the literary work of writers occupying minority subject positions. In fact, as Ousmane Sembène poignantly demonstrates in his novel *Le docker noir* (1956), markers of identity, including categories of race and class, quite literally become the black author’s prison. In this classic novel, which explores the link between racial prejudice in French society and black authorship, the protagonist Diaw Falla is a black author, who becomes the victim of intellectual property theft after a white Frenchwoman steals his novel and passes it off as her own. After a confrontation between the two results in a freak accident that ends in the latter’s death, Falla stands trial to the dual crimes of murder and plagiarism. As the victim is transformed into a criminal by

¹⁶ Benveniste, Émile. *Le Vocabulaire des institutions indo-européennes*. Paris: Éditions de Minuit, 1969.

the French legal system, it becomes clear that the black author's literary talent itself becomes the object of suspicion. If Laferrière pushes back against Western preoccupation with postcolonial authors' biographies, it is in large part because of this aura of doubt that lingers around the figure of the black author, who is often cast as plagiarist at worst or mime at best. In her book *Dislocating Cultures: Identities, Traditions and Third-World Feminisms* (1997), Uma Narayan analyzes these reductive roles that Western institutions accord minority authors, scholars and intellectuals who have roots in the so-called third world – roles that attribute to them mere mimetic or citational capacity. Narayan argues that minorities in Western academic and literary contexts are often assigned the role of “authentic insiders,” who are expected to speak for and represent their culture. Assumed to be “ambassadors” of their culture, these “authentic insiders,” Narayan argues, are expected to offer Western audiences a peek into authentic realities of their Other culture, thereby providing an antidote to Western ignorance. While in and of itself embedded in Western arrogance, exceptionalism and self-importance – as it assumes that the most urgent political task for writers is or should be to educate the West about their respective cultures – the “authentic insider” position becomes profoundly limiting for postcolonial authors. It ignores the inherently imaginative nature of novels, instead assigning ethnographic value to literary texts. In this sense, reducing the relationship of postcolonial narrative fiction to “authentic” reflections of realities becomes tantamount to denying the creative capacity of its authors. Like Diaw Falla, then, minority authors often become victims of Occidental social and cultural forces that strip them off their *auctoritas* – the originary, almost divine “pouvoir d'initiative” (12) – that is at the heart of the 20th century sense of the *auteur*.

From such literal court-room cross-examinations to the more symbolic interrogations of minority authors' writing as a function of their linguistic, national and identity categories, the

postcolonial author is thus perennially under trial. It is in light of this that Laferrière rejects biography as an exclusive prism through which global readerships commonly read postcolonial authors' works, demonstrating a particular dislike for geographically deterministic labels. While "novelistic discourse emerges not in fixed locations or static moments but within a constant movement *across* borders" (to borrow Michelle Burnham's words 57), publishing, pedagogical and critical practices governing postcolonial novels fix them in the specificity of local or particular experience. This is evident from the labels accorded to postcolonial authors and their works ("écrivain antillais," "auteur postcolonial," "roman québécois," etc – labels that I admittedly resort to at various points in this dissertation), which not only tie complex acts of authorship to simplistic biographic markers, but also anchor postcolonial novels in the particularity of local experience.¹⁷ Indeed, such labels package postcolonial novels as representative not of universal human conditions, but of particular, specific or local realities, thereby denying them the universality (and hence prestige) accorded to their European or North American counterparts.¹⁸

This is, however, not to problematize the fact of identity or belonging itself. As social beings who inevitably occupy and operate within specific cultural and historical configurations, neither authors of literature "mineure" nor "majeure" can sidestep their complex insertions into national and political contexts. Instead, what *is* problematic is the singularity and simplicity of labels that are assigned based on biographic determinisms, which Uma Narayan warns, can "fail to discern how complicated this assignment of country" is for writers from diasporic and

¹⁷ Sami Tchak nuances this dichotomy between the local/universal by underscoring that even putatively universal literatures ultimately exist in and are products of specific national contexts, and conversely, that literatures that are situated in the specificity of "l'ancrage identitaire" also bear testament to "l'universalité de la condition humaine" (50). See his book *La couleur de l'écrivain*, especially the chapter "Mal de nation" for more on this.

¹⁸ As Eileen Julien writes in her essay "The Extroverted African Novel," "regardless of its extraordinary vigor in its former colonies, the novel retains its association with European modernity," such that in the global literary stage, the novel is "perceived" or "assumed" to be of European nature and origin (676).

immigrant backgrounds (142). This is certainly the case for an author like Laferrière – a product of multiple exiles and migrations,¹⁹ he straddles multiple and complex identities simultaneously. Time and again in his interviews, Laferrière has expressed a sense of migrant, errant and plural identities that permits him to inhabit multiple geographic, mental and emotional spaces at once, such that he can “profiter des services que mes différents hôtes mettent à ma disposition.” (*J’écris comme je vis* 116). Influenced equally by his childhood in Haiti, his exile in North America, and his “retour au pays natal,” Laferrière has moreover expressed an “Americanness,” which as Bonnie Thomas notes, “offers a new way of conceptualising identity that focuses less on one’s specific roots and more on the interconnections that exist across the Americas” (267). For Laferrière, as for Badiou, “the real question” is thus one not of an abstract respect for difference, but one of “recognizing the same” (Badiou 25). Resonant with the Glissantian rhizomic logic of the Tout-Monde, this emphasis on trans-American connections and relations is doubly useful in its capacity to both delegitimize the quest for origins, and to allow the author to productively inhabit multiple identities and spaces at once. Indeed, Laferrière affirms that “en acceptant d’être du continent américain, je ne me considère plus comme un immigré, ni un exilé. Je suis devenu tout simplement un homme du Nouveau Monde.” While exile destabilizes identity by designating the exiled as outsiders, this trans-American identity contrarily allows him to be comfortable in all the multiple identities and cultural locations that he (and his works) occupy, to feel “partout chez moi” (*J’écris comme je vis* 116). After all, as Glissant writes, “Si l’exil peut effriter le sens de l’identité, la pensée de l’errance, qui est pensée du relatif, le renforce le plus souvent” (32). As if to heed Spivak’s

¹⁹Born in Port-au-Prince, Laferrière spent part of his childhood with his grandmother in Petit-Goâve, a period that he evokes with tenderness in his works including *L’Odeur du café* (1991), before returning to Port-au-Prince and his eventual exile in Montréal. He has since migrated between the Americas, returning to Haiti, and living between Montréal, New York and Miami as he rose to literary fame in both the Anglophone and French literary world.

warning that “nation cannot be taken for granted” (71), Laferrière’s “American approach” to identity (Thomas) compels us develop new conceptions of belonging and its relation to nation and other geo-spatial markers.

Coming to terms with Laferrière’s work independent of national determinisms becomes particularly important in the context of predatory capitalism and unequal global market forces, which assign hierarchies to literatures as a function of their place of origin. As many critics have noted,²⁰ coercive process of circulation and globalization grant visibility to literatures of some national contexts over others, such that what one might call Japanese, or Indian, or Haitian literature does not enjoy the same status in the world literary stage as say French, German or Russian literatures, national contexts that are “héritiers de grandes traditions littéraires à l’intérieur d’une ‘civilisation de l’écriture’” (Tchak 53). These asymmetries in national literary contexts in turn shape the recognition and prestige granted to authors on the world literary stage. As Dominique Chancé writes in her introduction to *L’Auteur en souffrance* (2000): “on ne serait pas auteur dans [...la] littérature écrite aux Antilles, comme on l’est en France ou en Allemagne, pays qui peuvent se prévaloir de littératures nationales reconnus” (2). In this context, where extra-literary forces shape the status of authors and their literary productions, linking nation and literature becomes particularly disadvantageous to authors writing from or associated with national literary contexts of lesser renown. As a black, Haitian-born author, Laferrière is keenly aware of his own position of writing from “pays dominé” (Chamoiseau),²¹ displaying a frustration with the

²⁰See Eileen Julien’s seminal essay “The Extroverted African Novel.” *The Novel*. Ed. Franco Moretti. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 667–700. See also Gikandi, Simon. “Realism, Romance, and the Problem of African Literary History.” *Modern Language Quarterly*. Vol. 73, no. 3, 2012, pp. 309-328.

²¹ In this work of autobiographical fiction, *Écrire en pays dominé* (1996), Patrick Chamoiseau interrogates the relation between history (the history of the Antilles specifically), language (the relative status of French and Créole), and their influence on Antillean literature in general and his own writing in particular.

tendency to be read, sold and marketed as Haitian: “How do I write a book that would not be Haitian but a book written by a Haitian?,” he asks rhetorically during a round table (qtd. in Thomas 267). Indeed, Laferrière is acutely attentive to this link between nation and literature, as he frequently calls it into question in both his literary (which we will discuss more in depth-below) and non-literary work. In multiple interviews and roundtable discussions, he has called for his readers and critics to divorce the link between origins and literary creation, proclaiming that “les seuls adjectifs acceptables” in categorizing an author are those of “‘bon écrivain’” or “‘mauvais écrivain,’” expressing his own preference for the former. (*J’écris* 104). Further, he co-signed “Pour une ‘littérature-monde’ en français,” a literary manifesto published in *Le Monde*, which called for the “Fin de la ‘francophonie’, et naissance d’une littérature-monde en français.” As one of its 44 signatories, he denounced the “impérialisme culturel” of French literature from “le centre,” which marginalizes “les talents venus de la ‘périphérie’” as a “variante exotique tout juste tolérée.” Criticizing the label “francophone” attached to French writers of the ‘outre-France,’ the manifesto denounces the very act of classification as one of marginalization, instead affirming the importance of “la langue libérée de son pacte exclusif avec la nation” and advocating for “l’émergence d’une littérature-monde en langue française consciemment affirmée, ouverte sur le monde, transnationale.” In light of this, it becomes evident that labeling authors as a function of their race, class and other denominations itself becomes tantamount to an act of domination (or legitimation), not only shaping the status of an author in the world literary stage, but also influencing the reading, reception and consecration of their texts.

In addition to impacting the literary position of the author, it is important to further recognize, to echo Chancé, that there are “répercussions stylistiques et littéraire d’une situation politique et institutionnelle particulières” (2). In other words, writing from a position of domination

impacts not only an author's status in the world literary stage, but also his poetics. Chancé contends that as a result of institutional devaluation, a sense of auto-derision characterizes the writing of Antillean authors such that "l'auteur des œuvres écrites aux Antilles, en particulier de romans, se-définit lui-même d'une manière paradoxale, comme une figure défaillante" (2). Although Chancé makes this argument with respect to Antillean authors, we need only to take a look at Laferrière's literary corpus to recognize its applicability to this not-strictly-Haitian but trans-American author. Indeed, Laferrière's literary corpus is haunted by writer-figures who portray themselves in intentionally self-derisive terms. Idle figures, these writer-protagonists barely write or pretend to write. In fact, these figures represent themselves as, to borrow Chamoiseau's terms, "marqueurs de paroles" (1994)²² rather than as veritable *auteurs* with creative authority. They position themselves as ethnographers of sorts, who do not so much write, as they observe and report on the societies that they live in (Chancé 2). This is certainly the case in Laferrière's first novel, *Comment faire l'amour avec un nègre sans se fatiguer*. The protagonist is a writer who displays a certain reticence in positioning himself as an author. This meandering figure presents himself as doing everything but write – a black writer living with his idle philosopher friend in a dingy apartment in Montréal,²³ he spends most of his time philosophizing and seducing women. This self-derisory

²² Chamoiseau offers his clearest articulation of this concept in "Que faire de la parole," an essay in the collection *Ecrire la parole de nuit : la nouvelle littérature antillaise : nouvelles, poèmes et réflexions poétiques* (1994). In a colonial world order of "francisation," Chamoiseau reflects on the role of the writer in preserving and revitalizing creole language and its tradition of orality that form the basis of Antillean cultural, linguistic and storytelling practices. The responsibility for this lies with the writer, Chamoiseau argues, who must act as a "marquer de parole." In his role as "marqueur," the writer serves as kind of ethnographer, who observes and documents Antillean society and its practices, drawing inspiration from the speech of the "conteur" to capture the sonority and rhythms of its language. The "marquer de parole" thus bears the heavy burden of ensuring the continuity of creole orality in the face of its colonial devalorization.

²³ The writer-figures in Laferrière's novels often closely resemble the author himself. In fact, his first novel is inspired by his life in Montréal: its narrator is a black writer who, reminiscent of Laferrière's own *parcours* soon after his move to Canada, struggles to write his first novel. Following long days spent

portrait of the writer-protagonist closely aligns with his racial identity as a black man. Brandishing an outwardly cavalier, even irreverent attitude towards the act of authorship, he is an “ante-écrivain” (Chancé 3), who instead fashions himself as a “dagueur nègre consciencieux et professionnel” (17). While not writing, he spends his time seducing “les filles Wasp,” sexual escapades that he in turn recounts in a novel entitled *Le Paradis du dagueur nègre*, which closely resembles the one that we are reading.²⁴ The resulting novel and novel within the novel thus portray the woes of a struggling black writer, as much as they stage stereotypes about race and sexuality.

A biting critique aimed at racist discourses of Anglo-Saxon society, the novel reproduces many of the dehumanizing stereotypes about black male sexuality that it critiques. Racial tropes are in fact the very basis of the novel, starting with its very title. Jarringly provocative, it repeats the construction of the black male Other as “grand baiseur” with a sexual organ of proportions that can fatigue, tellingly using the taboo “nègre” instead of “noir.” The novel that ensues is just as provocative as its title. In parallel projects, both author²⁵/narrator²⁶ and author-protagonist²⁷ construct the protagonist in their respective novels in hyper-sexualized terms – describing them(selves) variously as “nègre grand baiseur” and “nègre animal, primitif, barbare, qui ne pense

working disparate jobs, the book written on his Remington typewriter offered Laferrière, like it does for his protagonist, a way out of poverty.

²⁴ The novel’s structure involves a complex mise-en-abyme form as its narrator recounts his experience writing a book within a book, with the latter in turn recounting this experience of authorship. Add to this another layer of autobiographical mise-en-abyme, as the novel’s author is, like the narrators within, himself a black author who writes about writing. Fact and fiction thus blur within the novel’s fictional universe, as do its many layers of narrative.

²⁵ By author I mean the writer of *Comment faire l’amour avec un nègre sans se fatiguer*, namely, Laferrière.

²⁶ By narrator I mean the writer of the novel within the novel, *Le Paradis du dagueur nègre*. Here, I group together the author’s and narrator’s project not to conflate the writer with the intra-diegetic storyteller. Instead, this erasure of distinction between author and narrator is a necessary one, as the story that Laferrière tells in *Comment faire l’amour* about the narrator writing *Le Paradis du dagueur nègre* intertwines inseparably with the one that the narrator himself tells about his own protagonist in *Le Paradis du dagueur nègre* about a writer-seducer.

²⁷ The author-protagonist is the character whose sexual encounters that the author/narrator depict in their respective novels.

qu'à baiser" (49), the protagonist of both the novel and novel within the novel are in perpetual conquest of white women. The narrator goes on to preemptively counter accusations that he "tout simplement reprend le mythe du Nègre Grand Baiseur," explaining instead that there is something more subversive in this project. By constructing their protagonists in the image of dehumanizing stereotypes, both author and narrator seek to advance their own transgressive agendas. The author-protagonist, for his part, adopts the myth of the "nègre grand baiseur" and puts it in service of his literally self-gratifying mission, namely, to woo white women. As Maria Arentsen puts it, "il l'accepte [le mythe] et se sert des règles du jeu pour en tirer profit" (98). But beyond a fulfillment of personal fantasies, exploiting this trope of hypersexual black masculinity further becomes a way for the protagonist to disrupt dominant power structures. As the narrator explains: "Je pense que le couple Nègre / Blanche est pire qu'une bombe [...] Pourquoi ? Parce que la sexualité est avant tout affaire de fantasmes et le fantasme accouplant le Nègre avec la Blanche est l'un des plus explosifs qui soit" (134). This act of sexual coupling between black man and white woman represents a symbolic act of protest in and of itself for the narrator/protagonist, because of the threat that it presents to the white patriarchal dream of racial purity. The narrator in fact posits his carnal encounters with white women as amounting to "le meurtre du Blanc" (134). By disrupting the very myth of purity upon which white supremacy was founded, interracial sexual union therefore presents the prospect of white patriarchal society's symbolic demise.²⁸ Even further, the sexual conquest of white women represents a means for the author-protagonist to "grimper

²⁸ The myth of white racial purity underpinned Anglophone as much as Francophone colonial thought, serving as an ideological current that affirmed white racial superiority and concurrently justified white colonial domination of indigenous peoples. Central to this myth was a fear of miscegenation, which threatened this idea of a pure, white race. The postcolonial ideas of hybridity, *creolité* and *métissage* developed in part as a response to this racist myth. Writers and philosophers like Glissant, Chamoiseau, Spivak, Condé and Bhabha have posited that there is no pure, originary self, because heterogeneity characterizes every reality, including that of the colonizer. For more on this, see Homi Bhabha's *The Location of Culture* (1994), especially the chapter "The commitment to theory."

l'échelle judéo-chrétienne," even to invert it (140). To be served by "ce qu'elle [la race blanche] a de plus sacré" – the white woman – and to render her "esclave d'un nègre" (50) signifies for him a carnivalesque inversion of traditional hierarchies. In these ways, the narrator/protagonist paradoxically puts to use Anglo-Saxon society's very stereotypes in his struggle against the hegemonic socio-sexual order.

For Laferrière, exploiting these stereotypes serves as a way to subject them to ideological critique. Indeed, Laferrière draws on received notions of race and sex in the novel not to reinscribe, but to contest age-old stereotypes regarding blackness and its relationship to sexuality. How does the author enact this paradoxical mode of intertextuality with racist discourses? In other words, how does Laferrière reject stereotypes even as he reproduces them in his text? The answer to this lies in the ironic ways in which he deploys these tropes in the text. According to Linda Hutcheon, irony constitutes a "repetition with critical distance," such that ironic discourses rely on the very codes that they critique (*A Theory of Parody* 6). In this sense, irony serves as a privileged technique of self-reflexivity in the novel's examinations of race, sexuality and authorship because of its capacity to call attention, through such repetition, to its own textuality. In the novel's universe, irony operates through both its "semantic" and "pragmatic" functions, which Hutcheon describes as the two primary roles that ironic discourses perform. The function that irony is generally known for is the former one, namely, its capacity to signal semantic inversion. So well-known that it has even come to stand in as its definition, this inversion of meaning performed by irony relies on the reader to interpret an author's enunciation as antiphrasis. Thanks, however, to theoreticians like Wayne Booth²⁹ and Linda Hutcheon, we now do not limit irony to a simple antithetical function.

²⁹ Booth, Wayne C. *A Rhetoric of Irony*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1974.

Beyond this, Hutcheon explains that irony consists in “*something other than the said*,” “but also something in addition to the unsaid” (18). Thus, beyond inverting meaning, irony often necessitates us to draw inferences and conclusions *beyond* what is and what is not on the page. What helps us make such inferences is related to irony’s second function, which Hutcheon terms “évaluation pragmatique” (142). If irony, as Hutcheon describes, has an “edge” or “bite” to it, it is because it is “*toujours aux dépens de quelqu'un ou de quelque chose*” (144). In a pragmatic sense, then, irony functions as negative evaluation (Hutcheon) – it ridicules, denigrates or make a laughingstock out of its “cible.” The novel draws on these complex ways in which irony functions in order to not only create a critical distance from but also deride and transform the very racialized tropes that it repeats. Tellingly, while the novel’s title fashions what is to come as a sort of how-to manual, the rest of the novel has nothing to do with sexual pedagogy. Instead, it enacts a merciless mockery of stereotypes constructed based on mythical conceptions of the black man as “*nègre animal, primitif, barbare, qui ne pense qu’à baiser*” (*Comment faire* 49). Irony thus becomes a quintessential technique of critique in *Comment faire l’amour*, a text that plays off of and with familiar racial stereotypes in order to poke fun at them.

The novel in fact situates irony at the core of its resistance to Anglo-Saxon attitudes towards black male sexuality, as it makes a laughingstock out of well-worn racist tropes and those that perpetuate them. In many instances in the novel’s universe, it is white women – or as the narrator terms it, “*les filles Wasp [White Anglo-Saxon Protestant]*” – who embody and articulate white society’s assumptions about black men. In fact, in what constitutes a self-reflexive articulation of Laferrière own project, the narrator remarks that “*il n’y a pratiquement, pas de femmes dans ce roman. Mais des types. Il y a des Nègres et des Blanches.*” (160) These white

female types often become the “cible” of irony in the text,³⁰ particularly in the critique that it mounts against Anglo-Saxon society’s presumptions about black sexuality. This becomes evident over the course of a short conversation that plays out between the narrator and a woman that he meets at a bar whom he christens “Miz Punk.” The latter subjects the narrator to an interrogation about his origins, which ensues as such:

— Tu viens d’où, toi ?

— Harlem.

— Harlem ! J’adore Harlem. [...]

Miz Punk est survoltée.

— C’est plein de crimes ?

— On fait ce qu’on peut.

— Il paraît que personne ne va au-delà de dix-sept ans ? On meurt avant ? Est-ce vrai ?

— Sûr. J’ai quinze ans (134).

The text, punctuated by the narrator’s tongue-in-cheek responses, not only exposition the pre-conceived notions that inform Miz Punk’s worldview, but also highlight the power of irony in the face of her assumptions. The narrator’s response to his interlocutor’s inquiry about his origins is structured by the knowledge that any answer will do, as long as it confirms Miz Punk’s stereotypically white worldviews: although a local of Montreal, the narrator just as easily passes for a native of Harlem, a neighborhood that is quintessentially black in the white imaginary. On

³⁰ Some critics have chastised both the lack of black women characters in the novel and the presence of what many have viewed as stock feminine types. Some critics have seen in the instrumentalization of these reductive female tropes an exploitation of one marginalized group (women) in service of another (black men). See Saint-Martin, Lori. “Une oppression peut en cacher une autre : Antiracisme et sexisme dans *Comment faire l’amour avec un Nègre sans se fatiguer* de Dany Laferrière.” *Voix et Images*. Vol. 36, no. 2, 2011, pp. 53–67. For a counterpoint to these critics, see Mayr, Suzette. “Absent Black Women in Dany Laferrière’s *How to Make Love to a Negro*.” *Canadian literature*. Vol 188, 2006, pp. 31–45.

the one hand, his ironic response problematizes the oft-played out curiosity that the white gaze sustains towards the origins of a person of color, one that implicitly assumes the latter to be an outsider, to be *not-from-here*. On the other hand, the substitution of Montreal with Harlem further signals to what extent the black Other is himself interchangeable in white society, like the “meuble” that the *Code Noir* decreed him to be.³¹ Despite Miz Punk’s evident ignorance, the narrator does not deny or correct his interlocutor. By absurdly declaring himself to be fifteen years old, he instead confirms Miz Punk’s ludicrous belief about the short life expectancy for the inhabitants of Harlem, a notion that is in turn informed by a host of hegemonic assumptions about the Black Other’s susceptibility to violence and crime. On a superficial level, the ludicrous nature of these response suggests that the narrator far from means what he says. However, beyond signaling to the reader to not take what he says at face value, his ironic enouncements further allow him to convey “something other than and beyond” what is said. In addition to rendering his interlocutor a laugh-worthy, the narrator’s ironic engagement with Miz Punk also subjects her assumptions to critique. Indeed, the narrator’s antiphrasis here leads into irony’s negative evaluative function: his ironic treatment of Miz Punk’s assumptions allows him to poke fun at her, to signal that her understanding of race is meant to be laughed at, not taken seriously. Rather than contradict or correct her, by thus meeting her ignorance with his irony, the narrator transforms Miz Punk into an at-once laughable and pathetic objection of derision. Through these comically ironic declarations, he expositions Western society’s parochial ignorance and complicity, which sustain limited understandings of and relations with racial difference.

³¹ With the novel’s epigraph citing article 1 from the *Code Noir* (1685), “Le nègre est un meuble,” Laferrière firmly inscribes the novel into a historical discourse in which the Black Other has been objectified – as much through stereotypes as through legal decree.

What further becomes evident throughout the novel is that the mechanism through which Laferrière subjects racist stereotypes to critical judgment is quite paradoxical. The author exaggerates clichés surrounding black masculinity and sexuality to a point of such absurdity that they become the subject of scathing ideological critique in the novel. We see this play out during several remarkable episodes in the novel, when the hypersexualized black protagonist works stereotypes about black sexuality to such extremes that they cease to have any meaning or value. One vivid instance of this occurs when Miz Littérature, one of the protagonist's sexual conquests (whom he describes as a "fille [Wasp] de l'université McGill" (25)) compares his lover's alimentary appetite to his sexual one: watching him eat, she remarks that "ça me fascine de te voir manger. Tu fais ça avec une telle passion. Je n'ai jamais vu personne d'autre le faire ainsi" (31). This "passion" that Miz Littérature attributes to her lover's appetite conflates sexual and alimentary desire in ways that are resonant with white colonialist and imperialist discourses, which have dehumanized black masculinity by reducing it to primal instincts and appetites.³² This fascination with which Miz Littérature regards the narrator exemplifies the "ambivalence" of stereotyping discourses, which according to Homi Bhabha, render otherness at once an object of "derision," but also an "object of desire." Testament to this thinly veiled doubleness of the white gaze (Bhabha 67), Miz Littérature watches the protagonist with a sense of bewitchment, as she does with one of horror, as the sight of her black lover's hunger inspires in her simultaneously both desire and derision.³³

³² In fact, the protagonist later tellingly reveals – "Miz Littérature dit que je fais l'amour comme je mange" (46).

³³ It is interesting to note that implicit in the sentiment of fascination is a sense of doubleness – historical usage of the term suggests that the term has meant "troubler, égarer par sorcellerie," as much it has been employed to mean "attirer, captiver" ("Fasciner").

Met with this objectifying white gaze, which perpetuates the myth of the black man as reigned by instinct and its base functions, the protagonist proceeds to formulate a response that is so excessive that it gives us pause. He writes : “Je peux lui dire que je mange de la chair humaine, que quelque part dans mon code génétique se trouve inscrit ce désir de manger de la chair blanche, que mes nuits sont hantées par ses seins, ses hanches, ses cuisses”³⁴ (31). The narrator here employs rhetorical exaggeration to parody the trope of the “nègre grand baiseur,” as he gives his carnal appetite cannibalistic dimensions. In transposing black desire for white flesh from the sexual to the alimentary realm, this hyperbolic construction does not simply *repeat* Miz Littérature’s logic, but *literalizes* it in a move that demonstrates its very absurdity. Even further, by exaggerating the misguided beliefs guiding white thinking surrounding black sexuality, Laferrière makes a laughingstock out of both stereotypes and its purveyors. The narrator pursues his hypothetical response to Miz Littérature’s comment about his appetite in the follows manner: “vraiment, je te jure, je peux lui dire ça et elle comprendra [...] Tu t’imagines, elle étudie à McGill (une vénérable institution où la bourgeoisie place ses enfants pour leur apprendre la clarté, l’analyse et le doute scientifique)” (31). Aimed at both white bourgeois institutions and those that operate within these them, this ironic comment signals clear evaluative intent by producing an ethos of ridicule. In fact, its derisory effect is hard to miss, as this “clarté, l’analyse et le doute scientifique” is precisely what Miz Littérature evidently lacks in having internalized myths about black otherness. Through

³⁴ While exaggeration and verbosity often characterize his private reflections about and against hegemonic discourse, a certain self-restraint, laconicism and self-censorship, which was evident in his interaction with Miz Punk, characterize the narrator’s “direct” engagement and conversations with purveyors of these discourses. If this is so, it is because the narrator is acutely aware that white society would not tolerate such explicit contestation of its hegemony. As the narrator explains, this is a luxury that he cannot afford : “si je me permets la moindre naïveté, ne serait-ce qu’une seconde, je suis un nègre mort. Littéralement. Je dois être une cible mouvante ; sinon, à la première émotion, ma peau ne vaudra pas cher” (31).

such ironic exaggeration and distortion, Laferrière thus introduces a profound sense of defamiliarization with familiar racial tropes, in a process that strips them of any normative value.

By means of his outrageous declarations on race and sex, Laferrière not only contests racist tropes, but also calls into question pre-existing ideas about Haitian literature in particular and postcolonial authorship in general. Instead of adopting the idiosyncratic *gravitas* that characterizes both the subject and tone of postcolonial writing, Laferrière writes about (seemingly) trivial topics like sex, and that too with a sense of irreverence that many have considered sacrilegious. His first novel was in fact a subject of controversy on multiple fronts. As Laferrière comments:

Les Haïtiens ne voulaient pas être associés à cette vulgarité. Ils ont détesté parce qu'un Haïtien doit parler de l'exil, des Duvalier, de politique, de la nostalgie du pays natal – et moi je parlais de sexe. Les Africains, eux, ont été choqués que je dise que l'Occident ne devait plus rien à l'Afrique [...] Les féministes étaient très contre aussi, parce que je disais qu'il fallait une trace de sang dans la relation homme-femme. Les Noirs américains n'aimaient pas non plus que je dise dans le livre que j'aurais bien aimé être Blanc. Ils n'ont pas vu l'ironie. Tout le monde avait son mot à dire! (qtd. in Thomas 272).

By deliberately exaggerating and uncompromisingly mocking various “types” – be it Blacks, Whites, Women, Africans, African Americans, or the numerous other groups that are frequent targets of his work – Laferrière *annoyed* as much as he *impressed* critics with his novelistic debut. Regardless of how critics received his work, one thing was clear: he was an *agent perturbateur*, who challenged the conventions of what and how a postcolonial author writes. We can venture further to argue that, beyond a disruptive force that irked and captivated his readership in equal measure, the irony that his critics missed points at something more subversive at work in his writing. Through it, he reconfigures prescriptive expectations about what Haitian literature should

be and do, as he departs from its characteristic sobriety to adopt a sense of levity in his writing. Even further, “the raw, freewheeling prose of this novel” (qtd. in Thomas 273) is aimed at shattering pre-received ideas as much about black authorship as it is about blackness. The expectation that the writing of black authors deal with urgent and violent “events” is not a novel one – it pervades both the popular cultural imaginary as it does the academic one as readers and pedagogues alike look to the *fictional* works of black authors as *pedagogical* sources with which to educate (often) white audiences about black cultural realities. However, in both its form and content, Laferrière’s very first novel explodes such notions about black authors as “insider informants.” As he relies on absurdity and excess, the novel not only mocks those in power, but also makes the obvious seem ridiculous in ways that refuse to subscribe to any pedagogic or ethnographic intent. By adopting an alternative mode of writing postcolonial literature – one that is more light-hearted than somber – Laferrière thus prompts a radical reimagination of the image of postcolonial writing and the role of black authors within it.

Laferrière’s Poetics of Irony

Despite Laferrière’s sustained and rigorous reflections on questions of authorship, why do so many of his protagonists hesitate or even outright refuse to call themselves authors? To echo Chancé, what prevents these “marqueurs de paroles” from writing, from being veritable authors (3)? More relevantly, perhaps, we must ask why Laferrière’s protagonists are the subjects of an auto-derision that denigrates or altogether erases their claim to authorship? In order to understand this disjuncture between authorial self-representation and reality, we turn to another one of Laferrière’s work, *Je suis un écrivain japonais*. The novel portrays a writer-figure that closely resembles that of *Comment faire l’amour avec un nègre sans se fatiguer*, as the protagonist of this

novel, like the former, is characteristically dismissive in his attitude towards writing and authorship. Having announced in an interview that he is writing a book – which bears the same name as the one we are reading – the protagonist perennially delays writing it. And yet, this yet-to-be-written book is the subject of intense mediatic attention because of its provocative title – a black writer, constructed in the author’s own image, explosively proclaims himself to be an “écrivain japonais.” By laying claim to seemingly absurd identitarian markers, this apparently outlandish declaration allows author and author-protagonist to ridicule common Western assumptions about identity and origins, through a poetics of irony that is by now familiar in Laferrière’s work.

While there exist for authors “multiple arenas and media of discursive self-representation” (683), for authors of *littérature mineure*, literary identity is often assumed and assigned. In his book *Postures littéraires: Mises en scène modernes de l’auteur* (2007), Jérôme Meizoz argues that an author’s literary posture – “la manière singulière d’occuper une position dans le champ littéraire” (18) – is a deliberate act of self-representation and -articulation. Elaborated self-reflexively through both an author’s poetics (“image de soi donnée dans et par le discours ou texte d’un auteur”) and extra-literary conduct (for example, through the way an author conducts herself/himself in literary situations like interviews or prize distributions), the literary postures an author adopts allows her/him to construct “une image de lui-même” (31). Western literary historiography, however, reserves this autonomy and agency to fashion a public self-image for the center. As Sami Tchak argues, through “une sorte de déterminisme thématique, ...[et] la racialisation des sujets” (51), Western literary institutions deny this capacity for self-representation to writers from peripheries. In the face of this denial of literary agency, Laferrière defines his identity as an author by means of his author-protagonists. These writer-figures act, much like

pseudonyms do, as “énonciateurs fictifs” (Meizoz 18) that allow Laferrière to construct and relay to his public a literary identity separate from his “état civil” (Meizoz 18). Assuming alter-egos of sorts by means of his writer-protagonists, Laferrière not only embellishes reality, but also engages in meta-reflections surrounding questions of authorship and the act of writing itself.

Ironically, however, the literary posture adopted by Laferrière’s writer-figures center around diminishing or even denying their position as authors. Like the protagonist of *Comment faire l’amour*, the writer-figure in *Je suis un écrivain japonais* is highly cynical about the act of authorship. Rather than be typecast as a certain kind of author, this author-protagonist refuses labels that link his writing with his biography, even going as far as to reject the label of author itself. Instead, he intentionally denigrates his role as a writer, describing himself as a mere “titreur,” who does nothing more than come up with flashy titles.³⁵ By adopting this cavalier attitude towards writing, the protagonist, and Laferrière by extension, desacralizes authorship itself and the prestige associated with it. The latter drives home this message through a scene that shows his protagonist negotiating a contract with his editor for the book within the book:

Quand on avance un titre qu'on aime bien, il faut y aller prudemment. Généralement, l’éditeur veut vous entendre sur le contenu. De quoi s'agit-il ? On pose encore de pareilles questions idiotes. Pas le genre de mon éditeur qui se détache un peu de sa table, sans cesser de sourire. J'en profite pour regarder quelques titres autour de moi. Rien de bon. J'ai donc lancé négligemment le mien par-dessus la pile de manuscrits. Quoi ? Je suis un écrivain

³⁵ In fact, the autobiographical quality of this epithet becomes hard to ignore as Laferrière himself rose to fame through his provocatively-titled novels (*Comment faire l’amour avec un nègre sans se fatiguer* and *Cette grenade dans la main du jeune nègre est-elle une arme ou un fruit?* (1993) are some of the most sensational among them). In what constitutes an act of auto-derisive self-representation, Laferrière compares his protagonist to Kurt Vonnegut Jr., whom he refers to as “Le plus rapide titreur d’Amérique” (12), thereby elaborating his own identity as a mere “titreur.”

japonais. Bref silence. Large sourire. Vendu ! On signe le contrat : 10 000 euros pour cinq petits mots (13).

Through this primal scene that shows the birth of the book, Laferrière knocks the *auteur* off the pedestal upon which Western literary institutions have placed him. Far from the divine originator of words and worlds that its etymology suggests, the *auteur* is not only a meek “titreur,” but even more crudely, a simple participant in an economic transaction who sells his title to its highest bidder. As the protagonist “négligemment” throws his manuscript upon a pile on his editor’s desk, it becomes evident that there is nothing deific or even serious about the work that an author does. Through this cynical attitude towards the act of writing, Laferrière demonstrates that both author and authorial creation are subject to the same unsavory market forces that determine all other economic transactions. By laying claims neither to the title of author and nor to the esteem associated with it, the narrator thereby exposes the more banal, even sinister tendencies reigning the literary marketplace, thereby desacralizing the aura of prestige associated with traditional conceptions of authorship. Ironically, then, if Laferrière’s author-protagonist “réussit à écrire mais sans prendre la posture d’écrivain,” (Chancé 5) it is not without prompting a radical interrogation of the notion of authorship itself.

In a further irony, the writer-protagonist becomes renowned as an author for a book that he has not (yet) written. In a literalization of author as a mere “titreur,” the “novel,” and its “writer” become widely famous for a book that exists in nothing but name. “Il n’y a pas de livre [...] c’est simplement un titre” (162), the author reiterates throughout the novel. In doing so, the author-protagonist adopts what we can call “la posture ‘Houellebecq’” – a term coined by Meizoz to define writers who engage in a “mise en scène publique de l’auteur à travers les fréquentes polémiques portant sur leur personne et leurs écrits” (19). Reminiscent of *enfants terribles* like

Houellebecq,³⁶ who have triggered controversy through their writing, the title of the novel stirs public interest and debate, which triggers a “mise en scène publique” (Meizoz 19) of the narrator’s identity and its relation to the act of authorship itself. When a black writer bearing no connection to Japan proclaims himself to be a Japanese author, the “book” sets off a whirlwind of debates about identity and national belonging. In the wake of this polemic catalyzed by the novel’s provocative title, the writer-protagonist is propelled to the mediatic limelight: he appears in numerous television shows and interviews, where he gains notoriety through his subversive take on the connections between race, nation and belonging. In demonstrating how the enterprise of authorship is inextricably linked to public acts of showmanship, Laferrière mounts an implicit critique against “l’existence publique de la littérature” in the modern age, to borrow the words of Meizoz. The latter argues that that in an era of “culture de masse and de spectacle” (19), the writer’s posture, originally a means for authors to signal their writerly originality (“la manière singulière d’occuper une position dans le champ littéraire” (18)), is increasingly predicated upon public image (“calqué sur les exigences de la publicité et de l’image” (19). Illustrating Meizoz’s principle of authorial posture as public “coquetterie” or “pose” (19), the author-protagonist becomes more of a television personality or a showman than he is a writer, thanks to the mediatic attention that overshadows the fact that the book that brought him fame does not, in fact, exist. Through this *mise-en-scène* of the hyper-mediatization of the figure of the author, Laferrière shows that what is intrinsic to an author and his text (identity) becomes meaningless, as what is extrinsic (attractive titles, the ability to provoke debate) takes precedence.

³⁶Houellebecq has frequently stirred controversy through both his public appearances and his writings, particularly his portrayal and comments on Islam, which critics have accused as racist and Islamophobic.

But how does a “titreur,” who insists on not writing, simultaneously proclaim to be “un écrivain japonais?” Such is the paradox that the novel presents. In fact, like the protagonist of *Comment faire l’amour*, the narrator of *Je suis un écrivain japonais* also repeats stereotypes that he rejects and ridicules. The novel is ample in clichés about Japan. This is evident from the fact that the protagonist operates under a host of stereotypical assumptions about Japanese people – that they all look alike, that Japanese tourists are more interested in taking photos rather than with engaging with the sites in front of them (see the chapter “Un œil froid” (144-145)), that there is no Japanese cuisine without fish (89). Tellingly, many titles of the novel’s “chapters” or sub-sections often bear no significant relationship to their contents, and instead exist only as a play on stereotypes about Japan that are common in the Western imaginary (“Le Japonais de la tour Eiffel,” “Un match de ping-pong,” “Vous aimez le sushi?,” to name a few). This tendency even carries over into the novel’s paratext: the frontispiece of the 2011 English translation of the novel consists of a figure with slanting eyes and a geisha’s ponytail that visibly reads as “Japanese.” Starting from the Orientalizing cover to its shocking title, Laferrière (much like his protagonist) generates interest in the text and invites readers into it by appealing to a (Western) desire for the sensational and the exotic.

However, much like the bait-and-switch we witnessed in *Comment faire l’amour*, the rest of *Je suis un écrivain japonais* too does not deliver what its cover page seems to promise. Instead, the novel uses its exaggerated clichés and its shocking title as a basis to enact a mockery of a host of hegemonic notions about identity and alterity. In a meta-reflection of his protagonist’s own strategy, Laferrière capitalizes on the curiosity provoked by a sensationalizing title to engage in a sustained critique of Western practices governing the reading of minor literature. Although

Barthes, and later Foucault³⁷ called for an end to this “culture courante qui est tyranniquement centrée sur l’auteur” (66), the “homme” and the “oeuvre” have remained privileged categories of literary interpretation. As we have already seen, this is particularly true when it concerns writers of minor literature, whose *fictional* texts Western readerships have often looked to in order to educate themselves about ‘Other’ or ‘Third World’ cultures. Having declared himself to be “un écrivain japonais,” Laferrière, like his protagonist, uses the rest of the novel as a pretext to mock precisely this Western insistence on reading his texts through the lens of his biography. Time and again in the novel, Laferrière’s writer-protagonist seeks to de-link the neat connections between literature and nation, reflecting Laferrière’s own repeated attempts to be seen as “un écrivain libre de toute catégorisation” (qtd. in *J’écris comme je vis* 121). But in a mise-en-abyme of Laferrière’s frustration with his readers who insist on assigning him labels, the protagonist’s engagement with questions of identity register a sense of futility. The latter’s attempt to reason with his readers becomes increasingly resigned, and even absurd – “Je [prends] la nationalité de mon lecteur,” ultimately culminates in his most illogical declaration yet – “je suis un écrivain japonais.”

It can be argued, though, that in claiming to be “un écrivain japonais,” author and author-protagonist implicate themselves in the very questions of identity that they reject. The protagonist’s lover Midori, in fact, points out this very contradiction when she signals the hypocrisy of writing a book that seems to exclusively to deal with identity, despite claiming that “je n’en ai rien à foutre de l’identité” (162). This kind of paradox is precisely the mechanism through which irony functions: it relies, for its existence, on the very codes and conventions that it ultimately seeks to separate itself from. But if ironic discourse inscribes, in Hutcheon’s words,

³⁷ See his “Qu’est-ce qu’un auteur,” originally a lecture that Foucault delivered in 1969 and has since been collected in the anthology *Dits et écrits*.

“mocked conventions onto itself, thereby guaranteeing their very existence” (Parody 75), then it is through irony’s ethos of mockery that a text simultaneously marks its distance from the codes that it repeats. Indeed, the author(-protagonist) troubles identitarian markers despite laying claim to them in his declaration that “je suis un écrivain japonais” by turning this subject into an object of derision and mockery. “Être un écrivain et un Caribéen ne fait de moi forcément un écrivain caribéen. Pourquoi veut-on toujours mélanger les choses ?” (23), the protagonist rhetorically asks as he light-heartedly derides his readers, thereby inviting them to reevaluate their normative assumptions. In fact, the very absurdity of the declaration suggests critical intent because the author(-protagonist) is neither “japonais,” nor an “écrivain” but in the protagonist’s own words, “un Noir, à Montréal, qui se prend pour un écrivain japonais” (161). Clearly, then, claiming Japanese authorship, while insisting in the same breath that “je n’en ai rien à foutre de l’identité” does not present a paradox nor suggest hypocrisy in the author(-protagonist’s) world-view. Far from it, his claim to Japanese authorship allows him to divorce the link between cultural production and identitarian categories and moreover, to recuperate agency in defining himself as an author. As he explains: “Je l’ai fait pour sortir précisément de ça, pour montrer qu’il n’y a pas de frontières... J’en avais marre des nationalismes culturels. Qui peut m’empêcher d’être un écrivain japonais? Personne” (162). Separating geography from authorship therefore means dissociating the “moi social” from the “moi créateur” (Meizoz 28) and in doing so, reclaiming the right to authorial self-representation.

Conclusion

Laferrière’s corpus, as humorous as it is complex, is thus rife with contradiction. A large body of his work prompts a radical interrogation of authorship and its relation to postcolonial identity, a process that ultimately puts front and center precisely what he seeks to reject, i.e., the

enduring fixation with the biographical origins of authors of minor literature. In fact, these works seek to construct an image of Laferrière as an author himself, through the kind of careful mise-en-scène of writer-protagonists that we saw in *Comment faire l'amour avec un nègre sans se fatiguer* and *Je suis un écrivain japonais*. In seeking to escape the determinisms of racial, linguistic, geographic and ethnic categories, these author figures reject any and all labels, even going as far as to reject the designation of “author” itself. Instead, they position themselves as carefree figures who barely write and are deeply irreverent towards the act of authorship. This cavalier façade that dismisses or even denigrates the act of writing, however, masks deep-seated anxieties about the ways in which literary institutions and readerships marginalize postcolonial authors by labeling and categorizing their work as a function of their identity denominations.

Where does this leave us in relation to the problem of identity politics that has preoccupied the field of Francophone literature, its authors and critics, for so long? Reminiscent of Badiou’s contention, identity politics for Laferrière constitutes yet another tool in the colonial toolkit, which work in service of the status quo. In Laferrière’s attitude, we can thus hear echoes of Badiou’s rejection of the ethics of the Other:

differences are what there is and since every truth is the coming-to-be of that which is not yet, so differences are then precisely what truths depose, or render insignificant. No light is [therefore] shed on any concrete situation by the notion of the ‘recognition of the Other’ (27).

Refusing the position that the Other should be named and categorized, Badiou’s “ethics of truths” transcend particularities that designate difference. Instead, it is in sameness – what is shared *across* difference – where true recognition of and respect for alterity lies. For Laferrière, this emphasis on what is shared across difference translates, in concrete terms, to an identity that is not singular, but

is instead founded in relation, in the interconnections among and between cultures and civilizations – in other words, in a certain “Americanness.”

And yet, what is paradoxical in Laferrière’s own ethics is that it is through the figure of the “ante-écrivain” that he explores and stages the challenges of being a postcolonial author in today’s global literary marketplace. Contradiction, however, cannot help but be a defining feature of writing for a *métis* writer like Laferrière, who lives and writes between the multiple cultures and diverse traditions of the Americas. It is in fact at the very center of his creolized universe, where disparate histories and traditions intercross. Rather than occult or simplify these contradictions, this chapter sought to tackle them head on. As a literary form that is itself defined by contradiction, irony thus inflects our understanding of the paradoxes in Laferrière’s work. Indeed, irony does not subsume the paradoxes in Laferrière’s work, but rather puts it front and center: it highlights the ways in which the author not only repeats but also amplifies the very racial tropes that he deforms, derides and transforms. In fact, irony not only places the “rieur” – the one doing the mocking – in close proximity with the “risible” – “l’objet dont on rit,” (Moura 33) – but also “strikes back” through its capacity for derision and ridicule. After all, as Catherine Kerbrat-Orecchioni writes, “ironiser, c’est toujours, d’une certaine manière, railler, disqualifier, tourner en dérision, se moquer de quelqu’un ou de quelque chose” (119). Not unlike in *Comment faire l’amour*, Laferrière’s ironic deployment of racial tropes in *Je suis un écrivain japonais* allows him to humor hegemonic discourse in the dual sense of the term – through playful repetition and absurd exaggeration of racial tropes, he establishes a certain proximity with them, while also turning them into objects of derision. These self-derisive author-protagonists that resort to ironic deployments of racial stereotypes not only mock the existence of these dominant discourses, but also challenge the ways in which these racial stereotypes in turn influence the Western perception of minority, especially,

black authors. While this chapter explored how ironic deployment of racial tropes works to destabilize the link between identity and authorship, the next chapter will keep this focus on writer-figures that write about writing, but shifts our attention to the ways in which humor that flies in the face of social decorum effects carnivalesque reversals of the status quo.

Chapter 2

Mabanckou's Carnavalesque World

Introduction

A prolific French author of Congolese birth, Alain Mabanckou moved to Paris to study business law, which he pursued alongside his literary engagements. With several manuscripts already complete before he left the Republic of Congo for France, he published his first work three years after his move, a collection of poems entitled *Au jour le jour* (1993). Mabanckou's success in the literary world began early in his career, as his very first novel *Bleu-Blanc-Rouge* (1998), published by the renowned publishing house Présence africaine, won the Grand prix littéraire d'Afrique noire. He has since authored several works, continuing to win accolades. Despite this formal recognition, transgression characterizes Alain Mabanckou's literary career. He pioneered, for example, the "littérature-monde" movement. In 2006, Mabanckou published an article in *Le Monde* called "*La Francophonie, oui... Le ghetto, non !*," in which he denounced the marginalizing label "littérature francophone," because of its tendency to ghettoize French literature originating outside of the Hexagon. One year later, the signatories of the manifesto, including Mabanckou, collectively published the "Pour une 'littérature-monde' en français" (2007) based on Mabanckou's original article. Mabanckou has thus led a literary movement that challenged the boundaries of French literature, and along with it, the image of France as the center of French cultural production.

Similarly, Mabanckou's fiction flies in the face of convention. Transgressing the grim image of African literature, Mabanckou's novels are humorous in both form and content: they abound in wordplay and absurd comedy, and they mock the colonizer as much as the colonized. With good reason, critics call him the "Samuel Beckett of Africa." His novels thwart the basic

conventions of writing itself, as they often contain little to no punctuation other than the occasional commas – a deliberate discursive gesture, through which Mabanckou seeks to capture the sonority of Congolese French that his characters often speak. Owing to these formal and stylistic features, the literary worlds that Mabanckou creates inherit a sense of disorder and chaos, a fact that he self-reflexively articulates through the writer-protagonist of his novel *Black Bazaar* (2009): “j’écris comme je vis, je passe du coq à l’âne et de l’âne au coq” (19). In the present chapter, we will retain our focus on the figure of self-effacing writers writing about writing, as we turn our attention to Mabanckou’s novels – his work often features writer-protagonists who re-use “prescriptive discourses of Africanness, Frenchness and blackness” in order to contest and delegitimize them (Ayo 160). Although an omnipresent figure in Mabanckou’s canon, including in *Bleu-blanc-rouge* (1998) and *Black Bazaar* (2009) – to name a few of his best-known works in which the novel’s protagonist is also its writer – our discussion will center on *Verre Cassé* (2005) and *Mémoires de porc-épic* (2006) for two reasons. The first involves a purely geo-spatial consideration – we can divide Mabanckou’s work, like Lafférière’s, into a “cycle nord-américain” and a “cycle africain.” In his novels like *Black Bazaar* and *Bleu-blanc-rouge*, arguably representative of the former canon, Mabanckou examines the gaze that (formerly) colonizing and colonized groups cast within and upon each other, and in doing so, he constructs discordant and diverse representations of Afro-Caribbean migrant identities in France. However, since we focused on novels that stage the Franco-American space in Chapter 1, the present chapter will take us East and focus on Mabanckou’s “cycle africain.” Through an in-depth analysis of *Verre Cassé* and *Mémoires de porc-épic*, we will pay close attention to how Mabanckou dramatizes the African, particularly Congolese milieu. Another reason why I choose these two works concerns the framework that I will use to study Mabanckou’s work. Having focused on irony, a literary device of humor *par*

excellence, this chapter will turn our attention to the trope of carnivalesque humor. By framing this discussion through the lens of the carnivalesque, I ask what happens when self-reflexive and self-respecting author-protagonists employ scatologic imagery to relate the existence of black bodies in postcolonial society.

In my analysis of carnivalesque tropes in these two novels, I will rely on Mikhail Bakhtin's thought, particularly his work on the influence of medieval folk culture and humor on Renaissance literature. His writing on Rabelais, Cervantes and Shakespeare transformed how we understand scatological humor in Renaissance literature. While classical canons relegated the bawdy comedy of these 16th-century writers to the realm of the nonliterary, theorists like Bakhtin have shown that these authors in fact transgressed literary norms of their time to revolutionize how we understand literary humor and the "demands of literary taste" (Bakhtin 3) itself. Today, the carnivalesque conventions that these Renaissance writers popularized have become commonplace in cultural life, continuing to provide rich material for writers even today. Such is no doubt the case for Alain Mabanckou. Transgressing both literary convention and borders, Mabanckou draws equally from Eastern and Western literary traditions. In this chapter, we will explore the influences of both in Mabanckou's work – we will pay attention to how Mabanckou borrows from medieval folk comedy that we today quintessentially associate with Rabelaisian humor, as well as from African folklore, giving rise to Mabanckou's unique brand of humor.

To frame this analysis, I use Bakhtin's notion of the *carnavalesque*, a term that he coined in *Dostoevsky's Problem of Poetics* (1963) and later elaborated in *Rabelais and His World* (1965), to explain the "undestroyable nonofficial" (8), carnival-like atmosphere of the imagery in Rabelais' *Gargantua and Pantagruel*. Bakhtin argues in *Rabelais and His World* that to understand Rabelais, we must look to the legacy of the medieval carnival and its "tradition of folk humor" (3).

He explains that medieval carnivals, characterized by festivities, feasts, laughter and “an escape from the usual official way of life” (8), provided Rabelais with a wealth of literary images, which had a major influence on his non-dogmatic approach to literature. Drawing from language and imagery of the medieval carnival, anti-conventional Renaissance writers like Rabelais depicted the human body in resolutely excretory terms, giving rise to a humorous and subversive literary mode that Bakhtin termed the “carnavalesque.” A sensuous literary language, it expresses quotidian phenomena, from the most banal to the grand, in corporeal terms associated with the genitals – in carnivalesque idiom, bodily functions like urination, defecation and copulation explain everything from the etymology of Paris to the birth of the River Rhône.³⁸

Bakhtin’s analysis of the carnivalesque as a literary phenomenon will, in turn, guide my analysis of the representations of the black body in Alain Mabanckou’s oeuvres. It will provide the vocabulary necessary to understand Mabanckou’s works in which introspective, mature protagonists takes jabs at the primitive and base functions of the corporal body. Through the two works that I study in depth in this chapter, I will see how Mabanckou depicts the black body’s suffering in all its carnivalesque drudgery: from the pathetically alcoholic black writer wallowing in his own excrement in *Verre Cassé* to the grotesque violence of an outcast in *Mémoires de porc-épic* who seeks revenge upon his community through his animal double, Mabanckou depicts the tragedy of the black body and subjectivity in ambivalently ludic terms. Mabanckou, I argue, degrades and renders grotesque the black body through carnivalesque imagery that is at once debasing yet regenerative. Through this discussion, I show that Mabanckou coopts some of the

³⁸ In Rabelais’ carnivalesque world, Paris acquires its name (Par Ris) as survivors laugh controllably after Gargantua drowns the irksome crowds of Paris in his urine. Rabelais depicts the River Rhône as born not of geographical phenomenon involving rainwater and tributaries, but out of the body’s excretory functions: Gargantua urinates for 3 months, 7 days, 13 hours and 46 minutes to give birth to the Rhône.

most dehumanizing discourses about the black Other as base, bestial and ruled by instinct through his carnivalesque humor, but in so doing, pushes back against social norms to create a more just social order for his suffering heroes. We will see that the result is an ambivalent one – Mabanckou frees the suffering black body from the chains of conventional society precisely as these bodies' transgressions situate them at their margins.

The excreting black body in *Verre Cassé*

Verre Cassé (2005) stands out for its depiction of the black body in paradigmatically carnivalesque terms. In this novel, Mabanckou portrays the black Other's suffering in its most ludic aspect. The novel is narrated by a writer-protagonist who spends ample amounts of time at a bar drinking and documenting the lives of the people around him. A typical character type in Mabanckou's works, the barfly-writer returns in Mabanckou's popular novel *Black Bazar*³⁹ (2009) in the guise of its protagonist "fessologue," who taxonomizes women's buttocks and chronicles the permanents of an Afro-Cuban bar frequented by African immigrants (including Mabanckou himself).⁴⁰ If in *Black Bazar*, Mabanckou's image of a heterogenous, immigrant Paris – a "black bazar" – contests a stereotypical image of France and its history of a white Gaullist past, Mabanckou situates *Verre Cassé* within the African continent, Congo specifically, yet brings the Hexagon into conversation. Although tragedy and alcoholism plague the lives of the people that frequent a failing dive in Brazzaville humorously named "Le crédit a voyage," the novel's eponymous writer-protagonist and narrator Verre Cassé documents the lives of barflies like himself with a sense of levity that infuses humor into accounts of pathos. An amateur writer, reader

³⁹ *Black Bazar* appeared in the twenty best book sales in France (De Souza 103).

⁴⁰ I had the opportunity to speak with the owner of the Parisian bar called Le Jip's, which provided the real-life setting for the fictionalized worlds in Mabanckou's novels, including *Black Bazar*. He explained that Mabanckou is a beloved patron of the bar, who was often seen reading and writing there.

and foregone alcoholic, Verre Cassé is a former teacher whose marriage and career both come to a disgraceful end due to his drinking, and he thereafter practically lives in the bar that anchor the novel's events. Afraid that "Le crédit a voyagé disparaisse un jour comme ça" (VC 11), its proprietor L'Escargot entêté commissions Verre Cassé to write a book about the bar and the lives of its frequent clientele.⁴¹ All drunkards and alcoholics like Verre Cassé himself, the barflies of Le crédit a voyagé narrate gruesome life stories of pain and suffering, staking their claim to a place in Verre Cassé's novel. As he records accounts of pain, rape, humiliation and infidelity, Verre Cassé reveals his own life story, an equally sordid one. The present, a saga of Verre Cassé's degeneracy and drunkenness, intertwine with memories of his past, as his mother's alcoholism and suicide constantly haunt him. *Verre Cassé* – at once the novel and the novel within the novel – is a product of the eponymous writer-protagonist's labor, who presents a pastiche of the tragic life stories of characters like le type à Pampers and others including Verre Cassé himself, all social pariahs who recount miserable tales of humiliation. If by sublime, we mean that which inspires awe due to its grandeur, these accounts of intense suffering and depravation threaten to devolve into abstraction, if not for the novel's humor that renders it comprehensible. Neither purely ludic nor purely tragic, Mabanckou's text makes wide use of carnival imagery and idiom in portraying its eccentric, self-deprecating characters – he depicts suffering as a function of practical, lower-order bodily realities like defecation, urination and copulation, expressed in familiar 'marketplace' speech. In this sense, the mundane intertwines with the chaotic and the sublime, and pathos goes hand-in-hand with the ludic in comically self-effacing tales of suffering. This simultaneity of

⁴¹ In his article "Sarkozy, Mabanckou, and Notes from the Bar: Alain Mabanckou's *Verre cassé*", John Walsh argues that Mabanckou's challenges the cliché of African culture as one of orality in the novel. He points to L'Escargot entêté's insistence on remembering the bar's legacy through a written account of it as evidence of Mabanckou's frustration with "the privileged place granted to the oral tradition" and his "resolute [...] willingness to move beyond the cliché" (130).

paradoxical textual modes and moods becomes a creator of meaning, helping better convey the agonies of the black body by grounding it in its very quotidian. Just as in the carnival, when lax social regulations (temporarily) suspend hierarchies of everyday life — “their solemnities, pieties and etiquettes, as well as all ready-made truths” (Bakhtine 22) – Mabanckou’s carnivalesque text too upends social and textual conventions. The novel, much like its characters, fly in the face of established (literary and grammatical) decorum – it consists of abusive language, profanity and informal textual registers with sentences that have no beginning nor end and are separated only by commas. In my discussion of this novel, I demonstrate how this carnivalesque imagery and idiom makes possible an ambivalently utopic world, where the black Other who rejects all norms of social decorum, etiquette and decency exists free from but also outside of conventional society.

In *Verre Cassé*, we observe a carnivalesque preoccupation with the excreting body. Bakhtin explains that a downward topographical logic is a key aspect of carnivalesque humor – references to “the lower stratum of the body, the life of the belly and the reproductive organs [...] which] therefore relates to acts of defecation and copulation, conception, pregnancy, and birth” (21) all form key features of this sensuous literary mode. Indeed, tales of tragedies that befall the genital zone and its excretory capacities pervade the novel. One of the first accounts of such suffering in the novel is that of a man who is simply known as le type à Pampers, whose nickname immediately evokes the carnivalesque in its reference to a diaper brand. A pervasive sense of auto-denigration and emasculation pervades le type à Pampers’ tragi-comic saga, which involves a troubled marriage, rampant with marital infidelity. Over the course of his monologue, le type à Pampers reveals that he frequents prostitutes in a certain quartier Rex. Mabanckou frontally showcases le type à Pampers’ misogyny, for the latter uses his wife as scapegoat to justify his sexual infidelity. Insulting her womanhood and her sexual (in)capacity, he calls her “congelée”

(51) and labels their marriage “quatorze ans de calvaire et de position du missionnaire” (52).⁴² Holding his wife accountable for his sexual frustration, he recounts a time when “elle m’a carrément forcé de vite finir de me tortiller sur elle parce qu’elle voulait surtout pas rater son dernier épisode du feuilleton *Santa Barbara*” (48-49). He blames her disinterest for triggering his penile malfunction, describing what is to come as his complete unmaning: “je suis tombé en panne sèche, plus rien ne démarrait, les batteries mortes, rien, mais plus rien ne fonctionnait” (49). In a move of ultimate carnivalesque self-denigration, he takes a jab at his sexual organ, describing his “instrument de travail” as acquiring “les dimensions ridicules de la chose d’un nourrisson prématuré” (49). This image of a shriveled-up infantile penis aptly encapsulates the character’s auto-derisive rhetoric, which consists in equal parts of self-pity and auto-emasculatation, as it does of virulent misogyny.

The same self-emasculatation pervades le type à Pampers’ tragic tale of incarceration that follows, rendering his account at once pitiful and pathetic, yet humorously self-effacing. Following another of his sexual escapades, le type à Pampers comes home to find out that having had enough, his wife has changed the locks to their house. Commotion results when he tries to force entry, which lands him in prison. He is jailed in Makala, a prison that he describes as “le plus redouté par les malfrats de la ville” (57). A tale of harrowing suffering ensues, one that Mabanckou continues to render comical through the pervasive presence of the lower body and excremental tropes. A prison system that subjects him to extreme sexual violence both feminizes and infantilizes le type

⁴² We see over the course of his sexually detailed narrative that his visits to the quartier Rex, far from driven by inevitability, are motivated purely by pleasure. And yet, he uses his wife’s sexual ineptitude as a pretext to justify his sexual escapades. The result is thus a paradoxical narrative where accounts of his sexual encounters and their corporal pleasures coexist with accounts of his sexual emasculatation and frustration.

à Pampers, who employs a deprecating rhetoric of auto-emasculation to describe how prisoners and guardians sexually humiliated him: “on me prenait par derrière, je ne fermais plus l’œil, y avait sans cesse quelqu’un derrière moi, à me cravacher, à me traiter de sale pute, de chienne, d’ordure ménagère” (58). The painful frankness of his account becomes more pronounced as he recounts how his body became an object, a plaything for his rapists to do with as they please – “j’étais leur objet, leur jouet, leur poupée gonflable, je leur abandonnais mon petit corps” (58).

Despite this misery, the ludic spirit of the carnival persists in his tale, thanks to the self-derisive language that le type à Pampers employs to describe his rape. Ravaged by those that he describes as “membré comme un King Kong” (59), he swears that “même tes deux mains rassemblées peuvent entrer sans problème” (59), as he comically invites his interlocutor to check for himself to verify the fact. While the authorities meant to protect him became the very perpetrators of violence, he laments the deplorable condition of law and order: “je n’ai pas eu droit à un procès dans ce pays de merde” (59). He goes on to liken the sorry state of his homeland to his raped and damaged behind: “un jeune nerveux [...] pilonnait mon arrière-pays par des coups de reine de routier” (59). By equating the havoc inflicted upon his body to an image of national plunder, Mabanckou makes le type à Pampers’ bowels themselves the metonymical symbol of a Congo havocked by both colonization and internal conflict.

Indeed, Mabanckou materializes the failures of (post)colonial African history in the tragic-comic fate of le type à Pampers, whose body bears the brunt of Congo’s ailing social institutions. Many have in fact criticized Mabanckou’s depiction of Africa and Africans in his work, arguing that his novels blame the fate of the formerly colonized on their own (reproachable) actions. While le type à Pampers seemingly suffers from his own misdeeds, a more assiduous reading suggests otherwise. Instead, we can argue that Mabanckou styles le type à Pampers’ carnivalesque accounts

as a tragic-comic allegory, which transposes the failures of (post)colonial African institutions onto the individual body. In fact, what the terrible violence resulting from individual malfeasance reveals are the larger forces of Congolese history that ultimately govern the black body, a history that is itself, according to Mark Libin, an “uncanny and ghastly double of colonial politics” (49). Libin argues in his article “History and its Doubles in Alain Mabanckou’s *African Psycho*” that the ‘absent cause’⁴³ that drives Mabanckou’s narratives in his novels is this violent and bloody history of Congo, characterized by a civil war set in motion after Western forces fully installed the autocrat Denis Sassou Nguesso as the country’s president to serve Western strategic interests. The first civil war gave way to the Second Congo War, which prolonged disease, ethnic cleansing and guerilla warfare in the country to the present day (Libin 49). Figuring as a ghostly presence, this “absent cause” of history influences the fate of its characters in *Verre Cassé*, better explaining their predicament than does personal culpability.

Although a cover presence, this painful history remains a driving force in the novel that the varied narrative voices ironically suppress. Seeking to tell their individual story, each character is determined to gain a place within the “funhouse of polyphonic, indecorous, disrupted voice” (Bakhtin 18) that is *Verre Cassé*’s novel within the novel. Indeed, le type à Pampers peppers his rambling, first-person account with carnivalesque digressions and distractions that preclude any narrative investment in the larger socio-political context responsible for his tragedy, which his personal tale of suffering subsumes. Instead, the black Other’s body and subjectivity take center

⁴³ Mark Libin borrows Frederic Jameson’s formulation in *The Political Unconscious* (1981), in which the latter writes of history as “the formal effects of what Althusser, following Spinoza, calls an ‘absent cause,’” which “can be apprehended only through its effects, and never directly as some reified force” (102).

stage in the novel, as they embody and recount this history through tragic-comic anecdotes of individual suffering. If writers like Ousmane Sembène and Henri Lopes effect caustic critiques of post-independence African societies through biting ironic, even burlesque representations of political leaders and governments, for Alain Mabanckou, the microcosmic world of the bar *Le crédit a voyage* incarnates the socio-political realities of Congo. The bodies of the bar's patrons bear the wounds, both literal and metaphorical, of a Congo crippled by a history of colonial prejudice and oppression, replaced in its aftermath by corrupt leadership and an ailing system of law and order, which in turn commits atrocities upon its citizenry in a vicious cycle of violence and victimization. For *le Type à Pampers*, the effects of French colonialism's plunder of Congo materializes in the flesh and its corporal realities, more particularly, in the functions of the scatological body.

By making use extensive of excretory imagery, Mabanckou renders *le type à Pampers*' sublime suffering both humorous and quotidian. In order to understand how, we turn to an important aspect of carnivalesque humor that Bakhtin calls attention to, namely the "degradation and debasement of the higher" (21). Bakhtin explains that in medieval folk comedy, carnival festivities and parodies degraded the body through a mechanism that quite literally involved a downward topographic logic. Bakhtin elaborates upon Latin parodies of the Middle Ages, which uncrowned all that was high and ceremonial, such as sacred texts like the Bible or scholarly works like grammatical treatises, by bringing them "down to the bodily level" (20). These parodies often transposed their solemn and sacred subjects, like grammar mandates and religious pronouncements onto the flesh, frequently linking them with the "bodily lower stratum" (20) – that is, through comic dialogues that alluded to genitals, the sexual and digestive life associated with them. We can read the regressive dimension of *le type à Pampers*' nickname as a play on such carnivalesque

degradation because of the way this quintessentially carnivalesque moniker debases and materializes the character that it names – it links le type à Pampers’ very identity with his scatological body, an infantilized one at that. Tellingly, we never find out le type à Pampers’ real name – the novel identifies him only by this epithet. This image of a grown man wearing diapers allegorically evokes a puerile and patronized Africa, itself forced to appear like an infant on the world stage because of the ravages that Western actors inflicted upon its collective body for centuries. Mabanckou locates this regression to a childlike state in le type à Pampers’ violated body, particularly, his damaged bowels. Bakhtin explains that such topological transfer to the body’s genitals has the capacity to dethrone what is grand and sublime; for as Bakhtin writes, “the excremental represents bodies and matter that are mostly comic: it is the most appropriate substance for the degrading of all that is exalted” (20). To read Verre Cassé’s account of le type à Pampers in light of Bakhtin is to understand how Mabanckou combines that which is “exalted” with scatological images in order to “uncrown” and degrade it. This is evident in the powerful image that culminates le type à Pampers’ meandering anecdote, which Verre Cassé relates to us: : “j’ai alors pu voir de près son derrière bombé par les quatre couches épaisses de Pampers qui se superposaient, un derrière humide, y avait des mouches qui bourdonnaient autour” (60). Clearly, le type à Pampers has lost control over his bowel movements due to repeated rape in prison, leaving him in an infantile, utterly humiliated state. Mabanckou here literally and unpompously transfers the havoc that a corrupt prison system inflicts upon le type à Pampers to the body parts that perform its scatological functions. By literally moving suffering downward and grounding it in le type à Pampers’ liquefied bowels – that is, in the material realities of bodily pain – Mabanckou makes sublime misery, which threatens to become abstract by virtue of its very unspeakableness, both comprehensible and humorous. As le type à Pampers turns to bid goodbye to his interlocutor, he

adds in a light-hearted tone of self-mockery: “ne t’en fais pas pour les mouches, c’est toujours comme ça, Verre Cassé, les mouches sont devenues mes amies les plus fidèles” (60). Although an image laden with pathos, Verre Mabanckou nonetheless imbues it with his typically comical tone, one that gives the entire novel its carnivalesque character despite the desolate realities that it portrays. By locating suffering in the body’s bowels, Mabanckou therefore injects levity where there is no *a priori* place for it.

Auto-derision and its ambivalence: the “ailleurs ensoleillé” of pain and suffering

As we have seen over the course of this chapter so far, Mabanckou’s depiction of the black Other in the carnivalesque mode involves a humorous auto-derision of the black self and body on the part of his protagonists. How does this self-abasing expression of suffering in carnival idiom of the lower material body become productive in the text? To understand this paradox, we must look to the very ambivalence of bodily degradation in carnival humor, which Bakhtin explains in the following manner: “[In carnivalesque humor,] to degrade an object does not merely imply hurling it into the void of nonexistence, into absolute destruction, but to hurl it down to the productive lower stratum, the zone in which conception and a new birth take place” (21). Indeed, as medieval carnival festivities mocked, parodied and derided the existing hierarchies and predominating structures, carnival-goers experienced this “desecration of the usual way of life” (Bakhtin 21) alongside the carnival’s reviving spirit. Bakhtin explains that the “numerous parodies and travesties, humiliations, profanations, comic crowning and uncrownings” in the town square that were common to the medieval carnival abnegated and destroyed the prevailing order, but this also gave way to a universal “becoming, change and renewal” (10). He elaborates that, with the free and familiar contact of the town square, “people were, so to speak, reborn for new, purely

human relations” (10). “Bare abnegation,” Bakhtin writes, “is completely alien to folk culture” (11).

What this means for texts that adopt carnival forms, symbols and its humor, particularly when it comes to representing the body, is that degrading this carnivalized body has not only a destructive, but also a regenerative function. In this sense, even as the carnivalesque tropes in *Verre Cassé* abase its protagonists, they also open the possibility for rebuilding and renewal. In a literal sense, acts of expulsion and defection in the novel immediately give way to the more (re)productive functions of genitalia, like copulation and ejaculation. In a moment of carnivalesque humor exemplified, another frequent patron of Le Crédit a voyagé named “la Robinette” challenges a newcomer to the bar to a urination contest. Confident in her excretory abilities, la Robinette has tellingly acquired her name as a result of a talent that Verre Cassé describes as such: “elle boit comme les tonneaux d’Adélaïde que les Libanais vendent au Grand Marché et quand elle boit comme ça elle pisse derrière le bar elle met au moins dix minutes à uriner sans s’arrêter, ça coule encore comme si on avait ouvert une fontaine publique”⁴⁴ (94). These capacities of “la reine de pisse,” reminiscent of Pantagruel’s mare Grand Jument who drowns Picrochole’s army by urinating on them, are put to the test in a humorous episode that follows. When a certain “type prétentieux” (98) named Casimir brags about his own urinary abilities, la Robinette and Casimir partake in a urination contest, the details of which Verre Cassé recounts in all its vivid and putrid aspects. Dubbing himself and the group of patrons beholding the sight as its “témoins oculaires” (99), Verre Cassé colorfully describes in turn the genitalia of the urinators – la Robinette’s buttocks

⁴⁴The Rabelaisian nature of this image of gigantic urinations is hard to miss. In Rabelais’ carnivalesque world, Paris acquires its name (Par Ris) as survivors laugh controllably after Gargantua drowns the irksome crowds of Paris in his urine. Rabelais depicts the Rhône River as born not of geographical phenomenon involving rainwater and tributaries, but out of the body’s excretory functions: Gargantua urinates for 3 months, 7 days, 13 hours and 46 minutes to give birth to the Rhône.

as that of a “mammifère périssodactyle,” her “grosses cuisses potelées” as those of a “personnage féminin de peinture naïve haïtienne” and her calves as “bouteilles de bière Primus” (99). As for Casimir, the portrait is much less favorable. Verre Cassé describes his penis as “une particule élémentaire qui nous a fait éclater de rire au point qu’on s’est demandé par où passeraient ses pauvres urines” and his testicles as “des boules poilues qui pendillaient comme des fruits d’un arbre à pain effeuillé par une saison blanche et sèche”⁴⁵ (100). With both contestants’ excreting and reproductive organs depicted in graphic detail, the narrator illustrates their urination itself with visual vivacity. Verre Cassé describes la Robinette’s urine as a “liquide jaunâtre et fumant qui giclait comme un sachet d’eau qu’on venait de perforer,” which she excretes in jets that he describes as “lourdes,” “chaudes” and “imperiales” (101). Less impressive than that of la Robinette, the narrator depicts Casimir’s urinary flow as “celles [qui] sortaient par petits bonds de bébé kangourou, de grenouille qui veut devenir aussi grosse qu’un bœuf” (104). Thanks to these comical descriptions, the urinary act in fact acquires a life of its own in this episode. In a further demonstration of the comic glory of carnivalesque folk humor, Mabanckou even presents us with a scene of Casimir sketching a map of France with his urine, the latter swearing that “je peux aussi

⁴⁵ The phrase “une saison blanche et sèche” acts as an impertinent allusion to the title of South African novelist André Brink’s novel *A Dry White Season* (1979), a critique of the apartheid regime. I say this reference is impertinent because Mabanckou coopts a solemn title and applies to a brazen description of testicles. Critics like Dick Hebidge argue that such intertextual references themselves constitute a subversive act, because of how the writer “re-locates the significant object in a different position within that discourse, using the same overall repertoire of signs, [...such that] a new discourse is constituted, a different message conveyed” (qtd. in Ayo 160). These ironic and oblique intertextual references are commonplace in Mabanckou’s novels, which abound in indirect references to novels’ titles that are buried within the text. Since Mabanckou ensconces these references within sentences, neither calling attention to them nor referencing them for what they are, they can often be lost on readers, especially when the references are less well-known works, contributing to a sense of opacity in his novels. For an analysis of intertextuality and extroversion in Mabanckou’s work, see Walsh, John. “Sarkozy, Mabanckou, and Notes from the Bar: Alain Mabanckou’s ‘Verre Cassé.’” *The French Review*, vol. 84, no. 1, 2010, pp. 127–139; Steemers, Vivan. “Broken Glass Or Broken Text?: The Translatability of Alain Mabanckou’s *Verre Cassé* (2005) into English.” *Research in African Literatures*, vol. 45, no. 1, 2014, pp. 107–124.

dessiner la carte de la Chine et pisser dans une rue précise de la ville de Pékin” (104). Urine here clearly becomes “gay matter” (Bakhtin 335) – it is not just excrement, but also a matter of laughter and spectacle.⁴⁶ Accompanying this visual vigor, Verre Cassé leaves out no olfactory nor auditory detail. Threatened by Casimir’s meek but steady streams, la Robinette is forced to intensify her own, which comes with the noxious additions of passages of gas: “ses pets sentaient très fort [...] la naphthaline trafiquée au Nigeria” and “resonnaient comme des feux d’artifice que nous entendons lors de la Fête au bouc [...] et qui] faisait à certains moments des bruits de trompette d’occasion de la New Orleans” (104). Taken together in all its sensory detail, this scene typifies the marketplace humor of the carnival reminiscent of Rabelais, where the scatological body is emphasized with hilarity and acquires a comic life of its own.

Interestingly, however, interspersed amidst these humorously repulsive acts of defecation, are moments of sexual renewal, arousal and even copulation. In his analysis of the imagery of defecation and urination that abound in Rabelais’ work, Bakhtin underlines the ambivalence of these acts. He writes, “the slinging of excrement and drenching in urine are traditional [*sic*] debasing gestures [...] But such [...] expressions are ambivalent, since the lower stratum is not only a bodily grave but also the area of the genital organs, the fertilizing and generating stratum” (148). Indeed, even in the midst of revolting sights, sounds and odors of the urination contest, the beholders of the act experience moments of arousal at the sight of Robinette’s naked body. As Verre Cassé confesses, “curieusement j’ai même bandé à mort comme les autres témoins [...] parce qu’un derrière de femme c’est toujours un derrière de femme qu’il soit petit, gros, plat” (100). Here, the double valence of bodily degradation becomes evident, for we can locate it in the

⁴⁶ Bakhtin emphasizes, “We must not forget that urine (as well as dung) is gay matter, which degrades and relieves at the same time, transforming fear into laughter. If dung is a link between body and earth (the laughter that unites them), urine is a link between body and sea” (335).

very duality of the genital area – it is the zone that not only urinates, defecates, passes gas, but it is also the site of the body that copulates, conceives, and gives birth. The unitary contest itself concludes in *la Robinette* accepting defeat, and as the terms of the competition stipulate, “*la reine de pisse*” must now give in to sex with Casimir. At the culmination of the scene, the former competitors, now a couple, are seen heading in a taxi together towards the site of their sexual rendez-vous, in an image reminiscent of honeymooners setting off in their nuptial voyage to consummate their union. Debasing scene such as these, which is nevertheless followed by a regenerative act, thus “preserve the essential link with birth, fertility, renewal, welfare” (Bakhtin 148). In this sense, the lower body connected to excretion in the carnivalesque world, as Bakhtin writes, “has not only a destructive, negative aspect, but also a regenerating one” (Bakhtin 22).

This ambivalence extends out towards the very space in which the novel’s happenings are anchored – the bar. At the bar, patrons consume their lives away in alcohol, but they also share stories and histories of pain and suffering. The two acts, in fact, go hand-in-hand, because alcohol stimulates a sense of free exchange that promotes its patrons to share painful and private pasts without inhibition, thereby helping build a sense of communal belonging. In this sense, the bar exemplifies the site of the carnival, whereby its depravity, destruction, drunkenness and death give way to fecundity and productive regeneration, which is in turn made possible by the community that the bargoers build in this space through the stories they share. The resulting space is a simulacrum of the carnival, which suspends all hierarchies and places everyone on an equal footing where the barflies are unable or unwilling to judge one another. In this sense, the bar, like the carnival, becomes a depraved utopia of “community, freedom, equality and abundance” (9). A community and its stories are thus born out of a collective history of humiliation, pain and defeat, begetting the narratives that constitute the novel.

In light of this, we can argue that the bar functions quintessentially as a site of the carnival, where its participants create and obey their own laws – often laws of excess, impropriety and freedom from convention (Bakhtin 10). This freedom from decorum is characteristic of the carnivalesque. Bakhtin writes that “during carnival time, life is subject only to its laws, that is, the laws of its own freedom” (10). The same free and familiar intercourse of the carnival prevails in the bar – alcohol suspends dominant norms of social decorum and verbal etiquette, giving way to friendly exchange, fraternity and familiar address steeped in verbal abuse. In this sense, the bar serves not only as a place of community building and regeneration, but also a space of freedom. A heterotopic “Other” space, the bar is a site that allows the outcasts of humanism and modernity to reinvent themselves outside of normative notions of individuality. Akin to Foucault’s heterotopia, which Foucault defines in “Des escapes autres”⁴⁷ as spaces that authorize practices of transgression and deviation, the bar embodies a site that not only permits, but also affirms difference. There, individuals whose behavior defies convention come together and exist freely precisely because in it, they escape marginalizing norms of propriety. And yet, as Georges Minois argues in *Histoire du rire et de la dérision* (2009), the ludic, festive and free aspect of carnivalesque spaces doesn’t necessarily render them “le contraire du tragique” (554). After all, the force that propels the barflies’ seemingly carefree existence is a destructive one, namely their alcoholism. We can argue, however, that the bar’s carnival nature does render it perversely utopic: in its capacity as an “Other” or “third” space, it removes each of the novel’s suffering heroes from “son triste quotidien,

⁴⁷ This text, which represents Foucault’s best-known explanation of the term “heterotopia,” is based on a talk that he gave to architectural students in 1967. It was not published in its textual form until 1984 in the journal *Architecture-Mouvement-Continuité*. The journal’s editor notes in a footnote to the English translation of the text: “Although not reviewed for publication by the author and thus not part of the official corpus of his work, the manuscript was released into the public domain for an exhibition in Berlin shortly before Michel Foucault’s death” (22).

pour lui ouvrir un ‘ailleurs’ ensoleillé” (Minois 554-555). As result of the debauched liberty that the bar fosters, the bargoers transgress normative social conventions, thereby opening the possibility to liberate the novel’s self-deprecating heroes from the “norms of etiquette and decency” characterizing conventional society (Bakhtin 7).

In this sense, carnivalesque humor that degrades the body is ambivalent in its capacity not only to regenerate and rebuild, but also to free the body that it abases. We see this play out in the second half of the novel, in which Verre Cassé transitions from relaying other protagonists’ stories to his own. Much like le type à Pampers, Verre Cassé attributes his ruin to his ex-wife – a well-intentioned woman called Angelique, whom he christens “Diabolique,” declaring “elle n’a rien d’un ange” (155). Mabanckou, however, nudges us to take this narrative of blame not at face value, for we soon find out that he derides his ex-wife for no reason other than her well-meaning attempts to end Verre Cassé’s destructive drinking habits. Verre Cassé is resolutely cavalier in the face of his wife’s dogged efforts to reform his alcoholism and obstinately persists in his drunken depravity. Like le type à Pampers, he unabashedly depicts his past in scatological terms:

moi je rentrais toujours [du bar] au premier chant du coq qui se perchait au faite du manguier de notre concession, et certaines fois je dormais carrément au pied du manguier, j’étais réveillé par les fientes chaudes et diarrhéiques de ce coq [...], et alors, quand Diabolique ouvrait la porte le matin, elle me trouvait dehors au milieu de mes urines, de mes défécations liquides et noirâtres (156).

In this account, Mabanckou employs carnivalesque forms that are by now familiar: Verre Cassé’s self-effacing account of his debauchery is at once pitiful yet comical. Indeed, we cannot help but notice the ludic note in an otherwise pathetic image of Verre Cassé waking up in a mélange of his own excrement and that of the bird perched above him.

Mabanckou highlights the ambiguity of Verre Cassé's carnivalesque existence by foregrounding its duality – although free and festive, tragedies lurk beneath its ludic exterior. In his self-degrading accounts, Verre Cassé lives by his own rules – he sleeps, urinates and defecating where he wishes, persuaded by no amount of his wife's pleading nor his neighbors' taunting. In this sense, even while participating in his own abasement by literally wallowing in his excrement, Verre Cassé frees himself from conventions of decorum because he lives not as he should, but as he wants. However, rejecting the conventions of a society that has failed him comes at a cost. If in Verre Cassé's "ailleurs," notions of normality, political correctness and social decorum are abandoned, there is a price to pay for it – his family and his neighbors alike cast him aside, viewing him as a possessed man that needs to be exorcised. Homi Bhabha writes in *The Location of Culture* (1994) that "the borderline work of culture demands an encounter with 'newness' that is not part of the continuum of past and present" (7). In other words, disrupting normativity to rupture hegemonic structures requires acts of transgression. In his essay "Preface to Transgression," Foucault defines transgression as the act of crossing a limit: it involves passing over from the Apollonian realm of form and reason, into the Dionysian realms of movement, flux, disorder, and madness. Mabanckou often depicts such border-crossings in the novel as a product of societal forces – a society that humiliates and ostracizes the principal actors in the novel pushes them over the boundary of the normal into the realms of the abnormal.

For Verre Cassé, his marginalization from society takes on a ludically public dimension, when his wife and in laws forcibly transport him in a wheelbarrow to consult a *féticheur* to rid him of his purportedly Satanic ways. The cortège parades the drunk in a "brouette ridicule" (163) for all to see, as his neighbors gather around to watch and mock him – Verre Cassé recounts that "tout le quartier riait devant cette scène inédite parce qu'on me trainait comme un sac à ciment" (163).

Comparable to a bag of cement, this objectified body on public display acquires a paradoxical quality in its multiple valences: it is at once a detritus – a passive and useless deadweight – as it is a useful matter for construction, a raw material for building. This ambivalence pervades the scene as Verre Cassé – the constructor of stories – injects levity into a tragic tale of his past in order to survive his reality.

In the face of his public humiliation, Verre Cassé adopts a humorous mode of self-abasement as a tool to defend himself against social ridicule. He unapologetically ridicules both the healer and the people that go to him to seek facile cures to their problems. He rails against his in-laws and his wife who forcibly take him to a healer named Zéro Faute, calling them “hommes à cavernes” “[qui] n’ont pas de manières, “[qui] n’ont jamais appris à manger à table,” and who, to his greatest annoyance, “sont venus me tirer de mes nobles préoccupations au Crédit a voyage” (162-63). Verre Cassé designates the “healing” that Zéro Faute performs as con acts that rip off the poor through the promise of a better life. He variously calls the *féticheur* “le Grand Escroc,” (165) “vendeur de chimères, pauvre homme aux sept noms et des poussières, pauvre matamore, pauvre charlatan, pauvre prestidigitateur sans talent” (167).⁴⁸ Even as he mocks those that want to help him, he self-effacingly recognizes his own broken nature, which earns him his epithet Verre Cassé. In a further bid to thwart his family’s attempts to cure him, he implores those wheeling him to the healer to accept his irremediable quality as a foregone conclusion – he rhetorically asks, “a-

⁴⁸ This scene can also be read as Mabanckou’s critique of superstition. Amidst the laundry list of insults that he levels upon Zéro Faute, his biggest critique of the healer is that he is a “pauvre profiteur, pauvre capitaliste” (167) “[qui] veut manger notre argent, [...] comme tous les grands escrocs de ce pays mangent l’argent des honnêtes citoyens” (166). In this critique of “les grands escrocs de ce pays” that engage in “l’exploitation de l’homme par l’homme” (168), is a veiled reference not only to healers, but also to corrupt governments and politicians. Clearly, as much as Mabanckou critiques external, colonial forces in his work, he does not spare internal societal forces that bear upon the people of Congo – through Verre Cassé, he expositions both the people’s naive beliefs as well as the corruption of the nation’s leaders that exploit these beliefs for their own gain.

t-on jamais vu un verre cassé être réparé?” (163). Dragged around in a wheelbarrow, unable to control his own body’s whereabouts, Verre Cassé is wholly powerless and humiliated. Yet, he does not allow himself to be passively subjected to the ridicule of others and instead partakes in his own abasement and self-mockery. As various members of his family take turns wheeling him, Verre Cassé is blithely carefree, even insolent in the face of this humiliation, threatening to transform the wheelbarrow into a portable public restroom. Adopting a resolutely cavalier, matter-of-fact tone, he recounts, “je les [ces gens qui me poussaient] faisais vraiment chier parce que je rotai et menaçais même de faire pipi ou caca” (164). Verre Cassé thus gains a measure of self-control by threatening to make public the conventionally private functions of excretion. As if to make Zéro Faute’s insults come true (he refers to Verre Cassé as “déchet” (169), Verre Cassé himself becomes refuse in the wheelbarrow that he threatens to turn into a dumping ground for waste. It is no accident that Verre Cassé’s initials, when pronounced, sound identical to the French abbreviation (“WC”) for “water closet,” the term used to designate public bathrooms. Treated at once as an object of spectacle and as refuse hauled around in a wheelbarrow, the self-deprecating hero thus coopts a narrative of public waste, using it to both survive his suffering and to take control of it.

In the world of *Verre Cassé*, the text as much as the body that writes it challenges convention. We have seen that Verre Cassé finds his escape from his desolate reality in the “ailleurs ensoleillé” that the bar represents, particularly through reading, writing the novel within the novel, drinking in excess, and generally shunning social rules. Just as the *body* writing the text contests norms of social propriety associated with the lower body, the *text* itself subverts the dominant style by transgressing normative rules of textuality. L’Escargot entêté, the owner of the bar who commissions Verre Cassé to write the text, significantly employs metaphors of bodily

excretion while commanding his frequent client to write the novel: “explose, vomis, toussote ou éjacule, je m’en fous, mais ponds-moi quelque chose sur ce bar,” he implores (196). This corporal idiom foregrounds a sense of freedom from rules and restrictions: L’Escargot entêté wants a text – any text – by which to remember the bar and its patrons. According to Bakhtin, this generally relaxed verbal etiquette is a key aspect of carnivalesque language. The “suspension of hierarchic distinctions and barriers” (15) during carnival allows for a particular kind of language and communication that is impossible outside of the carnival, one that he characterizes as the “familiar speech of the marketplace” (15). He writes that “the familiar language of the marketplace became a reservoir in which various speech patterns excluded from familiar intercourse could freely accumulate” (17), including abusive language, mockery, insults and profanations, all of which allowed carnival-goers to “establish friendly relations” (16) and to practice a “free [and] familiar” form of communication” (16). These relaxed rules of textuality are evident in the novel’s informal register. The text’s author (Verre Cassé explicitly and Mabanckou by extension) carnivalizes linguistic convention through a familiar textual register that abounds with informal diction, curses, swears and references to scatological imagery. The resulting text is itself a carnivalesque entity in which (literary) convention is suspended, making possible the “special genre of [carnavalesque] billingsgate” (17) that leaves a resounding orality to reverberate through the text. In this sense, the familiar language of *Verre Cassé*, which conventionally belongs to spoken rather than written discourse, transgresses dominant literary convention in its very ubiquity in a literary text.

These relaxed rules of textuality are evident not only in the text’s linguistic style, but also in its form. While his community casts out Verre Cassé due to his eccentric ways, the “peculiar verbal forms of the marketplace” (Bakhtin 17) mark the text itself as Other. Verre Cassé calls attention to the text’s Otherness as the novel winds to a close, when he brings us back to where he began,

namely, to reflections about the novel that L'Escargot entêté has commissioned him to write. In an honest meta-analysis of authorship, Mabanckou explains by means of his writer-protagonist what he sought to achieve through the novel's unusual form, one that he aptly describes as "sans queue ni tête":

je voudrais surtout qu'en me lisant on dise 'c'est quoi ce bazar, ce souk, ce cafouillis, ce conglomérat de barbarismes, cet empire des signes,⁴⁹ ce bavardage, cette chute vers le bas-fonds des belles-lettres [...]' (198).

If Bakhtin describes carnival imagery and idiom as a kind of 'marketplace' speech, it is no surprise that the writer(-protagonist) likens the text itself to a marketplace – a "*bazar*" and a "*souk*," terms whose "foreign" origins highlight the Otherness of the text itself. Further, in their Orientalist conceptions, these terms evoke a sense of chaos, lack of order and decorum, and a sense of charivari, all of which aptly describe the novel's style. In its self-conscious "chute vers le bas-fonds des belles-lettres" (VC 198), the text transgresses written conventions that stipulate regularity of form, grammar and syntax. Instead, the text consists of endless lists, accumulations of synonyms and metaphors, long enumerations of oblique, intertextual references to novel titles that are easy to miss (see footnote 13), absent punctuation save for commas, and sentences that continue for pages on end, all of which regularly make the text opaque.⁵⁰ If in its Greek origins, the term "barbare" signaled the incomprehensibility of a foreign tongue, this opacity of the novel's

⁴⁹ A reference to Barthes' essay on Japan – "L'Empire des signes" – which he published in 1970 after his *séjour* there.

⁵⁰ In addition to the text's form, the language of the text is itself opaque. Pascale De Souza in her article "Trickster Strategies in Alain Mabanckou's *Black Bazar*" notes the impenetrability of Mabanckou's language in his novels. Pointing to Mabanckou's tendency to transform various novels' titles, to play with the secondary and tertiary meanings of French idiomatic expressions and Congolese proverbs, De Souza writes: "The full impact of Mabanckou's humor [...] requires some expertise in world literatures, French idiomatic expressions, and Congolese traditions, which suggests that many readers may remain unable to appreciate the full complexity of the novel" (113).

linguistic form constitutes another crucial aspect of the text's Otherness, which the writer-protagonist characterizes as a "conglomérat de barbarismes" (198). In this sense, the text's form bears testament to the marginal status of its writer(-protagonist)⁵¹ – himself an Other, the same chaotic, Dionysian disruptions that characterize Verre Cassé's life also characterize the text itself.

An "*ailleurs ensoleillé*" congruous to the bar, the text and the act of writing constitute ambivalent objects/acts, which allow its writer-protagonist to at once escape his desolate reality while also permitting him to portray the very realities of desolation. Bakhtin characterizes language of the carnival as "an ideal and at the same time real type of communication," which stands at the "borderline between life and art" (8). In much the same way, Mabanckou's carnivalesque language in *Verre Cassé* serves both real and ideal ends. In its "ideal" purpose, the act of writing serves the writer-protagonist as a carnivalesque escape. On the other hand, even as Verre Cassé evades his misery through the act of writing, the text itself paradoxically becomes a vehicle to represent the complicated live stories, whose realities are simultaneously bleak, desolate and sublime, as they are cheerful, humorous and quotidian. The text's disorderly "marketplace" form accurately reflects the multiple and complex realities that surround Verre Cassé. Continuing with his metaphor of his text as "bazar," Verre Cassé writes, "ce bazar c'est la vie" (198). In this "souk" to which he compares the text, he concedes, "y a de la pourriture, y a des déchets, c'est comme ça que je conçois la vie" (198). Clearly then, for all its rottenness and disorder, this

⁵¹ Writing outside of the Hexagon, often about blackness, and other experiences and spaces perceived in the West as foreign and far-away, Mabanckou himself is an "Other" of French literature and authorship. Mabanckou notes in a blog on his website (www.alainmabackou.com) that his increasing shift away from writing that dramatizes French spaces has to do with the readerly expectations of an audience that perceives him as an Other: "I believe the visitors to my blog have certain expectations. In some ways I occupy the place of the insider, I am somewhere 'in' America, and they want me to tell them about that experience, in particular as it pertains to the African Diaspora and Black Americans" (qtd. in Thomas 66).

‘marketplace’ that he likes the text to accurately reflect the chaos that surrounds him. It thus becomes evident that the carnivalesque - in both form and content - allows our author-protagonist to paradoxically transcend the realities of an oppressive status quo and the suffering that it brings, while in so doing, accurately captures the reality of life itself. In this carnival world, the suffering black Other is neither uniformly oppressed and powerless, nor singularly liberated. Here the ambivalence of the carnivalesque trope comes full circle: the regenerating and excreting corporal body couples with the carnivalized text to portray the life and suffering of the black body in all its complexity.

As we close our discussion of *Verre Cassé*, it should now be evident how auto-derisive humor works through carnivalesque tropes in the novel. By examining representations of the black body, we saw that the author(-protagonist) transferred suffering to the scatological body, and in so doing, rendered this suffering relatable and even humorous. In *Verre Cassé’s* carnivalesque world, its characters live in a heterotopic space removed from normative society. Ideologies of individual control, normality, political correctness and social decorum do not exist in this carnival space which suspends hierarchies. For those that push societal limits and spill over into the Dionysian realms of social unacceptability, the resulting chaos is freeing, but it also means existing outside of what society considers normal. We also gained insight into the paradoxically productive nature of auto-derisive humor that makes use of carnivalesque tropes. Textually, the utopic “ailleurs” of *Verre Cassé’s* carnival world consists of forms that are opposed to all that is “ready-made and complete;” it is instead “ever-changing, playful and undefined” (Bakhtin 11). Out of its linguistic familiarity, profanity and self-abasement, Verre Cassé and Mabanckou by extension, create an ambivalent world, where gravity exists simultaneously amidst levity. Indeed, recreation, renewal and change both thematically and stylistically characterize *Verre Cassé*, where a carnival spirit

pervades despite its suffering. Where all judgment and hierarchies are suspended, the bar becomes a space where healing becomes possible through the frank and open sharing of the past and its pain. This self-abasing expression of suffering in scatological idiom not only creates the capacity for regeneration through shared community, but also allows its tormented heroes to take charge of their own misery. Knowing full well that he has not lived a life worthy of a place in paradise, Verre Cassé is all too aware that he must force his way into it. Concluding the novel in a characteristically comical note of self-awareness, Verre Cassé writes : “ma place est au paradis, et si quelques anges de mauvaise foi me racontent des salades là-haut pour m’empêcher d’y accéder par la grande porte, eh bien, crois-moi, j’y entrerai quand même par la fenêtre” (248). Verre Cassé takes charge of his own fate – he creates and forces his way into his own fallen version of utopia, even if the normative one does not afford him a place in it.

The Grotesque and its (Animal) Doubles in *Mémoires de porc-épic*

Mabanckou does not contain Verre Cassé tales within the pages of his eponymous novel. The protagonist resurfaces again in Mabanckou’s 2006 novel *Mémoires de porc-épic*, which won the Prix Renaudot the same year. In this novel, Mabanckou creates a unique form of intertext: he resuscitates the fictional character and writer-protagonist Verre Cassé from his own previous novel and transposes him into the pages of *Mémoires de Porc-épic*, again as its (fictional) author. Mabanckou, however, does not reveal this intertextuality until the end of *Mémoires de porc-épic*. In an “annexe,” Mabanckou presents a letter written by l’Escargot entêté, the (fictional) owner of the bar that Verre Cassé frequented. In this letter entitled “Lettre de l’Escargot entêté sur l’origine du manuscrit *Mémoires de porc-épic*” (223), the bar’s proprietor reveals that the writer of the novel attached to the annexe is none other than Verre Cassé himself. Acting as the “exécuteur

testamentaire littéraire” of his now-deceased friend and client, l’Escargot entêté presents the novel’s manuscript to Editions du Seuil for posthumous publishing. We find out in this letter that l’Escargot entêté has reconstructed the manuscript after having found it in a shoddy state by the river Tchinouka, where Verre Cassé “all[ait] rejoindre sa mère” (227). This revelatory letter catches readers by surprise, as it comes at the very of the novel. But for this annex, Verre Cassé is a ghostly presence in *Mémoires de porc-épic*. This novel’s narrator is a porcupine, who is both a protagonist in the novel and its omniscient storyteller from whose point of view Mabanckou/Verre Cassé relates the novel’s events. Like *Verre Cassé*, the novel is set in Congo-Brazzaville. Portraying gratuitous violence of the kind that Mabanckou’s illustrates in *African Psycho* (2003), *Mémoires de porc-épic* relays the tale of a porcupine and its human master that together commit clandestine murders in their village. The protagonist-porcupine serves as the “double nuisible” to his master Kibandi, “l’incarnation animale” (17) through whom the latter, a depressed alcoholic outcast, exacts revenge upon individuals in his village whom he perceives to have wronged him. In its capacity as a malevolent animal double to its human master, the porcupine undertakes murderous pursuits – “missions,” as it calls them, which Kibandi confers upon the mammal. In this *Mémoires*, the porcupine recounts to a Baobab tree the increasingly senseless and cruel murders that its master forces it to commit – acts that they euphemistically refer to as “manger les gens” (190) – which culminate in its master’s death as the porcupine itself narrowly escapes its own demise. In this novel, Mabanckou coopts colonialist, racist discourses, which ascribe bestial characteristic to black men. Instead, he transforms this rhetoric by imbuing it with an indigenous, home-grown meaning – the author situates the novel within the framework of the African fable tradition. Critics have hailed *Mémoires de porc-épic* as a homage to the tradition of West African

folktales,⁵² which often features fables of beguiling animals and whose “écran du bestiaire” (qtd. in De Souza 103) allow storytellers to, in Mabanckou’s own words, “blâmer le comportement humain sans pour autant heurter directement les gens” (qtd. in De Souza 103).

Owing partly to this fable form, the novel has a distinctly carnivalesque character, despite depicting dark tales of a man who resorts to irrational acts of revenge after being cast aside by a village that views him as a perpetual outsider. In typical carnivalesque fashion, the novel is ludic in its portrayal of pathos – the fantastical world that the porcupine constructs through its narration amplifies the lighthearted tone set by a prickly animal narrator. The novel is divided into five parts, respectively called “Comment je suis arrivé en catastrophe jusqu’à ton pied” (9), “Comment j’ai quitté le monde animal” (45), “Comment Papa Kibandi nous a vendu son destin” (76), “Comment Mama Kibandi a rejoint Papa Kibandi dans l’autre monde” (109) and finally, “Comment le vendredi dernier est devenu un vendredi de malheur” (131). These playful, fairytale-like titles reinforce the novel’s fable form, giving it a fanciful quality that dissimulates the less-than-innocent events that each chapter recounts. As the novel blurs the boundaries between the real and the magical, between the human and its murderous animal double, the tale not only acquires a fantastical element characteristic to fables, but it also imbues the black body with an exaggerated, animalistic, even monstrous character, which viscerally evokes the literary aesthetic of the grotesque. Grotesque representations of the body, which Bakhtin posits as a chief feature of carnivalesque imagery, constitute a principal feature of the carnival world that Mabanckou/Verre Cassé construct in *Mémoires de porc-épic*. The ambivalence intrinsic to carnival worlds pervades grotesque images of the body in this novel, as joy and regeneration –

⁵² Annabelle Marie argues in her article “La Mémoire longue du porc-épic (à propos d’un roman d’Alain Mabanckou),” that this choice of the porcupine as the novel’s protagonist squarely places the novel in the tradition of “les contes africains”, as these animals often make appearances in African folktales.

what Bakhtin calls “positive pathos” (308) – coexist with fatality and destruction. While in *Verre Cassé*, we saw that the act of topologically debasing suffering gives way to the renewal of the body in pain, in this next section, we will strengthen the already robust contiguity of *Mémoires de porc-épic* with its predecessor by exploring the ambiguity that inheres in the grotesque representation of the black body. If carnivalesque tropes banalize bodily suffering, the caricatured, larger-than-life, and fantastical nature of grotesque imagery gives comic dimensions to the nefarious social forces that Kibandi and his animal double represent. In the discussion that follows, we will see how Mabankou employs the fable-form, with its “écran du bestiaire,” to create a fantastical façade that dissimulates his caustic critique of Congolese society that suffers from the weight of its colonial past.

In the Bakhtinian world of the carnival, exaggeration of the body and its parts are key elements of the grotesque. Bakhtin explains that the grotesque body constitutes a key feature of carnivalesque imagery in Renaissance literature. The literary trope itself harkens back to the medieval carnival, during which clowns or other comic figures, with protruding eyes, bulging guts and cavernous mouths elicited laughter from audiences through their deformed bodies. This hyperbolic, grotesque body and its parts transcend the body’s confines because they are exaggerated to disproportionate dimensions, and consequently, the body acquires a monstrous, absurd quality. However, Bakhtin emphasizes that the caricatural disfiguration the grotesque body undergoes is not simply negative in character. Positive regeneration, characteristic of the carnival, characterizes the grotesque body, such that it contains “the possibility of combining in one image both the positive and negative poles” (Bakhtin 308). This positive character derives from the wealth of broader, symbolic meanings associated with the “convexities and orifices” (Bakhtin 317) of the grotesque body, which are connected simultaneously to processes of both consumption and

elimination. As Bakhtin writes, “the essential role [of “bodily drama”] belongs to those parts of the grotesque body in which it outgrows its own self, transgressing its own body, in which it conceives a new, second body; [in the “convexities and orifices of the grotesque body], there is an interchange and an interorientation” (317). Indeed, in grotesque imagery, the absurdly exaggerated mouth both eats and vomits; the protruding nose blows and sneezes but also inhales and exhales life-giving air; the bulging gut both nourishes and eliminates. In other words, the grotesque body and its parts are sites of doubleness, embodying not only “the exaggeration of the improper” (308) but also the “joyful lavishness” of the exaggerated body and its parts.

We can understand the novel’s system of animal doubles precisely through Bakhtin’s “double-body” principle of grotesque imagery, whereby the cavernous body fluidly gives unto other bodies. In fact, the logic of doubleness pervades the universe that Mabanckou constructs. In the novel’s ontological system, a human can have two types of animal doubles: “doubles pacifiques” and “doubles nuisibles” (*Mémoires* 15). The former is born with its human master and bears responsibility for the human’s goodness – “ils protègent l’être humain, le guident, tracent les sillons de son existence” (16). The latter, on the other hand, carries out the unsavory acts of its human master – “les êtres humains dont nous [les doubles nuisibles] devons alors l’incarnation animale ne se laisseront plus habiter par les sentiments comme la pitié, la commisération, le remords, la miséricorde” (17). Serving as his master Kibandi’s “double nuisible,” the porcupine narrator must rid himself of all emotion to “remplir [...] sans protester la mission que [...] son maître] lui confiera” (17). The logic of bodily doubleness further deepens in the diegetic world as the master that the “double nuisible” serves himself cleaves in two –

Kibandi also has an “autre lui-même” (17), both of whose murderous impulses the porcupine serves. This process of the self cleaving into two and acquiring the “double nuisible” happen

simultaneously, in a secretive ritual passed on from father to son at the age of ten, through an initiation act unbeknownst to the mother. The porcupine recounts this initiation ceremony, when Papa Kibandi gives his son a potion to drink, following which a boy resembling little Kibandi appears before their eyes, but has neither a mouth nor a nose, but only eyes, ears and a very long chin (*Mémoires* 86). These fantastic events⁵³ culminating in the birth of this disfigured form – none other than Kibandi’s “autre lui-même” – is quintessentially grotesque. To borrow Bakhtin’s words, “exaggeration acquires an extreme, fantastic character [and] extraordinary dimensions” (Bakhtin 306) as a grotesque human clone rises from a set of incredible events.

In its capacity as “double nuisible,” the porcupine serves as a link not only between its master and his “autre lui-même” but also between generations by ensuring the transmission of this destructive paternal tradition. In fact, the porcupine’s individual body foregoes its unicity in its capacity as nexus, only existing in relation to other bodies and the world. Bakhtin characterizes such fluidity in images of corporeality as a key feature of grotesque imagery. He argues that “the events of the grotesque sphere are always developed on the boundary dividing one body from the other” (322). Elaborating on this principle, he argues that “grotesque imagery constructs what we might call a double body. In the endless chain of bodily life, it retains the parts in which one link joins the other, in which the life of one body is born from the death of the preceding older one” (318). These “linked and interwoven” (317) bodies – continuous and contiguous with both each other and the world – constitute a key feature of the novel’s universe. The porcupine acts as a link in a fundamental capacity, insofar as the process of transmission of the double from father to son can only be complete when the “doubles nuisibles” of progenitor and progeny meet. The porcupine recounts that Papa Kibandi’s “double nuisible,” an old rat, licked the porcupine’s genitalia in order

⁵³ Bakhtin affirms that “the grotesque starts when the exaggeration reaches fantastic dimensions” (315).

to facilitate the birth of his son's double : "la transmission se déroule [...] d'abord entre les êtres humains, l'initiateur et l'initié [...] ensuite entre les animaux, le double animal de l'initiateur devant lécher le sexe du double animal de son jeune initié" (62). This rite of passage dissolves all corporal integrity and boundaries, including the frontiers between the human and animal, between one body and another, and between body and the world.

Mabanckou illustrates this merging of animal and human elements in sensorial detail in the porcupine's account of its master's father, Papa Kibandi. (Bakhtin affirms, "the combination of human and animal traits is [...] one of the most ancient grotesque forms" (316)). Much like his son would go on to do, Papa Kibandi commits a string of murders through his "double nuisible" to avenge trivial disputes in his community. His degeneration is so complete that his mannerisms and physical form fuse thoroughly with his rat "double nuisible":

Papa Kibandi retournait à l'état animal, il ne coupait plus ses ongles, il avait les tics d'un vrai rat lorsqu'il faillait manger, il se grattait le corps à l'aide de ses orteils [...] le vieil homme était désormais pourvu de longues dents acérées, en particulier celles de devant, des poils gris et durs prenaient racine dans ses oreilles, arrivaient jusqu'à la naissance de ses mâchoires (87).

Typical of grotesque imagery, separate body parts become enlarged to acquire animalistic dimensions. Papa Kibandi's nails become long like claws, his front teeth protrude like that of a rat, his hair grows down to his jaw in a further likeness to a rodent. These exaggerated body parts, with their rat-like features, "completely hide the normal members of the body" (Bakhtin 328) – their form gives Papa Kibandi a monstrous quality. This lurid figure, half man, half rat, evokes disgust in the village, exacerbating Papa Kibandi's marginalized status in the community. A grotesque hybrid between human and animal, Papa Kibandi is designated as Other in a community that views

his difference as suspect. The alienation is so extreme that “les gens change[aient] de chemin en le croisant avec son allure de rat,” “les gamins [...] pleuraient [...] et accrochaient au pagne de leur maman dès que le vieil homme était dans les parages,” and even “les chiens batékés [...] prenaient la précaution d’aboyer à distance” (89).

In fact, in his capacity as the fictional author of the novel, Verre Cassé seems to construct Papa Kibandi in his own self-abasing image. Much like Verre Cassé himself, Papa Kibandi’s eccentric ways ostracize him. In a scene almost identical to one in *Verre Cassé*, Papa Kibandi stands trial before a *féticheur* in a communal attempt to rid him of his unsavory ways. This public trial is called by Papa Kibandi’s sister, who accuses him of drowning her daughter to death, an accusation that he (falsely) denies. (The porcupine later confirms his guilt, with his niece being the last of the ninety-nine murders that Papa Kibandi commits before villagers put an end to the mayhem by killing Papa Kibandi’s “double nuisible.”) Characteristic of his nuance, however, Mabanckou refuses to singularly villainize Papa Kibandi, whom he depicts as perpetrator and victim at once. Much like he does with the protagonists of *Verre Cassé*, Mabanckou illuminates the pathos of communal judgment to show how Papa Kibandi becomes a victim of his society. Denying him the chance to explain himself, the community assumes his guilt and treats him, in the words of the porcupine, as a “rat pestiféré” (93). Like Verre Cassé, Papa Kibandi becomes the object collective humiliation, as his trial acquires a public dimension. A large group, including his sister and “quatre témoins [...] choisis dans quatre villages” (94-95) escorts Papa Kibandi to the *féticheur* like it did Verre Cassé. In order to test Papa Kibandi’s claim to innocence, the *féticheur* conducts the trial of the “bracelet d’argent,” which consists in the suspect dipping his hand in a pot of boiling hot oil and retrieving a silver bracelet *unscathed* if the suspect is not guilty. Retrieving the bracelet without scalding his hands, Papa Kibandi is exonerated much to the

tribune's dismay. This spectacle, however, far from concludes his collective humiliation, as the people of Moussaka continue to gossip about him, speculate about his life, and conclude that "Papa Kibandi possédait *quelque chose*" (89) – an inexplicable quality that justified the community's rejection. Communal forces thus alienate the grotesque body that is in between the human and animal – in a vicious cycle, Papa Kibandi's difference pushes him to live in the margins of society, which further aggravates his status as outcast.

And yet, the grotesque acquires a positive, even ludic character, thanks to the lower body that Mabanckou emphasizes in his portrait of Papa Kibandi. This becomes evident following the *féticheur's* trial of the "bracelet d'argent," when the incredulous tribunal and acquitted suspect go their separate ways. Papa Kibandi wanders deep into a forest, where in his solitude, he is free of "norms of etiquette and decency" (Bakhtin⁷). Restraint and calm that characterized his predicament during the trial gives way to a Dionysian madness in this seclusion, as the porcupine confirms that "on l'aurait pris pour un fou" (103). In the solitude of this heterotopic space, Papa Kibandi celebrates his acquittal with not only a sense of relief, but also a carnivalesque joy – "il [...] poussa la chansonnette [...] il éclata de rire, marmonna quelque chose" (103). Here, he shows his true colors, revealing how he deceived the *féticheur* and his familial entourage during the trial. In an entirely unexpected twist, we find out that what saves Papa Kibandi is a palm nut hidden away in the depths of his anus, meant to help criminals avoid detection of guilt. Animality, exaggeration and the hyperbolic lower body, all coalesce in the following scene of revelation:

Il [Papa Kibandi] remonta son long boubou jusqu'à la hauteur des reins, il s'accroupit comme s'il fallait faire ses besoins, expira un grand coup, retint sa respiration, poussa, poussa encore, il y eut un bruit de pet, une noix de palme s'échappa de son anus, il la saisit,

l'inspecta, la rapprocha de son nez, sourit en se disant « mon cher Temb -Essouka, tu es vraiment aveugle » (103).

The comedy of this scene derives not only from the exaggeration of Papa Kibandi's rat-like characteristics, as he sniffs the nut that he has excreted out, but also from the grotesque excessiveness in the depiction of the excretory body. The physiological distress of expelling the nut (holding and letting out deep breaths, forceful pushing, passing gas) amplify to such an extent as to evoke the body both in the throes of both labor as well as constipation. The nut that is thus "born" out of this distress evokes at once the acts of (constipated) defecation and childbirth. This simultaneously excreting and regenerative lower body bears testament not only to the ludic exaggeration of bodily phenomena typical of grotesque imagery, but also to the capacity of the grotesque to fuse both the positive and negative poles. On the one hand, the carnivalesque logic of topological debasement transfers Papa Kibandi's nefarious mechanisms of trickery and deceit from the thinking and conniving mind to the bowels and anus. On the other hand, however, this lower body has a positive character. The defecating sphere quite literally saves Papa Kibandi, allowing him at least temporarily to escape punishment.

Like his father, Kibandi continues in this paternal tradition of murder and deceit through his animal double. The former cannot act for himself and needs the "double nuisible" to satisfy his murderous appetite⁵⁴ by "eating" people that have wronged Kibandi. Leading a liminal life in society's margins, it is through his double that Kibandi gains access to society, exacting his revenge upon a community that ostracizes him, while Kibandi himself remains safely away and avoids detection. The ghost of therefore Papa Kibandi lives on through the nefarious ways of his

⁵⁴ It is not until the porcupine has carried out several missions that he understands the relationship between Kibandi and his "autre lui-m me." When the porcupine begins to protest against the increasingly senseless murders that his master commissions, Kibandi explains that he is himself beholden to his "autre lui-m me," who has "de plus en plus faim" and "[qui] doit manger [...] sinon nous payerons cher" (188).

son, who continues killing “pour un oui ou pour un non” (190). The fabula-like form of the novel aptly culminates in a series of fantastic event that end in the death of Kibandi. Even Kibandi’s death is not an ultimate one, as he and Papa Kibandi remain alive through the tale that the porcupine recounts in its *Mémoires*. Following Kibandi’s death, the porcupine runs away from his master’s murderers and finds shelter under the branches of a baobab tree, to whom it recounts its life and its missions with its master, thus giving the novel its memoir form.

Even the end of the porcupine’s tale, however, does not signal the novel’s end. In a final “annexe,” Mabanckou, reflects on the novel, its form and meaning under the guise of a letter from l’Escargot entêté. In this letter, Mabanckou affirms that the novel seeks to “scrutent nos obsessions et secouent nos croyances” (228 – he intends at once to offer a reflection on human nature and society, while also leading us to question our beliefs as we know them. Indeed, l’Escargot entêté remarks that “cet étrange porc-épic [qui est] très au fait de la nature humaine us[e] de la digression comme arme jusqu’au bout afin de nous peindre, nous les humains et parfois nous blâmer sans répit” (229). Mabanckou notes that the novel while the novel allows readers to reflect on humanity, it also incites us to challenge our conceptions of it. As l’Escargot entêté confirms, reading the novel pushes him to question “qui de l’Homme ou de l’animal est vraiment une bête?” (229). Coopting the double signification of the term “bête,” Mabanckou signals to the monstrous/beastly element that lurks within the human. Further, Mabanckou self-reflexively comments on his use of the fable-form, affirming that this genre, “[qui] revinvente[...] le monde,” “revisite[...] notre enfance, [...] “interroge[...] l’Origine” paradoxically allows for the closest approximation of reality. He writes : “le monde n’est qu’une version approximative d’une fable que nous ne saisissons jamais tant que nous continuerons à ne considérer que la représentation matérielle des choses” (229). Under its fairy-tale like, moralistic exterior thus lurks a complex universe – this universe is

macabre yet festive, at times fatalistic, other times gay; occasionally real, regularly supernatural, but always provocative, thereby offering an intricate portrait of the black body specifically and human nature more generally.

Conclusion

If by degrading ourselves, we make others laugh, then what better way to debase oneself than to literally call attention to one's lower body and its functions? The carnivalesque worlds that Mabanckou creates in *Verre Cassé* and *Mémoires de porc-épic* function precisely in this way, as its protagonists make public the private and primal functions of the excreting body. Through writer-protagonists that speak self-derisively of their own fates and suffering, Mabanckou examines the position of the black body in post-colonial Congo. *Verre Cassé's* drunken protagonists flaunt all norms of social propriety, as the excreting body lies at the source of their lives' disorder and suffering, as well as its humor and liberation. In *Mémoires de porc-épic*, the animal narrator's near-escape from death provides the impetus to its confessions, which reveal the grisly murders that it commits on behalf of its human master Kibandi. Both stories represent social outcasts, whose status as outsiders in their community further drives them to exist in society's margins. If for Verre Cassé, this social alienation pushes him to transgress social decorum and make the private functions of the excreting body public, Kibandi and his father violate social norms in more violent ways, killing those they have perceived to have wronged them. Typical of the ambivalence characterizing postcolonial humor, the carnivalesque trope treats these tragedies of black suffering in the comic mode. While in *Verre Cassé*, Mabanckou banalizes his protagonists' suffering by topologically lowering it and locating it in the body's bowels, in *Mémoires de porc-épic*, he depicts the vicious cycle of social alienation and the dismal realities of violence in post-

colonial societies with his quintessential levity, thanks to the grotesque mode that characterizes this novel. Such self-deprecating humor that carnivalizes the drudgery of the black body's existence is highly ambivalent – it destructs and expels, even as it regenerates and empowers its protagonists. Mabanckou grounds the realities of the black body in both these novels in the lower-order functions of the excreting body and linguistically foregrounds carnivalesque profanity, abuse and self-abasement. In doing so, he coopts dehumanizing colonialist discourses surrounding the animality of the black body and subverts them by transforming the bestial into the banality of the bowels in *Verre Cassé*, even re-purposing these colonialist representations into a home-grown, fable tradition in *Mémoires de porc-épic*.

Inextricably linking the two novels together, *Verre Cassé*'s protagonist resurfaces in *Mémoires de porc-épic* – not as a character, but as its phantom author. While this ghostly presence of Verre Cassé in *Mémoires de porc-épic* provides a natural bridge between the two novels, this frame through which the porcupine's narrative passes is significant. Indeed, as Annabelle Marie notes, Mabanckou situates *Mémoires de porc-épic* within multiple narrative frames that link it to *Verre Cassé*. The porcupine narrates its memoirs, which is itself written by the fictional author of *Verre Cassé*, which is once again encased in the framework of l'Escargot entêté in his capacity as the novel's "exécuteur testamentaire littéraire," all of which Mabanckou relays to readers as author (78). These layered narratives create distance between the author and his work, a distance that *Mémoires de porc-épic*'s fable form amplifies. As Mabanckou notes, "[La fable] est un genre souvent utilisé par les écrivains pour aller au fond des choses, et qui permet de consolider sa critique, de regarder la société avec un peu de distance" (103). While Mabanckou's novels have often been accused of blaming colonized people for their own predicament, couching the narrative

within these multiple frames allows the author to create distance, while carrying out the important task of using his work to reflect and critique social realities.

Chapter 3

Mimicry and its Mottled doubles: Representing North Africa and its Orientalist Fictions

Introduction

Popularized by painters like Eugène Delacroix, French Orientalism propagated fictions about the Maghreb, claiming to offer its Western spectators a peek into its exotic and forbidden spaces. As it is well-known today, the 20th century French colonial aesthetic was best explained by Edward Said in his ground-breaking book *Orientalism* (1978). Said posits that Orientalism is a body of knowledge disseminated by colonial actors including artists, geographers, writers and anthropologists in various realms of arts, sciences, humanities and the social sciences, which structured relations of power between the Eastern and Western worlds. Based upon “an ontological and epistemological distinction made between ‘the Orient’ and (most of the time) ‘the Occident,’” Orientalism and Orientalist thought, Said argues, influenced how Western audiences conceived of the people and cultures of the Near, Middle and Far East, which Orientalists collectively called ‘the Orient,’ erasing all geographic and cultural specificity (21). In its artistic form, it was promulgated mainly by painters like Ingres, Delacroix, Renoir, Gérôme and Matisse in a range of Orientalist paintings, which claimed to give the Western world a certain authentic view of ‘the Orient’ through oneiric, essentializing and exoticizing representations of far-away cultures and people. What happens when postcolonial authors import into their work such problematic representations of ‘the Orient’ and put it in conversation with their own representations of the Maghreb? We delve into two sets of works that do precisely this i.e., they incorporate Orientalist imagery in a direct and explicit way in their pages; these works in question are Leila Sebbar’s *Shérazade* trilogy (*Shérazade: 17 ans, brune, frisée, les yeux verts* (1982), *Les carnets de Shérazade* (1985) and *Le Fou de Shérazade* (1991)) and Joann Sfar’s eleven-volume graphic novel

series called *Le Chat du Rabbin* published between 2002 and 2021. Although vastly different works, varying across literary genres and time periods, I put them in conversation in this chapter because of their thematic similarity. Both make widespread use of colonialist visual conventions in their works, particularly Orientalist imagery and paintings. These colonial repetitions take diverse forms in each of the works, ranging from ostentatious reproductions of entire Orientalist paintings in image (in the visual landscape of the *bande dessinée*) or in text (through citation and ekphrasis), to more subtle borrowings of Orientalist aesthetics. From superimpositions of ragingly racist characters from literary history to the recycling of more intangible clichés of North African femininity as mythical and exotic, ‘the Orient’ is a trope that the texts in question visibly reproduce. Indeed, what both these works have in common is their heavily visual approach, as both authors empathically borrow from Orientalist fictions in their depiction of the Maghreb, Algeria specifically. In their representations of the Algerian landscape, subjectivity, its language(s), religion(s), culture(s), both authors recycle the very Orientalist tropes that they challenge.

According to Shai Ginsburg’s analysis of Homi Bhabha, Orientalism is at once a systematized discipline and an oneiric aesthetic, whose discourses are rife with ambiguity (230). In his book *The Location of Culture* (1994), Bhabha notes the two seemingly contesting systems of representation that Saïd teases out in his analysis – Orientalism on the one hand as “a topic of learning, discovery, practice,” and Orientalism on the other hand as a “site of dreams, images, fantasies, myths, obsessions and requirements” (71). Bhabha argues that Saïd nonetheless weaves together these opposing systems within a “congruent system of representation,” (71) one that renders Otherness transparent and knowable, thanks to Orientalism’s facile and simplistic representations of it (Ginsburg 230). In other words, Orientalism, as a fetishistic discourse, produces the ‘Oriental Other’ simultaneously as visible, transparent and knowable, even as it

exoticizes this Other that it renders the stuff of Western fantasy. In a further paradox, Bhabha writes that colonial discourse “moves between the recognition of cultural and racial difference and its disavowal” (73). Indeed, colonial agents sought to erase difference through laws that targeted indigenous language, religion, culture, and ways of life, at the same time that Orientalist writers and painters emphasized the radical alterity of the colonial Other. Bhabha argues that while imperial enterprises sought to create “perfect” colonial mimics, who imitate the colonizer in language, culture, manners and subjectivity, these “‘reformed’ colonial subject[s]” (124) often turned out to be less-than-perfect “native” doubles (121-128). This is because instead of merely copying the models that were imposed upon them, the colonized often creolized colonial culture itself, as they infused their own cultural identities and paradigms with those of the colonizer. Bhabha argues that consequently, “mimicry emerges as one of the most elusive [...] strategies of colonial power and knowledge” (85) because it so often produced not perfect mimics, but (humorously) mottled ones. In her reading of Bhabha, Anne Donadey points to this blurring of lines between the colonial and the decolonial, between the colonizer and the colonized that mimesis involves, a process that she argues not only demonstrates that “ambivalence is always already present on both ‘sides’” but also “threatens the opposition between the two” (xxii). Mimicry, as a result, materializes as an ambiguous tool of imperial control, which produces colonial subjects “*as a subject of a difference that is almost the same, but not quite*” (Bhabha 122).

This brings us to a fundamental paradox of colonial mimicry. Although colonially-mandated mimesis emerged from a colonial desire for control, it worked not as a disciplined “system of subject formation” (Bhabha 124), but rather as a self-defeating mockery of colonial authority itself, as it exposed the idiosyncrasies and fallacies of its discourses. This possibility for mimicry to dislodge the original rather than faithfully reflect it brings us to the question that

motivates this chapter: what is the effect of mimicry on the authority of colonial –particularly Orientalist – discourses?⁵⁵ To answer it, we will think through Sebbar’s and Sfar’s Orientalist borrowings as strategic forms of cultural and literary mimesis, through which these authors imitate hegemonic discourses about the ‘the Orient’ precisely to dislodge their power. Pointing to the deforming potential of mimicry, Bhabha posits that colonial appropriation of the colonizer’s mannerisms, speech and ways of being led to the proliferation of “inappropriate objects” that ensured the “strategic failure” of colonially mandated mimicry (123). What this implies is that for mimicry or the cooptation of hegemonic discourses to be subversive, it must “continually produce its slippage, its excess, its difference” (122). Following Bhabha’s logic, this chapter thinks through Sfar and Sebbar’s misappropriation of Orientalist tropes as a literary and political aesthetic that ensures their “strategic failure.” If Orientalist representations reify or even wholly misrepresent the Maghreb, this chapter examines how Sebbar and Sfar, in return, engage in their own deformation of Orientalist tropes even as they paradoxically mimic them. I argue that by adopting flawed and distorted mimetic strategies in their texts, these authors create humorous counter-narratives to Orientalist conceptions of Algeria, even as they borrow from Orientalism’s well-known clichés. By discussing how Sfar’s and Sebbar’s work simultaneously dialogues with and challenges Orientalism’s exoticizing logic, this chapter highlights mimicry’s paradoxical capacity to function as a subversive literary and ideological device, allowing postcolonial authors to contest powerful, long-standing colonial discourses.

⁵⁵ Although Orientalism is subsumed under the umbrella of colonial discourse, using them interchangeably would be a mistake that effaces the specificity of the former in relation to the latter. Indeed, Orientalism’s distinguishing feature is what Edward Said, and more recently, Ali Behdad and Linda Nochlin have described as its exoticizing and eroticizing tendencies. In this sense, Orientalism constitutes a particular kind of colonial discourse employed by the French imperial enterprise, characterized by its gendered and hypersexualizing logic.

Humoring the Orientalist Gaze: Mimicry and its Mottled Double in Leïla Sebbar's *Shérazade*

Born of a French mother and Algerian father in Algeria, Sebbar spent her childhood in her paternal homeland before moving to France, which she qualifies as “le pays de ma mère, de ma langue, de mon travail, de mes enfants mais où je ne trouve pas vraiment ma terre” (*Lettres parisiennes* 125). In her epistolary exchanges with Nancy Huston quoted above, Sebbar identifies herself as a “croisée” cleaved between Algeria and France, going on to characterize this *métissage* as the basis of her work. She writes: “les sujets de mes livres sont le signe, les signes de mon histoire de croisée, de métisse obsédée par sa route et les chemins de traverse, obsédée par la rencontre surréaliste de l’Autre et du Même, [...] de la tradition et de la modernité, de l’Orient et de l’Occident” (126). Like Sebbar herself, her characters often live as exiles in France, inhabiting the interstices of two worlds, belonging to neither. They are, in the words of Madeleine Van Strien-Chardonneau, “doublement étrangers et par rapport à leurs parents et au pays d’origine, dont ils ne parlent pas ou à peine la langue, et par rapport à la France, le pays où ils sont nés mais qui ne veut ou ne peut être le leur” (27). Although Sebbar herself was born not in France but in Algeria, weaving together these two worlds of her fractured identity becomes the driving force in her work. Critics like Oana Panaïté have in fact pointed out the author’s obsessive return to themes of exile, marginality and hybridity,⁵⁶ even characterizing it as a form of “hantise” (807) that resurfaces time and again in all genres of Sebbar’s work, including her novels, short stories, essays, and *carnets de voyage*. In this attempt to “[f]aire entendre le bruit des cultures qui s’entrechoquent” (Panaïté 806), Sebbar has frequently addressed the subject of Orientalism, as it constitutes a system of thought and representation born precisely out of this encounter between two worlds. In contrast to

⁵⁶ See Oana Panaïté, “Étrangèreté et écriture du nonsavoir : Hélène Cixous, Nina Bouraoui et Leïla Sebbar,” 806-807.

her more serious, theoretical examinations of the workings of Orientalist power,⁵⁷ the Shérazade trilogy stands out for the playfulness with which Sebbar approaches the subject of Franco-Maghrebi identity and the hybridity that is at the heart of it. Through her capricious and whimsical protagonist, Sebbar poses a comic counter-regard on the Orientalist gaze itself, which in turn becomes the basis for a compelling literary critique of French colonial discourses and their continued legacy in contemporary French society.

The novel triad, which begins with *Shérazade: 17 ans, brune, frisée, les yeux verts* (1982), and continues with the slightly lesser known *Les Carnets de Shérazade* (1985) and *Le Fou de Shérazade* (1991)⁵⁸, is united by its titular heroine. All three novels portray the peregrinations of Shérazade – a young *Beure*⁵⁹ runaway born to Algerian immigrants – who travels through France in a quest for identity in a society that views her as a perpetual outsider. In depicting her heroine, Sebbar taps into a discourse embedded not only within colonial configurations of power: Orientalist discourses also intersect with patriarchal systems, such that together, Orientalist imagery and iconography have represented North Africa in the image of passive, yet tantalizing femininity. Mimicry, however, serves as an exemplary technique of cultural contestation in the trilogy, as the novels play off and with these very Orientalist conventions in order to subvert French Metropolitan images of Maghrebi womanhood. In a highly paradoxical gesture, Sebbar models her heroine upon a well-known Orientalist stereotype – that of the *femme du harem* or *odalisque*. French painters like Eugène Delacroix, Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres and Henri Matisse helped

⁵⁷ See her essays “Un voyage désorienté” and “L’orientalisme et les silences de la langue de mon père, l’arabe,” which respectively figure as pre- and -postface to Christine Peltre’s *Le voyage en Afrique du Nord: Images et Mirages d’un tourisme* (Saint-Pourçain-sur-Sioule : Bleu Autour, 2018) and Annick Notter et al.’s *L’Algérie de Gustave Guillaumet : 1880-1887* (Montreuil : Gourcuff Gradenigo, 2018).

⁵⁸ Each of the three novels will henceforth be referred to respectively as *17 ans*, *CS* and *FS*.

⁵⁹ *Beur* is a *verlan* inversion of the word “arabe.” The term – which was common in the 1980s and has since fallen out of favor – designates French-born citizens with immigrant parents from North Africa.

propagate the harem woman trope in the Western imaginary as one of French Orientalism's most tantalizing myths. Many of their well-known paintings⁶⁰ portray highly codified and sexualized images of Maghrebi (and Middle Eastern) women, often outstretched in languorous poses of inactivity. In a parody of Orientalism's "politics of exoticism" (Behdad 8), Shérazade bears superficial resemblance to the exoticized female subjects of Orientalist art, but the protagonist constantly frustrates the expectations of French society's Orientalizing gaze through her insistent banality. By constructing her heroine in the image of the *odalisque*, but as a humorously mottled variant of it, Sebbar situates mimicry at the heart of Shérazade's *Beure* identity formation and subsequent contestation.

Orientalist images exert a strong hold on Shérazade, like they do on Sebbar, as the author constructs her protagonist in her own image. If Sebbar self-avowedly "s'arrête au moindre indice pictural et littéraire qui raconte l'Orient" ("L'orientalisme et les silences" 81), Shérazade similarly seeks out Metropolitan representations of her cultural history. In fact, it is the very *raison d'être* of the trilogy: an elusive vagabond, the protagonist travels the length and breadth of France (and beyond) in pursuit of cultural indices that would allow her to engage with the legacy of French colonialism of the Maghreb. After having run away from home and living in Parisian squats (in the first book of the trilogy), Shérazade hitchhikes her way through France over the course of seven days alongside a truckdriver named Gilles (in the second book). In this journey, she follows "l'itinéraire de la marche des Beurs" (CS 21), retracing the footsteps of her Maghrebi ancestors. And finally, in the third volume of the trilogy, her quest for identity through errantry takes her as far as Jerusalem, where she seeks to "saisir des fragments de mémoire de l'autre côté de 'la mer

⁶⁰ See for example Delacroix's *Femmes d'Alger dans leur appartement* (1834), Ingres' *La Grande Odalisque* (1814), Matisse's *Odalisque à la culotte rouge* (1921).

blanche’⁶¹ (“L’orientalisme et les silences” 81). Together, the three novels portray Shérazade’s quest for a collective *Beur* memory, through which she seeks to understand her ancestral connection to the Maghreb as well as her status in contemporary French society. During her peregrinations, Shérazade obsessively reads travelogues of Orientalist writers like Pierre Loti, Isabelle Eberhardt, Flora Tristan and Eugène Fromentin, which demonstrates, in Michel Laronde’s words, the heroine’s “prédilection pour les errants, les déracinés, les métissés, ceux qui tentent d’assimiler plusieurs cultures et qui sont ouverts au monde” (167). She also visits museums and other cultural sites, where she spends hours contemplating Orientalist paintings and other cultural representations of North Africa. Anne Donadey attributes this marked presence of Orientalist cultural symbols in Sebbar’s novels neither to the author having succumbed to the “trap of Orientalist repetition” nor to Sebbar “engaging in oppositional dialogue with the Orientalist tradition” (118).⁶² Rejecting this Manichean framework, Donadey instead ascribes this omnipresence of Western narratives in Sebbar’s work to her characters’ exile from their North African homeland. Shérazade is a child of immigrants, whose parents’ migration to France leaves the Maghrebi culture and past inaccessible to her. It is then by means of this Orientalist material that Shérazade discovers the exoticizing lens through which Metropolitan France regards her history, her people and Shérazade herself, impressions of which she notes in her *carnets*⁶³. If

⁶¹ This expression is a French translation of the Arabic designation for the Mediterranean Sea – “al-Bahr Al-Abyad al-Muttawasit,” meaning “the Middle white sea.”

⁶² Other critics have, however, rejected this position by questioning whether Sebbar’s ambiguous reliance on Orientalist iconography necessarily serves as a means to subvert them. In her critical reading of Sebbar’s novella *Le peintre et son modèle*, for example, Alexandra Gueydan-Turek suggests that Sebbar’s dependance on “Orientalist visual artifacts,” photographs particularly, perpetuates to some measure “a certain Western nostalgia” for these colonial symbols (98). See her article “Visions of Odalisques: Orientalism and Conspicuous Consumption in Leila Sebbar’s ‘Le Peintre et Son Modèle’ (2007).” *Research in African Literatures*, vol. 42, no. 4, 2011, pp. 97–113.

⁶³ In a *mise-en-abyme* of Shérazade’s own *carnets*, the second novel in the trilogy – *Les carnets de Shérazade* – offers a meta-representation of Shérazade’s notebooks.

Orientalists like Delacroix kept notebooks to document their ‘voyage en Orient’ (Djebar 168), Shérázade coopts this Orientalist apparatus for her own purposes – she makes cursory sketches and takes haphazard notes as she records her travels across France, thereby inverting the direction of the colonial gaze. By observing these visual and narrative representations of official history,⁶⁴ Shérázade seeks out a point of departure from which to discover, participate in and restore a collective memory which would give her, a *Beure*, a coherent identity and legitimate her presence in France. Shérázade, then, actively engages with French representations of the Maghreb, using them not only to understand the seductive Orientalist lens through which French society regards her culture, but also to access her own history and cultural heritage.

Like her heroine, Sebbar does not reject official history, but rather invites it into the text in order to tease out its ideological motivations. In the novels, we come face to face with two tumultuous intertexts – on one hand, Orientalist myths and iconography that exoticize the Orient represented as a passive female, and, on the other hand, Sebbar’s own gaze that tells a more complex narrative of North African femininity. Inspired by Edward Said’s ground-breaking book *Orientalism* (1978), writers and scholars like Assia Djebar and Linda Nochlin have written about the highly gendered nature of Orientalist discourse, which gave the French colonial regime a set of exoticizing and eroticizing conventions with which to represent North African womanhood. Although they propose distinct understandings of how Orientalist thought influenced Western representations of North Africa (and the Middle East), both Djebar and Nochlin draw a similar

⁶⁴As for the author, this Orientalist imagery renders accessible the Algerian culture of her birth and her childhood, which her exile in France cuts her off from. As a “croisée” straddling two distinct worlds, Sebbar’s identity is founded upon “ce qu’elle ne sait pas de la vie et de la langue de son père” (Panaïté 808). In Sebbar’s writing, her ignorance of the Arabic language (which she can neither speak nor understand) often stand in for her inability to access her paternal culture and history, a subject that she addresses in her works of autobiographical fiction and essays, including *Je ne parle pas la langue de mon père* (Paris: Julliard, 2003) and “L’orientalisme et les silences de la langue de mon père, l’arabe.”

conclusion when it comes to Orientalism in the visual arts⁶⁵ : that feminized and sexualized representations of those it colonized served as avenues for the “playing out, from a suitable distance, of forbidden [Western] passions” (Nochlin 42). Indeed, by claiming to offer (Western) spectators a peek into ‘the Orient’s’ forbidden spaces like its harems, paintings of *odalisques* transformed the Maghreb world in general, and North African womanhood in particular, into objects of Western fantasy. The trilogy follows this sexualizing logic of Orientalism, as each novel in the trilogy consists of men, Frenchmen particularly, who project their own fantasies of “exotic” feminine alterity onto Shérazade. In the first book, the purveyor of this Orientalist gaze is Julien, a pied-noir who is yearning for his lost Algerian homeland. His attempt to render transparent the mysteries of ‘the Orient’ – which have evaded him since he left Algeria as a child – coheres as much around a scholarly passion for Orientalist literature and history, as it does around his fascination with Shérazade, whom he is besotted with (*Le Fou de Shérazade* is no doubt Julien). In a chapter entitled “Delacroix,” Julien and Shérazade together visit the Louvre, where both “orientalist” and “*odalisque*” simultaneously regard Delacroix’s *Femmes d’Alger dans leur appartement*. While Julien is insistent to identify Shérazade with the women in the painting based on superficial similarities (like her scarf, her green eyes), Shérazade recognizes that her likeness to these Orientalist representations of Maghrebi womanhood is nothing but cursory. In the second novel, a French trucker named Gilles, much like Julien, seeks to transform this young woman of Algerian heritage into a real-life *odalisque*. During a scene that explicitly likens Gilles’ gaze to that of Orientalist painters, we witness the trucker watch Shérazade sleeping on a divan: “une fille

⁶⁵ See Assia Djebar, “Regard interdit, son coupé” from *Femmes d’Alger dans leur appartement : Nouvelles* (Paris: Des Femmes, 1980) and Linda Nochlin, “The Imaginary Orient” from *The Politics of Vision: Essays on Nineteenth-century Art and Society* (New York: Harper & Row, 1989).

endormie, allongée comme les femmes des harem...le pantalon blanc trop large pour elle ressemble à un pantalon bouffant de femme arabe ou turque” (89). Evoking paintings such as Matisse’s *Odalisque à la culotte rouge*, this image of Shérazade intruded upon by a voyeuristic male gaze situates the protagonist in an Orientalist *topos*. Through it, Sebbar ostentatiously relates her heroine to the trope of the *odalisque*, which codes the ‘Oriental’ woman as a forbidden object of sexual fantasy, meant to be unveiled through the prying gaze of European men. What is perhaps even more powerful is how this episode *enacts* the harem scenes of Orientalist art, as a stranger voyeuristically peeks into what is supposed to be a moment of solitude. While watching Shérazade, Gilles is reminded of “des revues pornos” (89) – telling because it serves as Sebbar’s not-very-subtle jab at Orientalist paintings, or as Nochlin’s calls them, “Orientalist erotica” (44), which have both mystified and sexualized North African women by transforming them into fetishistic objects of desire. By fashioning her protagonist in the image of Orientalist tropes, Sebbar is thus able to demonstrate – and critique – the continued attraction that these stereotypes exert in contemporary French society.

Dialoguing with Orientalist painters and their representations of Maghrebi women as *odalisques*, Shérazade therefore intentionally creates Shérazade in close resemblance to this exoticizing trope – indeed, as Bhabha explains, in order for mimicry to work, it must have elements of the “real” and recognizable. However, this mimesis functions through a paradoxical process that can be described as what Bhabha terms “colonial discourse that is uttered *inter dicta*” – “a discourse uttered between the lines and as such both against the rules and within them” (128). That is, even as Sebbar takes up familiar Orientalist myths, she simultaneously wedges a gap between stereotype and reality through an ironizing process that calls attention to the dissonance between them. When it comes to her heroine, Sebbar subverts the categories of the “real” in the mimic by

constructing Shérázade in the image of the *odalisque*, but as a mottled, humorously unexotic version of it. This becomes evident when adulatory Frenchmen attempt to assimilate the protagonist to images of *odalisque*-like youth and beauty; Shérázade, however, resists any such attempts at identification through her insistent banality. Displaying a flagrant disregard for her appearance, she wears clothes that are either ill-fitting or dirty; she is often seen sporting a tacky visor bedecked with the colors of the American flag; she dons sunglasses well past dark in order to keep away the prying gaze of men obsessed with her green eyes, which for them evoke Orientalist depictions of harem women. In all these ways – and much to the consternation of her admirers – Shérázade emerges not as “legible” and “desirable” (Behdad 5), but as unexotic and ordinary.

This inexact approximation of the Orientalist model is not only humorous, but also subversive in its capacity to deface familiar Orientalist imagery. As an act of repetition with a difference, Shérázade’s practices of mimicry result not in “appropriate form[s] of colonial subjectivity” that would confirm the expectations of the Orientalist gaze, but instead produce her as an “inappropriate object” whose “resemblance” [to the *odalisque* type] is itself “menace” (Bhabha 123). This transgressive potential of mimicry becomes evident as Shérázade imitates images of harem women in fashioning her appearance, but makes a travesty of them through symbolic acts of “vandalism.” Borrowing Orientalist “accessories” to style herself, she wears a “babouche,” a “foulard à franges brillants, comme les aimaient les Arabes de Barbès et les femmes du bled,” “boucles d’oreilles rondes et fines [avec] une émeraude cerclée d’or” (*17 ans* 7-9). It is based on these items of dress that Julien likens Shérázade to the women in Delacroix’s *Femmes d’Alger*, a likening that acquires particular significance given that it is these very types of accessories that Delacroix would bring back from his travels in North Africa to give his paintings

of harem scenes a semblance of authenticity.⁶⁶ However, in a gesture akin to adolescent rebellion,⁶⁷ but far more subversive than it, the young vagabond “vandalizes” these classics even as she mimics them. For example, if she wears a “foulard à franges brillantes” “[qui fait] penser à ces femmes d’Algérie” of Delacroix, it is nevertheless one of “mauvaise qualité du tissu [qui le] rendait trop mou” (17 ans 8). By “tagging”⁶⁸ her scarf not as a fetishistic object of “couleur locale,” but to borrow Anissa Talahite’s term, as a cheap object of “pacotille” (65), the “vandal” despoils the Orientalist images that inform her identity quest. In thereby threatening the exoticizing logic upon which Orientalist economies were founded, Shérazade preserves that “menacing sense” in which she is “near but different” (Bhabha 98).

By enacting cultural and racial difference, these flawed acts of mimesis further do the work of disturbing the homogenous logic of colonial discourse. Arising from a colonial desire for a

⁶⁶ Djebbar is clear that the women in Delacroix’s paintings, although Orientalist renderings, are not fictional figures but real women, whom Delacroix observed during a visit to Morocco. A former *raïs* authorized Delacroix’s visit to the female quarters of his abode, which allowed the painter to access a private, feminine space ordinarily closed to men. There, he spent a few hours sketching the women, taking notes in his *carnets* and collecting items that he would bring back to France (according to Djebbar, “des babouches, une écharpe, une chemise, une culotte (Djebbar 170)) – all of which would eventually inspire his well-known painting (Djebbar 168-170).

⁶⁷ Like Faïza Guène’s Doria in *Kiffe kiffe demain* (2004), Shérazade is fiercely independent. Akin to Sebbar’s trilogy, this classic coming-of-age novel is a story about immigrant life in France’s *banlieues* and French society’s failure towards its immigrants. Doria’s independence results from physically and mentally absent parents, who leave her to fend for herself and rely on France’s inadequate social security system. Shérazade’s fierce sense of individuality is a product of her own choosing – as a runaway, it is Shérazade who has abandoned her family in pursuit of her identity. Although independent, Doria is not opaque. The novel takes the form of a journal, which gives readers access to Doria’s internal monologue. Sebbar, however, keeps Shérazade’s thoughts impenetrable to both her diegetic and extra-diegetic audience. Shérazade closely guards the contents of her *carnets* and the novel’s narrator often slips without warning or distinction from Shérazade’s point of view to an impersonal third-person narrator, which leaves her audience perpetually unable to access her internalizations.

⁶⁸ Tagging, a term used in street-art, indicates a signature or any stylized writing that is added to a graffiti mural. Like an artist’s signature on a painting, a “tag” marks a work of street art as that of an artist or her/his crew. In addition to stamping an artwork as an artist’s own, tagging buildings with graffiti also constitutes an act of resistance, which serves as a visual reminder of protest or a challenge to the status quo.

familiar and knowable Other, colonially-mandated mimicry sought to erase difference and instead re-cast colonial subjects in the colonizer's own terms. However, as explained by Bhabha, colonial mimesis rarely resulted in exact copies, but instead enacted a parody of Metropolitan standards by producing mimicking subjects as flawed replicas of the original (almost the same, but not quite). In other words, colonial mimics have qualities that resemble the colonial model, but they combine this likeness with attributes that are different from or in excess of this original; that is, they are hybrid in their very essence. Indeed, *métissage* is an essential feature of Shérazade's mimicry, as she borrows from both Metropolitan representations of her cultural heritage as well as subaltern cultural histories in forging her identity. Françoise Lionnet defines hybridity as a quintessential characteristic of the 'postmodern condition,' whereby the postcolonial subject is "suspended between different yet often inseparable, cultural spaces" (174). Grounded in this "*logique métisse*" (Amselle in Lionnet 179) of postmodernity, Shérazade coopts elements from both French and Algerian history and culture, using them to reconstruct her own sense of self that is independent from the projections of the exoticizing Metropolitan gaze. Thus, while Gilles and Julien, as authorized representatives of this dominant imaginary, seek to fix Shérazade as an 'Oriental' woman, Shérazade rejects this reifying impulse by embracing both her Arabness and Frenchness. Claiming an aesthetic of mixity, we see her fashion a "voile de femme arabe" of the sort that she has often seen her mother wear, but this, out of a "nappe en coton français" (CS 58), thereby quite literally piecing together a garment that embodies an aesthetic of interrelatedness. Just as Shérazade's "air [...] Arabe" sets Gilles off in extended Orientalist reverie, she decides to repurpose the drape into a "robe du soir" (CS 59), which signals a fluidity, a symbolic "glissement de la nationalité" (Van Strien-Chardonneau 30) that perpetually leaves Gilles and other 'Orientalists' unable to pin her down either as Algerian or as French. In fact, Shérazade's imperfect

imitation of Orientalist tropes makes problematic the very notion of origins. Peter Stranges underscores precisely this link between mimicry and hybridity when he writes about Shérazade's "ambiguous relationship with French (neo)Orientalism", one that he defines as a process of "identification *and* distance" (81). By adopting this "hybrid stance" (Stranges 81), Shérazade challenges the diametric opposition between self and other/colonizer and colonized upon which Orientalist discourses rely, which ultimately allows her to "reterritorialize France's segregated landscape as common ground" (Stranges 81). Through it, not only does Shérazade emerge as a *métisse* postmodern subject who privileges, according to Marianne Hirsch and Nancy Miller, "une imbrication réciproque plutôt qu'une opposition ouverte entre le désir des racines [...] et la tentation de la condition diasporique" (qtd. in Panaïté 797), but France itself materializes as a multicultural nation, whose "always already hybrid nature" (Lionnet 6) is testament to the multiple colonial encounters that forged it.

In addition to reinforcing the dissonance between mimic and model, her *métissage* further becomes useful as a mechanism to thwart Orientalism's reifying impulse. As Shérazade seeks to preserve her ties both to her French identity and her Algerian heritage, she emerges neither as the fetishized trope of Orientalist discourse nor as the "femmes de cités" of her mother's generation – "elle n'évoquait pas immédiatement les odalisques ou les Algériennes," according to the narrator (*17 ans* 198). Dressed "en jean, Adidas et blouson de cuir" (*17 ans* 198), she instead resembles the postmodern subject reminiscent of Marjane Satrapi's Marji in *Persepolis*. In a nation at the cusp of revolution, torn between anti- and pro-Western agendas, the adolescent heroine of this classic coming-of-age *bande dessinée* subscribes wholesale neither to the tenets of tradition nor of modernity. Like Marji, Shérazade too borrows from "Eastern" and "Western" influences in creating her self-image: she draws inspiration from the "femmes orientales de la peinture française,

[...] oisives et belles [...] dans le luxe des parfums et de la soie [...] ” as much as she does from “les femmes d’Orient en France, dans les cités au bord des capitales, [qui vivent] dans le froid et la brique grise et noire” (CS 152). Negotiating between Delacroix’s *Femmes d’Alger* and Sebbar’s “femmes de cité,” Shérazade’s sense of Franco-Maghrebi womanhood lies somewhere in between the two – a pastiche of grandiose ideal and suburban French reality. In this way, her flawed acts of mimesis become a “strategy” of resistance in Michel de Certeau’s sense of the term as he uses it *The Practice of Everyday Life* (1980) – they challenge the power of Orientalist discourse although they operate “within the stronghold of its own ‘proper’ place or institution” (de Certeau xx). In negotiating her identity, Shérazade uses the framework developed by dominant culture, but in ways that were not originally intended by it, which allows her to appropriate its rules to her benefit. As a consequence, Shérazade is able to reject Orientalism’s essentializing logic, even though her quest for identity is heavily mediated by its codes.

This inexact approximation of the *odalisque* original effectively ruptures the allure surrounding Orientalist stereotypes – while Frenchmen seek to find in her traces of the exotic, they are often disappointed to find in its place something quite ordinary. As a postmodern subject who enacts and embodies France’s cultural heterogeneity, Shérazade is equally wary of the homogenous logic of *francité* as she is of French Orientalism. She challenges the myth of France as a uniform nation of “quiet pastures and authentic images” (Lionnet 181), often through her banal gastronomic choices. She chooses to consume “le pain des Macdo” (CS 48) and Coca-Cola, even as Gilles fantasizes about his idyllic childhood in the French countryside, complete with artisanal bread from local *boulangers* and small batch, locally produced wine. In doing so, Shérazade rejects the tricolor-sporting truckdriver’s yearning for a pure French culture, unsullied by the forces of globalization (and imperialism), instead demonstrating her preference for consumerist culture of a

most everyday, un-artisanal kind. She is equally wary of photographers and filmmakers like Julien, “who [often] want to reproduce her image as the stereotypical other, the archetypal exotic woman” (Majumdar 202). This becomes most evident in Julien’s photographic and cinematic attempts to represent Shérazade. As Winifred Woodhull writes, Julien “enacts his fantasy” of (sexual) conquest “in and through image production” (118). In a corollary to his obsessive desire to “possess” Shérazade, and by extension, the Algeria of his childhood, Julien ceaselessly seeks to produce images of Shérazade, attempts that she insistently thwarts (Woodhull 112). While Julien photographs her, she refuses to pose in ways that Julien directs her to, instead doing as she pleases: “Elle [...] n’obéissait jamais à ses injonctions lorsqu’il arrivait de dire ‘Lève ta tête, regarde-moi, reste debout...’” (*17 ans* 148). Decidedly rejecting Julien’s Orientalizing gaze, she dismisses his photographs as “du porno” (*17 ans* 158), even tearing down pictures of her in his apartment, thereby sending him a succinct but clear message: “Je ne suis pas une odalisque” (*17 ans* 206). By maintaining control over her representation, Shérazade thus retains a strong sense of agency, through which she perennially eludes the Orientalist “dream of possession” (Woodhull 112). In fact, during the entirety of the third novel, Julien is in search of Shérazade, who has run away after she agrees to play the protagonist of a film that he is directing. Shérazade quite literally evades his cinematic gaze “when she finds she cannot relate to the screen image he is creating of her” (Majumdar 203), which results in perpetual game of cat-and-mouse that leaves Julien in constant pursuit of her over the course of all three novels in trilogy. Rebuffing those that seek her out to play the part of the quintessential ‘Oriental’ woman, Shérazade therefore rejects any attempts at representation that violate her own, hybrid sense of self.

As an imperfect colonial double, the heroine not only frustrates the expectations of the Orientalist gaze, but also parodies its exoticizing tendencies. The banality of Shérazade’s language

(like that of her appearance and her culinary preferences) becomes a particularly effective tool in enacting a mockery of Orientalist fantasies, as the terseness of her speech starkly contrasts with the exalting prose of Orientalist desire. Often in the novels, Sebbar forcefully jerks us away from the grandiose rhetoric of Orientalist discourse through the brevity of Shérazade's language. One instance of this occurs when Julien sees Shérazade for the first time at a fast-food joint. Evoking the famed narrator of the tales of *One Thousand and One Nights*,⁶⁹ Shérazade's name becomes a subject of marvel for an enthralled Julien, who proceeds to interrogate her about its origins with a sense of transfixed wonder. The conversation that ensues plays out thus:

“-Vous vous appelez vraiment Shérazade ?

-Oui.

-Vraiment ? C'est...c'est tellement...Comment dire ? Vous savez qui était Sheherazade ?⁷⁰

-Oui.

-Et ça vous ne fait rien ?

-Non.

-Vous croyez qu'on peut s'appeler Shérazade, comme ça ?....” (*Shérazade: 17 ans* 8).

⁶⁹ According to the story that frames *One Thousand and One Nights*, Sheherazade is a legendary Persian queen, known for her ingenious narrative capacities. Her despotic husband vows to avenge his former wife's infidelity by marrying virgins and beheading them the next day. Sheherazade, however, devises a plan that would save her from persecution. She narrates a tale nightly, which together comprise the stories in *One Thousand and One Nights*. Taken by Sheherazade's narration and eager for more, her husband perpetually delays her death, and through her ingenuity, Sheherazade thus escapes death.

⁷⁰ With this Persian/Arabic transliteration ('Sheherazade'), instead of the French spelling ('Shérazade'), Julien evokes the original Persian figure of *1001 Nights*. (For more on the original name and the distinction with Shérazade, see the following footnote.) This literary figure has enthralled many in the West, particularly Orientalist writers and artists. Scholars have argued that Western literature and popular culture have coopted this literary figure and transformed her into a sexual object – a harem woman of sorts – by focusing on her sexual allure, rather than on her narrative capacities. Julien's enchantment with Shérazade, as well as her namesake Sheherazade, harkens to this Western fascination with the Persian character. For more on this, see Mernissi Fatima, *Scheherazade Goes West*. New York: Washington Square Press, 2001.

The dialogue continues in this vein, with Julien's Orientalist musings incongruous against Shérazade's monosyllabic responses. In an ironic transgression of the eloquence associated with her namesake, Shérazade's own manners of speech are evidently curt, as they refuse to participate in Julien's exoticizing propensities. We see this dynamic operate frequently in the trilogy – Julien offers Shérazade lessons on Orientalist art, literature or history, but a disinterested Shérazade often interjects with blunt responses that interrupt the Orientalist scholar's pedantizing. In fact, Shérazade's quotidian language renders the entire Orientalist colonial enterprise a derisory object of mockery in the novels' diegetic universe, as it stands in direct and humorous contrast against Orientalism's obsessive penchant for exoticism. Critics have pointed out that Sebbar's prose in the trilogy is emphatically straightforward – “sujet, verbe, complément, quelques relatives, mais quasiment pas de propositions circonstancielles qui permettraient d'échapper à une certaine monotonie” (Déjeux 60). This matter-of-factness of language not only sets a brusque pace for readers of the text, but also allows its author to poke fun at the excesses of Orientalist discourse. Serving as a counterpoint to the language of the 'Orientalists' in the novel, Shérazade's, and by extension, Sebbar's laconic prose reveal the absurdity of Orientalism's exalting and romanticizing rhetoric, particularly in the face of Shérazade's own unexoticism.

But if Shérazade resists Orientalist attempts at identifying her with her Persian namesake, at propitious moments, she embraces this identity. This tendency highlights the tension between two differing forms of mimicry that Shérazade performs. If she sometimes emphasizes her difference from Orientalist tropes to prevent being absorbed into its exoticizing codes (through what I have called flawed acts of mimicry), at other times, she intentionally establishes proximity to them in ways that would benefit her. Just as Lafférière's and Mabanckou's protagonists coopt stereotypes about blackness, Shérazade too makes Orientalist myths her own. This becomes

evident when Shérazade instrumentalizes her narrative agencies as the Sheherazade of *One Thousand and One Nights* did, telling tales to stay alive within the context of patriarchal power structures. In her book *This Sex Which is Not One* (1985), Luce Irigaray explains that such paradoxical acts of mimesis, which consist in women intentionally assuming the roles that are expected or assigned by masculine discourse, can in fact be subversive. On Irigaray's account, *mimétisme* – the “playful repetition” (76) of masculine discourse – functions as a form of feminist resistance against a phallogocentric world order, particularly when employed with a sense of intention: “One must assume the feminine role deliberately. Which means already to convert a form of subordination into an affirmation, and thus to begin to thwart it” (76). This is precisely what Shérazade does, i.e., she “deliberately” submits to the Orientalist expectations of her namesake and this acquiescence in turn allows her to gain opportunities to survive and thrive. Self-consciously playing the role of storyteller, the trilogy's heroine creates a system of “barter,” through which she trades stories for safe passage in Gilles' truck during her errantry (Lionnet 185). If the Sheherazade of *One Thousand and One Nights* evaded death by telling stories, Sebbar's Shérazade similarly promises to entertain her interlocutor in exchange not only for transport but also for safety. Like her Persian counterpart, Shérazade “parlait tout le temps pour qu'il oublie de la violer” (FS 180-181).

In this sense, Shérazade's discursive engagement with Orientalist desire becomes a “tactic” of survival in de Certeau's definition of the term – that is, it serves as one of “the ingenious ways in which the weak make use of the strong” (xvii). Borrowing Michel Serres's definition, Françoise Lionnet compares Shérazade to “something of a social parasite” (168) – the protagonist selectively adapts and exploits various parts of her identity according to her needs at hand. While dropping

“la syllabe [...] la plus orientale” (FS 164) in a modernization of her name,⁷¹ she simultaneously taps into the Orientalist imaginary surrounding Sheherazade, exploiting Western culture’s fascination with this figure when it proves useful to her. Rather than *being coopted* into this colonial imaginary, she is an active subject who *coopts* it in the service of her own agendas. Shérázade’s mimetic repetition of the storyteller’s role, then, is both “defensive” and “opportunistic” (Blauvelt 20), since it allows her to enjoy moments of security in her capacity as a young and vulnerable vagabond who relies on strange men for transport and domicile⁷². Like a social parasite, she is constantly on the lookout for “opportunities that must be seized ‘on the wing’” (de Certeau xix). When she is unable to find them, she finds propitious moments to transform “events” into “opportunities” (de Certeau xix), which she grasps within the cracks and crevices of Orientalism’s patriarchal enterprise.

As Shérázade assumes the role of ‘Oriental’ orator assigned to her by male European discourse, she does so not to reinforce its hegemony but instead to resist being absorbed into its phallocentric order – as Irigaray writes, “To play with mimesis is, [...] for a woman, to try to recover the place of her exploitation by discourse, without allowing herself to be simply reduced to it” (76). Indeed, Shérázade’s discursive choices themselves become a “conscious strategy of opposition to hegemonic discourse” (Donadey 69). Like her literary counterpart, who postponed her stories’ revelation and conclusion, Shérázade recuperates agency through her ability to create and maintain opacity in her narratives, which competes against the Orientalist desire for clarity.

⁷¹ Shérázade explains that a French court clerk “simplified” her birth name, originally “Sheherazade,” by dropping the second syllable, “cher,” and replacing it with the French “é” (FS 164). In an implicit critique of French bureaucratic forces, which subject migrant identities to forced assimilation, Sebbar demonstrates how a name that originates in Arab literary history undergoes a process of *francisation*, in order to render it less “foreign” and more phonetically familiar to the French tongue.

⁷² Shérázade often seeks shelter in Gilles’ truck. In fact, the two make their acquaintance when Gilles one day returns to his truck to find in it a sleeping Shérázade.

Comparable to 19th century Orientalist painters, who sought to penetrate women's intimate spaces to get a glimpse of what was forbidden to them, the men in the novel's diegesis attempt to unveil Shérázade's private life. Gilles and Julien constantly seek answers to questions about Shérázade's identity and past: How old is Shérázade? Is she a *sans-papiers*, an Arab, a Muslim, a Jew? What is she doing hitchhiking alone through France? However, they must content themselves with little to no details about her background, as her narrative techniques leave her impervious to their invasive gaze. Asserting her "right to opacity" (Glissant *Poetics of Relation* 189), she decides how much to reveal (very little), when (here and there, as she pleases) and how (in bits and pieces); she only tells those stories that she wants to tell, jumping from one anecdote to another, punctuated by long periods of silences and revealing little about herself and her past. Characterized by constant textual pirouettes, Shérázade's anecdotes thereby mirror the uncertainty of her vagabondage itself: the text both follows and recounts her nomadic encounters, leaving one narrative trail to follow another as Shérázade herself wanders from one adventure to the next. Adopting, then, her very own codes of narration and conversation, Shérázade constructs her universe and realities through her stories, which allow her to "authorize herself to assume her own identity" (Lionnet 175). These stories force her audience – those watching, listening to and reading her – to understand her past and her life on her own terms, rather than peek into her interiority and subjectivity uninvited as the Orientalists did.

In appropriating Orientalist images and narrative economies to advance her agendas, Shérázade regains the right to construct her own identity and self-image, which is a definitively cosmopolitan and hybrid one. Irigaray writes that "if women can play with mimesis, it is because they are capable of bringing new nourishment to its operation" (76). Indeed, in mimicking Orientalist tropes, Shérázade transforms colonial culture itself, as she is able to braid together the

“grands récits” of colonial History with the “petites histoires” (Greenblatt 2)⁷³ of the migrant voices that she discovers during her travels. Through this dialogue between colonial, Orientalist discourse and her own itinerant travels, Shérazade creates a sense of self that privileges not Orientalist fixity but fluidity. While Gilles and Julien seek to assimilate her to the singularity of a mythicized Orient, her sense of belonging is universal rather than local, dynamic rather than static: in the image of Flora Tristan whom she avidly reads, she is “une voyageuse intrépide et passionnée qui proclame, parce qu’elle n’a pas de terre, que sa patrie c’est l’univers” (CS 128). Following the trajectory of her own errant stories, Shérazade is thus a citizen of the world, whose identity is, to use Paul Gilroy’s metaphor, not in the “root” but in the “route” (3). In her nomadism, Shérazade meets people from all over France and its multicultural diasporas, which becomes the basis of her references, in turn the creative source behind the stories recounted in the trilogy by Shérazade and by Sebbar herself. Demonstrating this interpretability of her (textual and spatial) voyage and her identity, the “route” – her errantry in both time and space – becomes essential in piecing together both a sense of self and of contemporary French society. As she wanders across France and later Jerusalem, her errant quest dislodges a homogenous image of France, as she uncovers a history and contemporary French society that are diverse and multiple. By “establish[ing] a Relation, in an egalitarian and unprecedented way, between histories,” to borrow Glissant’s words (*Caribbean Discourse* 249), her errantry blurs binary distinctions between Self/ Other, Metropole/ Algeria,

⁷³ In his book *Marvelous Possessions: The Wonder of the New World* (1991), Stephen Greenblatt draws a distinction between “grands récits” and “petites histoires” or anecdotes. He argues that the former was the primary form that European travelers employed in their travel narratives and other colonial accounts of encounters with the “New World.” These Histories, which were characterized by an inexorable sense of certainty and forward momentum, presented voyagers’ novel contacts and clashes with cultural difference as being organized and ordered. He argues that in contrast, “petites histoires,” or anecdotes, are more appropriate to voyages of exploration that are “uncertain of their bearings, disorganized, fragmentary” because they discursively reflect an oft played-out history where “voyagers [...] thought that they knew where they were going and ended up in a place whose existence they had never imagined” (2).

France/Maghreb. Instead, it accepts that there is no pure, originary self, but that the Totality of the world – Tout [le] Monde – is inside the self. Shérazade's identity, as a result, becomes tied not to a restrictive national framework, but is instead constituted as a patchwork of its multiple parts that come together to form an integral whole.

Her identity, thus a product of her *vagabondage*, is as capricious and ambivalent as is Shérazade. Because her errantry is dictated only by the logic of her own whims and vagrancies, Shérazade is ever-elusive in the trilogy, leaving those around her unable to know where she is at any given moment. Shérazade has run away from home, and despite police reports that detail her appearance, she continues to evade her family, friends and even the French police, because she refuses a fixed domicile. Instead, she goes where she pleases, when she pleases and speaks little of herself, leaving those around her to speculate about her itinerant lifestyle. The novels' characters, for their part, seek to contain this indeterminacy, which fuels their fantasies but also creates a sense of uneasiness and suspicion surrounding her life: for example, Gilles wonders, "peut-être Shérazade avait [...] échappé à la police, à des maquereaux, à la drogue, au foyer, à la prison ... ou peut-être pas, après tout. Elle avait peu parlé d'elle" (CS 87). Faced with an Orientalist desire to define her, Shérazade thus remains not only banal, but also impenetrable and unknowable in the eyes of those that seek to comprehend her migrant existence. For the 'Orientalists' attempting to penetrate her life on their own terms, she emerges as much as an exotic temptress, as a mysterious vagabond, who cannot be fixed in time and space as the *odalisques* were. Instead, she affirms a fierce sense of liberty, declaring "je vais où je veux, quand je veux et ma place, c'est partout" (17 ans 88). Consequently, fluidity and suppleness become the only stable signifiers of her identity. This further becomes evident in the way Shérazade changes her name, modifying her identity to suit her needs: "je m'appelle aussi Camille.... ça dépend avec qui je suis" (17 ans 180).

As Michel Laronde explains, these acts of “s’autonomer/s’auto-nommer” (197), while on the one hand allowing her to “camoufler” (198) her identity, on the other hand, function as a means to reclaim a plural and hybrid sense of self. Laronde underscores that these acts of “substitution nominale” (199), rather than supplanting her identity, add to them: “plutôt que de remplacement (d’un nom par l’autre), le processus est d’accumulation: *sous* le nom d’emprunt, il y a multiplicité de la personne dans un seul être” (199). While bureaucratic and Orientalist France seek to fix her identity through reductive stereotypes and superficial description (hence the first novel’s subtitle: *17 ans, brune, frisée, les yeux verts*), Shérazade’s own notion of self is evidently not a congealed one, but changing and multiple, not to mention resolutely independent. In Glissant’s logic of the “Tout-Monde,”⁷⁴ her sense of being in the world and her Relation with it is one in which “each and every identity is extended through a relationship with the Other” (*Poetics of Relation* 11-22), opening the possibility for what Victor Segalen has called the “esthétique du divers” in *Essai sur l’exotisme* (1978). In this essay, Segalen re-evaluates the very notion of “exotisme,” presenting it not as a symptom of colonialist universalism, but as an antidote to it. Like Glissant, Segalen warns against engaging with cultural difference based on epistemic clarity (“la compréhension parfaite d’un hors soi-même qu’on étreindrait en soi” (Segalen 44)), and instead proposes “exotisme” as a category that privileges a sensate engagement with the Other. By refusing to cede to an Orientalist and French bureaucratic obsession with knowing her (what Glissant calls a regime of

⁷⁴ Glissant’s concept of relationtiality, which he calls the “Tout-Monde,” stems from the idea of the Caribbean as an archipelago of hybridity. At the intersection of the Atlantic slave trade, colonialism and the cultural encounters that these forms of domination facilitated, the Caribbean became a site of hybridity. Glissant extends this concept of creolisation from the Caribbean towards all forms of relation and cultural contacts – he posits that within the self lies the totality of the world, such that all beings and their cultures become a product of multiple peoples and civilizations crossing and mixing with one another. The “Tout-Monde” thus counters the imperialist logic of homogeneity and affirms global interrelations, solidarity and hybridity.

“transparence”), Shérazade redefines the dynamics of cultural encounters. She facilitates – or rather forces her interlocutors – to engage with her based not on an imperialist imperative of knowledge, but on a “perception aiguë et immédiate d’une incompréhension éternelle” (Segalen 38).

Through practices of “flawed colonial mimesis,” to borrow Bhabha’s words (125), Sebbar thus presents a humorously mottled alternative to the odalisque original in whose image she constructs Shérazade, thereby dislodging the very Orientalist fictions that the author draws from. In refusing the exotic desires projected onto her by dominant French culture, Shérazade emerges as humorously banal, whose language, appearance and way-of-being challenge the reification of the Orientalist gaze. Sebbar thus takes up metropolitan myths surrounding representations of Maghrebi femininity, identifying the source of their attraction in contemporary French society, and goes on to establish a dialogue with these narratives to braid them into a new cultural narrative. In the next section, we transition to a discussion of another author who similarly problematizes the tradition of Orientalism despite, like Sebbar does, borrowing from its aesthetics.

Testing Empire: Language, Opacity and Orientalism in Joann Sfar’s *Le Chat du Rabbin*

In light of such long-standing colonial desire to know and unveil the Other, postcolonial scholars have advocated for what Edouard Glissant calls “le droit à l’opacité” (203).⁷⁵ According to Glissant (and as was evident from our discussion above), the basis of understanding an Other’s difference in Western epistemology has involved subjecting this Other to a certain transparence – exposing them to scrutiny in order to render them knowable and comprehensible. He writes, “la

⁷⁵ Glissant opens the chapter entitled “Pour l’opacité” in *Poétique de la Relation* (1990) with the claim: ‘Nous réclamons le droit à l’opacité,’ (203) one that he had already articulated in *Le Discours antillais* (1997).

différence elle-même peut [...] ménager une réduction au Transparent. Si nous examinons le processus de la ‘compréhension’ des êtres et des idées dans la perspective de la pensée occidentale, nous retrouvons à son principe l’exigence de cette transparence” (*Poétique* 204). He goes on to explain that this process of rendering difference transparent has constituted opening the Other to examination and assessment. While the previous section explored paradoxical cooptations of Orientalist myths in the novelistic genre, this section turns its attention to a different medium: the bande dessinée [BD] or the graphic novel. As a genre where the textual and the visual cohabit, the BD medium is uniquely placed to borrow from Orientalist discourses and its imagery. In this section, I focus my attention on a recent graphic novel series, namely, Joann Sfar’s *Le Chat du Rabbin*. Situated in French colonial Algeria of the 1930s, the eleven-volume series was published between 2002 and 2021. By treating complex issues like the history of colonialism, the complicated status of Jewish Algerians under French rule and the subject of Orientalism in both a humorous and accessible manner, the BD has gained both popular and critical acclaim.

In our discussion, we will examine how this graphic novel series illustrates the French colonial administration’s obsession with surveying and knowing the Algerian Other. The story of a rabbi, his daughter Zlabya and his talking cat, *Le Chat du Rabbin* depicts a colonial culture that privileged writing, at the expense of oralities and other indigenous modes of knowing. Notably in the series’ second volume, *Le Malka des lions* (2002), the colonial administration imposes the written French language upon the Jewish community in Algeria, exacerbating its disenfranchisement. Under a colonial regime insistent on opening the Other to examination, the series’ protagonist – the rabbi – becomes subjected to a very literal form of assessment: the administration mandates a French-language dictation test in order to authorize him as the “rabbin officiel” of his community (2 11). Never mind that he has served as the community’s rabbi for 30

years, and never mind the futility of a French dictation test for a rabbi who *speaks* French perfectly well and who moreover serves an Arabic-speaking community! Focusing its analysis on the series' first and second volumes, *La Bar-Mitsva* (2002) and *Le Malka des lions* respectively, this section examines the colonial administration's valorization of writing to shed light on the colonial insistence on the written form and how it determines the colonial Other's right to opacity. What are the implications of subjecting the colonized Other to a regime of transparency in exchange for the colonial seal of approval? What does it mean to resist the epistemic violence of the colonial tongue and what does agency in the face of this violence look like, in both lived history and its representation in literature? Conceived as the beginnings of a response to these questions, I posit that although the colonial language, under the guise of a French dictation test, acts as a tool of cultural domination by imposing upon the rabbi what Glissant calls "l'exigence de [...] transparence" (*Poétique* 204), Sfar's paradoxical aesthetic allow the author to restore a measure of opacity to the Algerian Other. Compelling a figure of religious authority to become the pupil of his talking cat, the dictation test expositions the rabbi's insecurities and inabilities as he struggles to write in French. Nevertheless, by examining the complex ways in which Sfar mimics French Orientalist aesthetics, we will see that the very medium of the *bande dessinée* permits Sfar to envelop his protagonists and the Algerian landscape in an opacity that forecloses the possibility of total transparency. In all, this discussion bears testament to how literature in general, and Sfar's artistic-literary choices in particular, serve as tools to contest official accounts of colonial history.

Under the mantle of knowledge, reason and progress, French colonial agents justified subjecting the colonized Other to a regime of transparency. As Enlightenment's (false) universalism and rationalism structured various colonial agents' encounters with difference, progress and reason became the linchpins justifying both overt imperialist projects of expansion

as well as the more subtly sinister projects of colonial knowledge and surveillance. For the rabbi, this colonial “exigence de [...] transparence” (*Poétique* 204) takes the form of a French-language dictation test, which forces the rabbi to submit very literally to colonial judgment, in exchange for authorization as a state-approved religious leader. The dictation is instituted by the Israelite Central Consistory of France (Consistoire Central Israélite de France), a state organization that had been created by Napoleon in 1808 with the purpose of surveying the Jewish community’s complaisance with the rules of the Republic. The dictation is evidence not only of a colonial culture obsessed with writing and documentation, but also of a type of bureaucratic surveillance meant to serve the French Republic preoccupied with centralization and the consolidation of power. The dictation is bad news from the outset, because it means that a letter that would come from a distant and anonymous French administration bearing the results of a dictation test would determine the terms of the rabbinate in Algeria.

In the harrowing days leading up to the test, we see a pathetically humorous reversal in the rabbi’s status. Well-versed in the Talmudic texts and Mosaic laws, the rabbi acts as a spiritual advisor to the Jewish community in Algiers, counseling those that seek his guidance. Faced with the prospect of the dictation test, however, this figure of wisdom and authority becomes fearful and uncertain of himself. In fact, the rabbi despairs from the outset, resigning himself to failure: “il n’a pas même besoin d’une lettre. Il sait que c’est fichu,” the cat remarks (vol. 2 22). This fall in the rabbi’s status from his position of authority is clearly evident from the two panels juxtaposed below.

Image 2

Before

After

Content removed due to copyright concerns

Joann Sfar, *Le Chat du Rabbin 1. La Bar-Mitsva*.
Page 12. © Dargaud 2002.

Joann Sfar, *Le Chat du Rabbin 2. Le Malka des Lions*. Page 12. © Dargaud 2002.

In the panel on the left, which is taken from the first volume (before the commencement of the dictation debacle), the rabbi is seen instructing his cat in the fundamental precepts of Judaism. Faced with the impending dictation test, however, the rabbi becomes the pupil, the cat, his master. The rabbi that instructed his cat in the first volume, is thereafter seen holding a book and pen *to be instructed*. Indeed, what we see in the second panel on the right above, is the cat dictating sentences to the rabbi from French literary classics in order to prepare him for the dictation test. As he struggles to pen down what the cat reads out, the rabbi's inability to write in French becomes evident. The cat, for its part, seems to relish this new-found authority; particularly poignant is a scene in which the cat explains to the rabbi, not without a hint of paternalism, that the key to passing the dictation test lies not in the aesthetics, but in the content of his writing: "La calligraphie est bien [...] mais dans une dictée, c'est surtout l'orthographe qui compte" (2 14). In this sense, the dictation test becomes the occasion of a complete reversal in the status quo, transforming a spiritual agent that imparts wisdom into a quiescent pupil that needs instruction.

Bringing to light the rhetoric used to justify the colonial mission, Sfar demonstrates the colonial administration's capacity to dehumanize the rabbi in instituting the dictation test. At the heart of the *mission civilisatrice* [civilizing mission] was the idea of the colonial subject as at once *bête barbare* [barbarous beast/animal] and *enfant sauvage*, who is presumed to need the gift of French civilization in order to attain the status of civilized humanity. André Benhaïm calls attention to the “[*nature*] *bête*” of the dictation exercise, the term “*bête*” here signifying both the juvenile and facile, but also the animalistic and beastly (246). This double signification that the adjective evokes in French aptly encapsulates the implications of the exercise – it at once infantilizes as well as dehumanizes the rabbi. Tellingly, it is a “*bête*” [beast, animal] that coaches the rabbi for the test: the rabbi's cat dictates sentences from La Fontaine's *Fables* to help him practice for the dictation.⁷⁶ As the roles of teacher and pupil become inverted, we also remark a blurring in the boundary between the human and the animal. The visual techniques that Sfar employs in depicting the cat and the rabbi, particularly in the sequences that show the former reading to the latter, signal this transformation. Taking charge of the rabbi's test preparation, the cat becomes more and more human. The feline's posture in the frame shown below while it reads to its master illustrates this process of humanization: while a cat normally sits on all fours, the rabbi's cat sits on its two hind legs. Its paws acting like hands, clutch the book from which it dictates to the rabbi. Conversely, needing the tutelage of a cat, the rabbi becomes less and less human.

⁷⁶ The fables are no doubt a playful choice on the part of Sfar, since their protagonists are *bêtes* like the cat itself.

Image 3

Content removed due to copyright concerns

Joann Sfar, *Le Chat du Rabbin 2. Le Malka des Lions*. Page 12. © Dargaud 2002.

As the anthropomorphized cat becomes increasingly human-like, the rabbi progressively becomes less so, lapsing into a state of infancy and even animality. While the cat is generally pictured much smaller than its master, it progressively appears bigger over the course of the test preparation sequence, acquiring the same size as the rabbi, eventually even dominating the frame. We see this transformation in the frames below.

Image 4

Content removed due to copyright concerns

Joann Sfar, *Le Chat du Rabbin 2. Le Malka des Lions*. Page 12. Page 13. Ibid. © Dargaud 2002.

In all three frames, Sfar employs a high-angle technique that places the cat on an elevated visual plane in relation to the rabbi, who appears small and inoffensive (despite his vexation with the cat for irksomely dictating from objectionable polytheistic fables with strange animals). From this superior position, we the readers, along with the cat, look down upon the rabbi who dutifully attempts to transcribe what the cat dictates. This topological debasement on the visual plane exemplifies the more metaphorical abasement and dehumanization to which the colonial administration subjects the Algerian Other from a position of presumed superiority. The docile rabbi is in turn subordinated under the cat's tutelage, who transmits French civilization to the rabbi through classics of French literature, themselves carriers of language as a colonizing tool. As the rabbi struggles to transcribe what the cat reads, we see the cat slowing down its reading pace in

the last of the three frames shown above - it pronounces one syllable at a time, like one would while reading to a child learning to write. In a literalization of the beast vanquishing its master, the cat is pictured sitting *on* the rabbi in the culminating frame of the sequence (shown below), an image that becomes all-the-more poignant, thanks to the cat's declaration that "sans moi, tu échoueras" (2 14). The rabbi, with his inverted feet and shriveled-up posture, "redevient écolier, dominé comme un enfant, et même comme un animal," as Benhaïm writes (245). In this way, the dictation test becomes a humiliating exercise, subjecting the rabbi to a paternalist colonial regime's infantilization and dehumanization.

Image 5

Content removed due to copyright concerns

Joann Sfar, *Le Chat du Rabbin 2. Le Malka des Lions*. Page 14. © Dargaud 2002.

Sfar further shows how the colonial language acts as an instrument of wholesale cultural erasure, devaluing both indigenous forms of knowledge and cultural practices. Shedding light upon the imperialist dissemination of the French language in the Francophone world, Glissant writes in *Poétique de la Relation*: "Dans le contexte indéterminé de ce qu'on appelle la francophonie, l'idée apparemment simple était [...] de considérer la langue française comme porteuse a priori de valeurs." He explains that these values include "la fameuse universalité porteuse d'humanisme [...et] l'harmonieuse prédestination à la clarté (128). These purported claims of French language

and civilization to a supposed universal humanism and enlightened rationalism, Glissant goes on to suggest, served to dissimulate the French empire's imperialist motives as well as to justify the imposition of both French language and rule (128). Thus regarded as imperative to progress, the colonial language was meant to "aider à corriger les tendances anarchisantes des diverses cultures qui, entièrement ou partiellement, relèvent de son expression" (126-127). We see the French language perform this work of cultural devaluation in *Le Chat du Rabbín* by compelling a transformation in indigenous modes of learning and instruction – from orality to writing. Throughout the series, we see that the rabbi's instruction to his human disciples as much as to his feline one privileges orality – although based on sacred written texts, he imparts Judaism's teachings through word of mouth. The colonial regime, however, devalues the direct, oral transmission and acquisition of knowledge, instead requiring that the rabbi have knowledge of the (written) French word in order to serve as an "official" religious leader. As if knowledge and wisdom were somehow inextricably linked to the French language, the rabbi is thus forced to "écrire dans [une] langue qui n'est pas la sienne" (Benhaïm 245) if he is to continue in his position as religious leader of his community.

Even further, language imposes a humiliating transparency upon the rabbi, exposing his deepest inabilities and insecurities. "La prétention à la concision consécutive et non contradictoire est, dans l'histoire de la langue," explains Glissant, "le voile qui dissimule [...] et justifie" "ne pas entrer dans la pénétrable opacité d'un monde où [...] on est" (*Poétique* 126). The French empire evidently instrumentalized the French language and its purported virtues to justify a regime of transparency. In *Le Chat du Rabbín*, the colonial administration employs language for precisely these purposes – a French-language assessment compels the rabbi to lay himself bare to French scrutiny. A juvenile exercise *par excellence*, the dictation test is tellingly held in a school

classroom. Observing the rabbi through the classroom window, the cat despairs as it sees its master struggle. The rabbi beseeches his examiner to speak more slowly as he repeatedly crosses out and scratches what he writes, leaving him completely exposed and humiliated. In fact, we see the rabbi hunched over in a posture of shame and defeat in almost every frame that shows him taking the test (see image below). The colonial examiner, on the other hand, looks down upon the rabbi from a higher visual plane, often with his nose turned upward in the air, suggestive of an arrogant self-importance.

Image 6

Content removed due to copyright concerns

As the rabbi is literally subjugated under colonial authority, it becomes easy to see how the dictation test imposes upon the rabbi a humiliating transparency, denying him his right to opacity by exposing him to colonial scrutiny. Indeed, the test reveals his inability to write in French, leaving him profoundly insecure of himself. But beyond the psychological torment that it brings him, the test holds significant practical stakes for the rabbi – it not only authorizes him as “official,” but also serves as proof of his status as civilized, even human, in the eyes of the colonial government. A test of written French thus becomes an occasion for an absolute and terrifying unveiling of the self for the rabbi; reaching far beyond his dictational abilities, it proves to be an exposition of his incapacities and uncertainties, and should he fail, it threatens to wrest from him what he holds most dear – the rabbinate.

In the face of this humiliating colonial regime of transparency, it is Sfar’s representational tactics that serve as intervention. In this second half, we will discuss Sfar’s textual and visual aesthetics in the series, interrogating how it rejects the colonial impulse for transparency and allows his characters to reclaim the right to opacity. In reality, Sfar admits to never having visited the Algeria that he depicts, instead relying on both history and memory in his representations of this paternal homeland (although Sfar is of French birth, Sfar’s father was Jewish Algerian). In his book *Redrawing French Empire in Comics* (2013), Mark McKinney characterizes Sfar’s “artistic-historical model” as “cultural *trabendo*,” which comprises “traffic[ing] in counter-memories and archival material” (*trabendo*, McKinney explains, is an Algerian term that designates the act of contraband smuggling) (79). One form of “recovered material from the past” (McKinney 79) that inspires Sfar’s narrative is stories that his grandmother told him about the Algerian homeland. Sfar in fact makes this fact explicit when he writes in the exergue to the fourth volume, *Le Paradis*

terrestre (2005): “Les anecdotes évoquées dans cet ouvrage sont rigoureusement exactes et jamais exagérées puisque c’est ma mamy qui me les a racontées”⁷⁷ (4). These familial stories that served Sfar as self-avowed and self-reflexive sources of his work no doubt act as a form of counter-narrative to colonial representations of Algeria, which “disrupt [official] memorial constructions and identities” (McKinney 79). Yet, what is surprising in light of this fact is that while Sfar relies on counter-narrative and -memory in his (re)construction of historical Algeria, he relies just as much on official colonial narratives and accounts.

Indeed, the other important component of “recovered material from the past” (McKinney 79) that Sfar imports and incorporates into his narrative, like does Sebbar in *Shérazade*, is Orientalist imagery. Sfar mimics both the aesthetics and iconography of master Orientalist painters in his representations of Algeria throughout the *Chat du Rabbín* series, even stating in an interview that “[Si] je m’étais fait une géographie imaginaire et rêveuse d’un pays où je n’étais jamais allé [c’est] grâce à la peinture coloniale ‘orientaliste’” (qtd. in Poel 8). This process, which McKinney describes as the “recirculating [of] colonial materials whose original or earlier meanings run counter to [...] those for which the [artist] retrieves and rearticulates them,” (McKinney 79) ushers in a paradox that needs to be unpacked: how do Sfar’s modes of representation, which borrow so heavily from a problematic Orientalist aesthetic, challenge its discourses even while so visibly reproducing them? The answer to this paradox lies precisely in the complex ways that Sfar coopts Orientalist tropes, which the rest of this section will discuss.

⁷⁷ We notice a contradiction in this statement: a claim to *vraisemblance* and rigorous exactitude, despite the fact that his representations were inspired by and subsequently constructed from what is quintessentially subjective – memory and oral history (Leroy 41). For an in-depth analysis of Sfar’s aesthetic and its complicated relationship to mimesis/mimetic representation, history, memory, fiction and fantasy, see Fabrice Leroy’s book *Sfar So Far: Identity, History, Fantasy, and Mimesis in Joann Sfar’s Graphic Novels* (2014), particularly Chapter 3 entitled “Painting Painters. On Mimesis, Meta-Representation, and Intertextuality in *Pascin*, *Le Chat du Rabbín*, and *Chagall en Russie*.”

At the heart of the Orientalist mission was opening up and unveiling the mystifying ‘Orient,’ which was closed to foreign eyes and therefore the stuff of Western fantasy. According to Said, “Orientalism is premised upon exteriority, that is, on the fact that the Orientalist, poet or scholar [or artist], makes the Orient speak, describes the Orient, renders its mysteries plain for and to the West” (20-21). Claiming to offer Western spectators a peek into ‘the Orient’s’ exotic, forbidden as well as quotidian spaces, Orientalist paintings tended to depict recurrent themes that continue to have a strong hold in the Western imaginary even today, including imagery of harems and harem women or *odalisques*, scenes of religious life and prayer, spectacles of the North African bazaars and souks, dreamy depictions of ‘Oriental’ landscapes peppered with palm trees, grazing camels and mosque minarets. Indeed, as Assia Djébar argues in the postface to her short story collection *Femmes d’Alger dans leur appartement* (1980), Orientalist artists conceived of their art as a way for Western audiences to partake in a “voyage en Orient” from within the familiarity of the Western world (168).

Unlike Orientalists that used their art to open ‘the Orient’ to Western scrutiny, Sfar paradoxically employs the Orientalist aesthetic to give back opacity to the Algerian people and landscape. From the vivid colors, the tile-covered and arched building facades, the mosque minarets, to the djellaba-style loose-fitting robes donned by the people in the diegesis, the visual realm of *Le Chat du Rabbín* is teeming with elements that can be recognizably typed as “Islamic” or “Eastern,” thanks to its popularization by Orientalist art. However, the transparency in Sfar’s aesthetic stops at this. One of the ways in which Sfar imbues opacity to the Maghrebian landscape is by limiting what can be understood through image alone. This opacity of image is made possible in part by the particularity of the *bande dessinée* medium itself, thanks to the paradoxical ways in which the genre allows text and image to cohabit. In fact, in many instances in the series, image

fails to correspond with the text and the reality that it conveys. As a case in point, let us consider a sequence from the beginning of *Le Malka des Lions*, where the rabbi and his cat are pictured sitting at a café (2 4). In the visual realm of this sequence, the influence of Orientalist painting is evident, as is the “géographie imaginaire et rêveuse” (qtd. in Poel 8) of Orientalist imagery that Sfar refers to as a source of his inspiration. In this sequence, Sfar depicts an idyllic image of colonial Algeria, like did so many Orientalists during their time; in the scene in question, a white man – whom we presume to be French – seems to be taking an order from the rabbi – an Algerian – who is sitting in the courtyard of a café. This image seems to evoke a sense of peaceful coexistence betwixt the colonizer and colonized. However, in reading the text that accompanies the images in the sequence, it quickly becomes evident that there is nothing universal about this café ironically called “L’Univers.” Indeed, Sfar subverts this image of a tranquil French Algeria by juxtaposing it against text that shows a violent reality – as the cat-narrator reveals, the waiter informs his Algerian guests that “l’établissement ne sert ni les arabes ni les juifs” (2 4). While the visual realm deceptively suggests harmony between French settlers and Algerians, the text thwarts this bucolic imagery, revealing a reality of rampant French racism and anti-Semitism. Image thus obscures what the text clarifies. What this points to is an ethos of opacity guiding Sfar’s aesthetic, as the author intentionally restricts the capacity of image to be faithful and unintrusive purveyors of meaning. While Orientalist art was meant to do just that, i.e., purportedly provide an objective insight into a singular truth about ‘the Orient,’ Sfar’s aesthetic insistently signals the limitations of image. In this way, Sfar’s opacity distinguishes his aesthetic from the transparency of Orientalism, despite borrowing from its tropes. If through their art, Orientalists sought to transform ‘the Orient’ “from a very far, distant and often threatening Otherness into [...] relative familiar[ity]” (Said 29),

image alone can be misleading in Sfar's work, as it paradoxically obscures reality to get at the sinister truths of colonial history.

Not only delegitimizing official history, Sfar's redrawings of Orientalist tropes also deform them, such that they run counter to or exceed the original meanings of what he mimics. One of the most visible Orientalist tropes that Sfar reproduces is that of the *femme du harem* [harem woman] or the *odalisque*. In mimicking this aesthetic, Sfar borrows from renowned French painters like Delacroix, Ingres, Renoir, and Matisse, who depicted women in private and feminine spaces in a quintessentially Orientalist mode. This Orientalist trope constructs Maghrebi women as passive, static and ahistorical beings congealed in languorous poses of inactivity. To examine how Sfar coopts this trope, let us consider a paradigmatic Orientalist painting of the trope, Delacroix's *Femmes d'Alger dans leur appartement* (1834), and compare it to a scene from the series' second volume, when Zlabya announces to her friends the arrival of her legendary uncle, Le Malka des Lions (both shown below).

Image 7



Delacroix, *Femmes d'Alger dans leur appartement*, 1834.

Image 8

Content removed due to copyright concerns

Joann Sfar, *Le Chat du Rabbin 2. Le Malka des Lions*. Page 6. © Dargaud 2002.

The resemblance between these two images is hard to ignore: in addition to the quintessential Orientalist objects ornamenting both “harem scenes” (such as the narghile pipe, with its charcoal burner, the ornate Orientalist rug/carpet), the posture of the women and their clothing bear striking resemblance. In both images, the women are sitting on the ground, unmoving, wearing loose-fitting trousers that stop at the calves that we recognizably know today as “harem pants.” Their legs are also similarly crossed, close to their bodies, in a sign of modesty. The odalisque in the harem, then, is one of the most visible Orientalist clichés that Sfar repeats in *Le Chat du Rabbin*.

But despite this resemblance in what we *see*, what we *understand* is a narrative that radically departs from Orientalist representations. One of the ways in which Sfar subverts these clichés even while recycling them is by taking familiar images and slightly altering them to tell a different story, a process that Mireille Rosello aptly terms as “declining the stereotype.” In her book *Declining the Stereotype: Ethnicity and Representation in Contemporary French Culture* (1998), Rosello taps into the double figuration of the word “declining” to describe the paradoxical mode in which some contemporary French authors have contested stereotypes even while reusing them in their work; she argues that these authors “decline” stereotypes – in the grammatical sense

of inflecting to show variation – in order to “decline” them – meaning, to reject them (10). Although Sfar is not one of the authors that she discusses, her theory can be aptly applied to his work, for this is precisely the process through which Sfar disrupts Orientalist clichés despite mimicking them. In what Rosello calls “an ambiguous gesture of refusal and participation at the same time,” (13) Sfar takes familiar Orientalist images of the odalisque but incorporates small, unexpected changes to them, which conveys an altogether different and subversive narrative of Eastern feminine alterity. Let us take a closer look at the two “harem scenes.” As we can see in the frame from *Le Malka des Lions* shown above, Sfar, like Sebbar does with Shérazade, reuses the well-known trope of the idle, languorous and passive harem woman, but he imposes upon this inactivity, Zlabya’s activity. Contrary to the indifferent and absent gaze of Delacroix’s odalisques, Zlabya and her friends display an active, almost feverish curiosity, as inquisitive heads turn towards an enthusiastic Zlabya announcing the arrival of the legendary Malka des Lions, the object of her young friends’ affections. This expression of desire is evidently lacking in Delacroix’s rendition. According to Djebbar, Delacroix’s odalisques “demeurent absentes à elles-mêmes, à leurs corps, à leur sensualité, à leur bonheur” (173). Indeed, as Said writes about Flaubert’s accounts of the Egyptian courtesan Kuchuk Hanem (which would influence many Orientalist accounts of Eastern femininity to come): “she never spoke of herself, she never represented her emotions, presence or history. He spoke for and represented her” (6). However, unlike the odaliques of Orientalists, Zlabya and her friends are far from mute; much to the contrary, they are quite talkative and highly expressive about their desire for le Malka: “Je crois que je serais une bonne épouse pour lui,” announces one of Zlabya’s friends, while they debate to whom le Malka should rightfully belong (26). In Sfar’s version of Algerian femininity, then, its women are very present to their sensuality, they do indeed speak for themselves, and register their “emotions, presence [and]

history” (6). By thus “declining” familiar Orientalist images, Sfar reclaims the power of representation, contesting the notion that the Algerian feminine Other can be represented through simplistic and stereotypical images like the ones that Orientalists disseminated.

Perhaps one of the most effective ways through which Sfar renders his Algerian protagonists opaque is through his cat-narrator. Sfar rarely gives his readers direct access to the thoughts and words of his characters. Most often, they are reported by the cat, who recounts events in the third person narrative voice. Despite having access to this omniscient narrator, we are refused any sort of reliable insight into the protagonists’ subjectivities because the cat’s knowledge is less than dependable. With its capricious vagaries and erratic subjectivity, the cat acts as a conduit of narrative opacity in the text due to its unreliability as a narrator. Indeed, we hear the cat often punctuate its highly subjective remarks with the words “elle a dit que” and “il a dit que,” which Sfar primes us to take with a grain of salt, because they are often self-serving and self-aggrandizing, if not “purely inventive and fantastical” (Leroy 160). Further, we know full-well that the cat tends to lie, a fact that Sfar makes evident from the series’ very beginning, when the cat eats the rabbi’s pet parrot and proceeds to fabricate stories about it. By thus screening the subjectivity of his characters through the cat’s less-than-reliable voice, Sfar refuses to grant his (Western) readers direct access to the interiority of his Algerian protagonists. This “refus[al] to yield” (Crowley 107) serves as Sfar’s own intervention against a history of colonial relations based on the Other’s transparency; for our resulting inability to access the conscience of the protagonists imposes a limit on we can grasp and comprehend, which compels an opacity in our relation with the Algerian Other.

This unpredictable character of the cat is exacerbated by its highly irregular physical form. Sfar’s renditions of the cat are sometimes hyper-detailed, as he sketches in meticulous fashion

everything from the curvature of its claws, the minutiae of its fur, to the details of its whiskers; at other times, the cat is hyper-stylized, barely a silhouette, and at yet other times, it is reduced to nothingness, merely a pair of disembodied eyes. The cat's physical form is thus highly variable, as Fabrice Leroy notes in his book *Sfar So Far: Identity, History, Fantasy, and Mimesis in Joann Sfar's Graphic Novels* (2014) (160). Through this inconstancy in his depictions, Sfar rejects the *ligne claire* aesthetic that has prevailed comics' graphic conventions (160). Developed by the father of Western comics Hergé in the highly popular *Aventures de Tintin* series, the *ligne claire* is dominated by a sense of regularity, which congeals its characters in neat, uniform representations. Refusing its mechanicity, however, what is immediately evident in Sfar's "cartoon-like style" are the uncertain, shaky lines and the characters' mutable corporeality, as Leroy notes (160). Through Sfar's ever-changing forms, the Algerian Other that he represents escape fixity in a very literal sense, as his dynamic aesthetic refuses to reduce his protagonists to a simple and recognizable essence.

If opacity renders the Other impenetrable to the judgment of those more powerful, we must ask whether this refusal of validation from the powers-that-be is a universally empowering experience. To what extent is opacity's "refus[al] to yield" (Crowley 107) an empowering experience? What are the limits of opacity for the Other that is already at the margins of society? Convinced that he has failed the dictation test, the rabbi refuses to subject himself to further humiliation, which is followed by a period of torturous opacity. The rabbi receives the test results in a letter from the colonial administration, which he abstains from opening. Longing for the affirmation of the colonial government that would authorize him as "rabbin officiel" (2 11), he desolately concludes: "un rabbin tout blanc et sans barbe va venir de France et il prendra ma place avec ses chaussures à lacets" (2 25). The cat confirms the rabbi's agony when it remarks, "Depuis

la dictée, il [le rabbin] n’a plus le gout à rien. Même des choses qui nous faisaient rire avant, il s’en fiche” (22). In this sense, opacity is not altogether empowering for the rabbi, for whom the colonial seal of validation means the difference between whether or not he can continue his rabbinical work. For the cat as well, the experience of opacity is harrowing. In a desperate attempt to help the struggling rabbi during the dictation test, the cat invokes the name of the Jewish God in a profanation of the official interdiction against it (2 17). Having committed blasphemy, the cat loses its ability to speak and is thereafter only able to communicate with animals, leaving the ever-opinionated cat distressed by his inability to have his voice heard. In a move of performative erasure, the cat’s narrative voice disappears for a period of time in the second volume, until the cat calls attention to this very fact by remarking that “Depuis que je parle plus, c’est comme si j’étais pas là” (2 26). For the cat then, as for the rabbi, the experience of opacity is ambivalent, because it threatens invisibility; for those already at the edges of society, it threatens further marginalization by potentially erasing the Other’s very existence.

Sfar’s aesthetic, then, presents a complex relationship to opacity. Through our reading of mainly the first two volumes of *Le Chat du Rabbin*, we examined the ways in which arbitrary exercises of colonial power, which the dictation test exemplifies, disenfranchised Jews in French Algeria. Infusing history with fantasy, Sfar demonstrates how the written French language served as a conduit for transparency, foreclosing the Other’s right to opacity. In addition to representing a painful colonial history, Sfar uses his aesthetic as intervention; he re-ascribes agency that the colonial regime denied to Jewish Algerians through what Fabrice Leroy calls “a subjective [re]imaging of history” (160). We analyzed the textual and visual techniques through which Sfar subverts the colonial desire for transparency and restitutes opacity to his Jewish Algerian protagonists. In doing so, we saw that Sfar’s reimagining of colonial narratives consists of literal

re-drawings of Orientalist tropes but also paradoxical borrowings from them. The genius of this graphic novel series is thus without doubt, as it bears testament to the sinister modes through which the French empire consolidated power in its colonies.

The unveiling of the self that the (neo)colonial regime of transparency presupposes has today become a *de facto* prerequisite for the Other to access Occidental hospitality. In order to be granted physical and symbolical access to Western civilization, outsiders must lay themselves bare to bureaucratic scrutiny – be it in the form of juvenile dictation tests, or as is the case in today’s anti-immigrant climate, by subjecting oneself to radiographic surveillance at airports, or even yet, by revealing the intimate details about oneself and one’s private relationships in order to be granted a visa or a green card. In a culture where bureaucratic documents determine the legality, even the humanity of people, the Western world has seen the birth of dehumanizing rhetoric surrounding the so-called “sans papiers.” And yet, the right to opacity is a right for which the Other has fought ceaselessly in the face of this push for transparency. Today Harragas or African migrants traversing the Mediterranean exercise their right to opacity in their West-ward journey for asylum by burning their identification papers. In the world of *Le Chat du Rabbin*, the rabbi renders himself opaque to colonial judgment, at least temporarily, by refusing to open the letter containing the results of the dictation test. The cat also experiences a measure of opacity in the narrative as it loses its power of speech. In these instances, Sfar shows us that the experience of opacity for the Other is disconcerting, even torturous. In all, the right to opacity for the Other is an ambiguous one – while it threatens an invisibility, even a symbolic demise for those already at the margins of society, it also enables the expression of complex and multiple histories, which allow to deconstruct dehumanizing colonial representations of the Other.

Conclusion

The purpose of mimicry, a practice that is perhaps most well-known in stand-up comedy, is first and foremost to amuse. In keeping with the analogy of stand-up comedy, humorists often emulate a model – be it a famous figure, a common type, an accent, a personality or mannerisms – with the goal of entertaining their audience and making them laugh. As Henri Bergson writes in *Laughter: An Essay on the Meaning of the Comic* (1900), the act of imitating another is comical because it evokes that which is the most mechanical and least conscious about the model – their intonations, gestures, and ways of talking and being in general. If living beings, humans particularly, taking on mechanical attributes that impute inorganic, machine-like qualities upon life evokes laughter, Bergson explains why: “This is because really lively life is not supposed to repeat itself. Where there is repetition, complete similarity, we suspect that there is mechanism behind life. That diversion of life towards mechanism is the real cause of laughter” (45). Mimicry, by evoking that which is mechanical, entertains and amuses audiences by imitating the most quintessential attributes of a model. Mimicry, however, also mocks that which it imitates. Even if mimicry is done in the spirit of flattery, the act of mimicry itself inevitably knocks down the pedestal upon which the model is put. A humorist that imitates invariably exaggerates the mannerisms and ways of being of who they mimic, by virtue of which the model becomes funny. We can thus add to the purpose of mimicry not just to entertain but also to ridicule. For mimicry to be effective, however, the audience must share in a collective imaginary of cultural knowledge, beliefs and assumptions. Indeed, Trevor Noah’s mimicry of Donald Trump is funny only if the audience is aware of Trump’s body language, hand gestures, and ways of speech, which the comic exaggerates in his routines. In this sense, mimicry not only activates a set of common cultural beliefs and references shared by the mimicker and the audience for whom the mimicry is being

performed, but it also distorts this collective imaginary. As Bhabha writes, the subversive potential of mimicry depends on its capacity to generate “inappropriate objects” that ensure its “strategic failure,” such that mimicry is at once “resemblance” and “menace” (123). We saw precisely this logic that operate in Sebbar and Sfar’s work, although in two distinct literary forms – both use techniques of mimicry to play with Orientalist discourses.

It bears, in conclusion, to recap why this chapter positions Sebbar’s and Sfar’s work side-by-side: their shared, what McKinney calls “artistic-historical model,” which mines from colonial-era Orientalist imagery and myths, provide an ideal case study in both comparison and contrast. We investigated how the two Franco-Maghrebi writers, each with their own connections to Algeria, recycle Orientalist myths. Sebbar constantly jerks us away from Orientalist reverie into the regime of the everyday, while Sfar, for his part, draws from Orientalist imagery to create a fiction that paradoxically disrupts metropolitan narratives that disseminate reifying narratives of the Algerian Other. We saw that by tapping into and coopting the discontinues and excesses of Orientalist mimicry, these writers *re-construct* altogether different, ludic and multiple tales of Maghrebi identity and subjectivity than facile Orientalist represents sought to convey. Their various takes on French colonial history and Orientalist fantasy is a product of their own specific post-memory, ie., in the words of Marianne Hirsch, the relationship that the ‘generation after’ bears to the personal, collective, and cultural trauma of those who came before” (5). Nevertheless, both works are products of writers who are themselves at the peripheries of cultures and discourses, and as such, both sustain a complicated relation to metropolitan France and its discourses, including Orientalist discourse. Because much of postcolonial literature itself operates at what anthropologist

Renato Rosaldo calls the “border zones” of culture,⁷⁸ what I hope this discussion makes clear is the importance for making arguments about postcolonial literature that that is based not on a notion of diametric difference between colonial discourses and postcolonial texts, but instead centers on what is shared between the two. In borrowing from colonial economies, what Sebbar’s and Sfar’s case makes clear is that processes of colonial appropriation and adaptation can serve as *unexpected* and *creative* practices to resist powerful colonial systems of representation. If Orientalists constructed images of the Maghreb for *consumption* in the West, writers and artists today in turn draw from these imagery and myths in their own re-constructions and depictions of diasporic postcolonial identity in contemporary France. We will further explore this dynamic in the following chapter, however, in a different medium. Through comedy sketches and film roles performed by renowned French comedians, this dissertation closes by interrogating how postcolonial humorists paradoxically embody and transcend their Otherness through racially- and ethnically-marked performance.

⁷⁸ See Rosaldo’s book *Culture and Truth: The Remaking of Social Analysis* (1989), especially his chapter “Border Crossings.”

Chapter 4

Drawing the Line: French Stand-up and its Limits

Introduction

On the evening of May 13, 2019, the 31st *Nuit des Molières* was more eventful than usual. During this annual ceremony that bestows upon performers the nation's highest honor in French theater – the Molière Award – a group of *Gilets Jaunes*⁷⁹ stormed onto the stage. Interrupting the awards ceremony, they addressed the French Minister of Culture demanding “droits aux chômages pour tous” and denounced the 4-million-euro budget cut to arts and culture, which left artists and performers with “un avenir encore plus incertain” (“Molières 2019” 00.00-01.26). On the same evening, the stand-up comic Fary, who was invited to present an award, took the opportunity on stage to address a primarily white audience,⁸⁰ during which he censured the lack of diversity in live French theater. He began his speech with a sardonic greeting – “Salut les blancs!” – and in his usual cheeky style tinged with irony, he went on to condemn the whiteness of both the ceremony's invitees and its award recipients (Touré). Not coincidentally, another widely popular humorist – Coluche – is the symbol and mascot of sorts of the yellow vest movement. Son of an Italian

⁷⁹The *Gilets Jaunes* or Yellow Vests (named for the fluorescent yellow vests worn by its protestors) are protestors of an eponymous French grass-roots protest movement that initially began in opposition to a 2018 tax hike on fuel. Today, however, it has morphed into a wide-reaching movement under whose umbrella fall an array of motivations, including instituting an increase in France's minimum wage and decreasing tax cuts for the wealthy. See Grunberg, Gérard. “Les ‘gilets jaunes’ et la crise de la démocratie représentative”, *Le Débat*, vol. 204, no. 2, 2019, pp. 95-103 for more on the mouvement.

⁸⁰ Although the *Gilets Jaunes* movement is not associated with a specific political party, the political tendencies of its members span the spectrum, ranging from far-left to far-right tendencies. Indeed, media commentators have described the far-reaching scope of the movement as providing a fertile ground for its affiliates to express a wide range of political sentiments –including extremist tendencies, primary among which is anti-Zionist views, which many *Gilets Jaunes* have expressed. For more on this see, Camus, Jean-Yves. “Quelle place pour l'extrême droite chez les gilets jaunes ?” *Libération*. 8 January 2019.

immigrant, comedic superstar and advocate for the working classes who became a legend following his untimely death, the humorist's quotes and sketches regularly figure in the yellow vest movement's protests and social media platforms (Girard). Taken together, both events demonstrate the intimate link between humor and social engagement. Indeed, humor serves as a mirror, or to use Fary's analogy, as an "art thermomètre" of sorts (qtd. in "Spectacles d'humour"), which provide insights into the most important and pressing debates confronting a society at a given time. This status of humor as a soundboard, to use yet another analogy, for French society's contested issues is however not a novel one.

Indeed, comedy has for long echoed the changes taking place in the French social and political landscape. This was certainly the case during the mid-1970s, a period when France experienced deep economic as well as demographic shifts in the aftermath of the 1973 oil crisis. After members of the OPEC declared an oil embargo, many of the world's economies, including that of France, were thrown into "shock," which fueled an economic recession. The resulting high levels of unemployment prompted a tightening of immigration policies in France, as a sharp decline in the need for labor effectively put an end to the guest worker program that filled labor shortages in France. But as Christof Van Mol and Helga de Valk note, such "policies aiming to control and reduce migration, however, transformed rather than stopped migration" (35). Migrants from former French colonies, who came to France as temporary workers, increasingly settled on a permanent basis under family reunification schemes, which ironically augmented the immigrant population in France. This progressive visibility of migrants of color, coupled with an economic recession and unemployment, saw a growing normalization of racism and xenophobia in France, which coalesced around the far-right anti-immigrant political party – the *Front National* led by Jean-Marie Le Pen. The comedy scene in France registered these social changes and political

tensions, as it became more and more acceptable for comedians to deal with race, religion, nationality and immigration in their humor, subjects normally considered taboo in Republican France, where markers of identity are not “officially” recognized. This gave a platform to comedians like Michel Leeb, who gained notoriety by performing a kind of humor that has since been increasingly deemed racist,⁸¹ and also to comedians like Pierre Desproges, who contrarily ironized stereotypes and mocked the rampant racism taking hold in French society.⁸² Comedy thus not only reflected the social and demographic changes taking place in France, but it also more explicitly became an avenue for sociopolitical engagement. This phenomenon was exemplified by Coluche, who capitalized on his fame to use his stand-up comedy as a platform to fight for French society’s poorest.⁸³ In fact, the comedian even ran for president in 1981, thereby fortifying comedy’s close connection to political protest.

Today, comedy in France has become a hotbed for sociopolitical engagement with the rise of stand-up as an increasingly popular art form. As Nelly Quémener notes in his book *Le Pouvoir de l’humour* (2014), the period following the end of the oil crisis saw the advent of a new era for comedy in France:

Les années 1990-2000 amorcent un tournant plus radical encore vers une figure d’humoriste, participant actif des rapports de pouvoir et porteur d’une vision du monde forgée par l’expérience de domination. Ce tournant s’incarne tout particulièrement chez les humoristes femmes et ceux issus des minorités ethnoraciales émergeant par la voie télévisuelle (qtd. in Ervine 98).

⁸¹ See, for example, his sketch “L’Africain” from the 1980s.

⁸² His sketches “Les rues de Paris ne sont plus sûres” and “On me dit que des Juifs,” or his book *Les étrangers sont nuls* (1992) (originally a collection of texts published in *Charlie Hebdo*), all exemplify the Desprogian brand of humor, which recycles stereotypes to poke fun at racist and anti-Semitic sentiment.

⁸³ Shortly before his death in 1986, Coluche founded *Les Restos du coeur*, a non-profit organization that provides food and other support to France’s destitute.

This “tournant [...] radical” in French comedy saw the birth of French stand-up as we know it today, which abounds with comedians of color from immigrant and working-class backgrounds, many from France’s *banlieues*. Many of these comedians use stand-up as a platform to make audible and visible the experiences of racial and ethnic minorities in France, and to themselves migrate from the anonymity of *banlieues* to the visibility of public life and fame, thanks to the mediatic exposure provided by the art form. As Jonathan Ervine notes in his book *Humour in Contemporary France* (2019), stand-up comedy is a fledgling art in France that has emerged in the backdrop of the recent decades, which have seen a resurgence of anti-immigrant sentiment and a concomitant consolidation of the far right⁸⁴ in the aftermath of the 2005 *banlieues* riots, the 2015 *Charlie Hebdo* shooting and Paris terror attacks. Alongside the tense debates that France has seen regarding immigration and integration in the post-9/11 era – already marked by the alienation of French Muslims and other visible minorities – the nation has simultaneously witnessed a “questioning of the extent to which France really is a single and indivisible nation that is as egalitarian as it aspires to be” (Ervine 2). It is in this climate that stand-up comedy has emerged as a privileged, if contentious avenue for debates on issues of freedom of expression, immigration, identity and universalism – issues that are as old as the French nation itself and continue to be at the basis of tense sociopolitical discussion even today. Particularly in a context where immigrant youths from French suburbs rank low in the nation’s list of priorities (a reality that was at the basis of the 2005 French riots), Black, Arab, Jewish, and Muslim comedians have taken to using stand-up as a platform to promote the cultural visibility of minority groups and to voice contentious opinions concerning racial and ethnic relations in modern France.

⁸⁴ This climate propelled the *Front National* under Marine Le Pen to the political mainstream in the 2017 French presidential elections.

Transitioning from the literary to the popular cultural imaginary, this chapter addresses the variegated landscape of humor in the overlapping cultural platforms of French stand-up comedy and film. It aims to serve as a starting point for a more detailed study on how minority stand-up comedians use humor in their comedic performances to navigate, negotiate and reconfigure racial and ethnic power relations in French society, especially in light of the official “blindness” to these categories. In exploring the role of race, ethnicity and Otherness in French mainstream stand-up comedy and cinema today, I examine how “minority comedians” treat questions of difference and marginality in their comedic performance; what challenges, debates, and controversies their rhetoric surrounding alterity has posed; and how these discussions have evolved with France’s changing sociopolitical landscape. Three questions will thus guide my approach.

First, how has comedy (re)shaped the French ethno-racial landscape? Second, in what ways do minority comedians represent modern French culture and society in their stand-up sketches and film performances, and to what extent does their humor disrupt or reinforce French Republican ideology and the myth of universalism upon which the nation was founded? Third, how do French comedians engage with or reference racial and ethnic stereotypes in their comedy and to what ends? In seeking answers to these questions, I will explore the diverse face of French stand-up comedy and performance in France, focusing particularly on minority stand-up comedians, their career trajectories, and the ways in which they use their humor to engage with sociopolitical debates surrounding what it means to be French. I argue that modern French stand-up comedy and performance play a key role in intervening in debates about immigration, difference, and alterity, as comedians often performatively enact and embody France’s cultural heterogeneity, thereby disturbing the homogenous logic of *francité* (Frenchness). To do so, I begin by tracing the history of French comedic performance by tracking its evolution from one-man shows to stand-up as we

know it today. By exploring the career trajectories of some of the biggest names in French humor, including Fellag, Gad Elmaleh and Jamel Debbouze, the epilogue then investigates how French stand-up has become as diverse as it has and how these influential comedians brought cultural visibility and exposure to new generations of comedians from minority backgrounds. I analyze in-depth the humor of two up-and-coming comedians, Fary and Shirley Souagnon, to shed light upon what contemporary French stand-up comedy is like now and where it is headed. In order to assess the limits of humor in artistic creation, I will briefly touch upon the *Charlie Hebdo* controversy, but pay particular attention to the career trajectory of Dieudonné, before concluding with the curious potential of stand-up to not only promote racial harmony but also tension. Over the course of the epilogue, it will become evident to what extent comedic performance in France reveals faultiness in French society and to what extent it provides insight into the nation's fraught racial politics.

From One-Man Shows to French Stand-up: A Genealogy

Brought from the Anglo-Saxon world within the last decade and a half, stand-up comedy is a new art form in France, so much so that some of the biggest names in French stand-up, including Gad Elmaleh and Jamel Debbouze, have been accused of plagiarizing British or American comedians. The French model of comedic performance has traditionally constituted one-man shows, which involve character- and sketch-based skits that comedians often perform over a fifty- to sixty-minute period. Not only longer than the rapid-fire format seen in American comedy clubs, where comedians perform five- to ten-minute bits in quick succession, the one-man show genre also sustains a greater degree of proximity to theater. Unlike stand-up, which involves varying extents of improvisation, particularly as comedians interact directly with their audience

and adopt an informal, conversational tone, French sketch-based comedy has traditionally constituted a so-called fourth wall and distance between the comic and the public. Humorists in one-man shows and sketch-based comedy often play fictionalized versions of themselves, if not a role or character, and often work from a fixed, pre-written text. For instance, paradigmatic of the tradition of character-based comedy, the Franco-Tunisian Jewish comic Élie Kakou famously created and played Madame Sarfati in his sketches, a character who exemplified the trope of the Jewish mother in a comically exaggerated manner. If in American-style stand-up, audiences laugh at punchlines, in traditional French comedy, audiences laugh at feats, gags, imitations and situational humor that relies as much on Jacques Tati-style physical and visual comedy as verbal play. In this section, I examine the career trajectories of three comedians – Mohammed Fellag, Gad Elmaleh and Jamel Debbouze – all of whom exemplify what Quémener has called the “tournant radical” in French comedy: they employ humor to bring visibility to the experiences of minorities in France and to moreover transform their own realities of marginalization. In examining the careers of these comedians, this section seeks to understand two things: first, how the French comedy scene transitioned from the traditional one-man show format to Anglo-Saxon style stand-up; and second, how these comedians have paved the way for a uniquely French brand of stand-up despite its Anglo-Saxon origins. Although a borrowed art form, these pioneers of French stand-up have made their own mark in the art form by adopting styles and content that are particular not only to the French context, but also to the comedians’ own personal and autobiographical contexts. Over the course of this genealogy, it will become evident that there is a uniquely French brand of stand-up comedy, which has evolved from and responds to a specifically French sociopolitical landscape.

For Fellag, a humorist of Algerian descent, both his career trajectory and brand of humor are informed by his life in and exile from his homeland. Born in the Kabylie region of Algeria, Fellag studied theater at *l'Institut national d'art dramatique et chorégraphique d'Alger*, following which he founded his own theater troupe and performed in various theaters across Algeria during the 1970s. After then briefly traveling in France and Canada, he returned to Algeria and began his work as a writer, actor and director at the *Théâtre national algérien*, over the course of which he wrote his first one man show, *Les Aventures de Tchop* (1986). He went on create several successful one-man shows, including *Cocktail Khorotov* (1990), *SOS Labes* (1991) and *Babor L'Australie* (1991), which reached a wide audience by virtue of their multilingualism (his performances combined Arabic, Berber and French). Fellag had by then become a star in Algeria, who gained a reputation as a caustic humorist that satirized life in Algeria, particularly critiquing political corruption, ineffective leadership and the status of women in Algerian society. Soon, however, Fellag would be forced to leave his country, as the instability in his homeland reached new heights. Growing up during the turbulence of the Algerian war for independence (his father was in fact a member of the FLN), Fellag was no stranger to violence. However, with the advent of the Algerian Civil War, the country had become dangerous for artists and intellectuals, particularly for those that critiqued Algerian society and politics (Rosello 29). In the mid-1990s, he was forced into exile in Tunisia, then in France, when a bomb exploded during one of his performances, which left him not only fearing for his safety but also made it nearly impossible to continue earning a living as a performer (“Fellag présente son spectacle” 4:50-5:18).

Upon arriving in France, his path to success as one of the most influential French humorists was an untraditional one. While some of the most successful French comedians, like Coluche and more recently, Smaïn and Michel Boujenah, started their careers performing in *café-theatres* –

small, intimate venues that serve as steppingstones for entry into the prestigious one-man show world (Ervine 12) – Fellag was already famous when he arrived in France. Further, unlike his North African counterparts Smaïn or Boujenah, Fellag did not branch off into cinema once he made his mark in the world of French comedy. Even while performing in critically acclaimed cinematic roles, most notably in *L'Ennemi intime* (2007), *Il reste du jambon?* (2010) and *Monsieur Lazhar* (2011)⁸⁵, Fellag continued to write, direct and perform comedy. Further, Fellag made his mark in the world of comedy not only as a performer, but also as an author who simultaneously adopts both these identities with equal gusto. In fact, much like Sfar illustrates the porousness of literary and popular culture by virtue of the graphic novelist's fame and marked social media presence,⁸⁶ Fellag's work too, albeit following the opposite trajectory, inscribes the humorist as much in the literary world as in the world of popular culture.⁸⁷ Fellag's one-man shows, like *Djurdjurassique Bled* (1999) and *Le Dernier chameau* (2004) – both of which have also been published as texts – have gained him critical and popular acclaim as both a writer and performer.⁸⁸ Fellag has published novels and short story collections,⁸⁹ which he has adapted into performances, or conversely, the comic has textualized several of his one-man shows, but irrespective of the order, his texts, all published by Les Editions Jean-Claude Lattès, have been praised for their literary value. Echoing critical consensus, Olivier Mongin writes that despite his popularity as a humorist, he is also “un écrivain qui n'est pas sans rappeler ces grands écrivains de la douleur maghrébine” “comme Kateb Yacine et Mohammed Khaïr-Eddin” (54). Indeed, the political,

⁸⁵ *Monsieur Lazhar* was an Oscar finalist in 2012 for best foreign language film.

⁸⁶ Sfar has an active presence and following on social media platforms including Instagram, Facebook and Twitter, where he frequently engages with his readership.

⁸⁷ Fellag in fact wrote the preface to *Le Malka des Lions*, the second volume of Sfar's *Chat du Rabbini* series.

⁸⁸ Fellag also published his one-man show *Le dernier chameau* in DVD format in 2005.

⁸⁹ These include *Rue des petites daurades* (2001), *C'est à Alger* (2002), *Comment réussir un bon petit couscous* (2003), among others.

artistic, comic and literary all coalesce into a singular whole in Fellag's writing and performance, comprising what Fellag himself describes as "burlesque à la frontière du politique et de la poésie" (qtd. in Costaz).

Through his texts and performances, Fellag not only satirizes the colonial history that continues to structure Franco-Maghrebi relations, but also comments on the quotidian life and struggles of Maghrebis both in France and the Maghreb. In "fai[sant] rire des mœurs de ses frères algériens" ("Les Algérie de Fellag" 43), Fellag's work portrays the "petits peuples" often left out of political and cultural narratives. In one of his latest shows, *Tous les Algériens sont des mécaniciens*⁹⁰ (2008) for example, Fellag employs the title's generalization to portray the "débrouillardise" (Costaz) of Algeria's middle and working class. An ode to Algerians' inventiveness and capacity to make do regardless of the situation at hand, the show humorously exposes the Algerian people's resilient national spirit in the face of decades of inept governance and corrupt bureaucracy. Indeed, despite himself leaving Algeria for France, his texts and performances effect a constant back and forth between the two "imagined communities" (Benedict Anderson), allowing him to stage not only geopolitical mobility but also identarian multiplicity ("Les Algérie de Fellag" 44). In fact, at the basis of much of Fellag's work is his own life in and exile from Algeria, a subject that he explores in many of his texts and performances. In his short story "Un coing en hiver,"⁹¹ his protagonist, forced to leave Algeria for France in the midst of civil unrest, compares his move from Algeria to the uprooting of a tree: "il était aussi tragique d'extraire un être humain où il avait semé ses rêves que de deterrer un arbre" (27). This apt metaphor captures the nature of Fellag's exile, which he characterizes in both his interviews and his work as a

⁹⁰ He performs *Tous les Algériens sont des mécaniciens* alongside Marianne Épin, rendering it the only show in which he shares the stage with another actor.

⁹¹ The story is part of a collection entitled *Le Dernier chameau et autres histoires* (2004).

begrudging one, motivated by fear for his life; in the same short story, he writes, “Partir, c’est mourir un peu, rester, c’est mourir beaucoup. [...] Mais quand la mort frappe à la porte... la vie doit sortir par la fenêtre !” (27-28). In addition to his exile, Fellag’s Kabylie origins influence both the content and the form of his work. As critics have noted, Fellag’s humor is one in which he constructs his identity as multiple; for him, “Être algérien ? C’est être kabyle, arabe... c’est en tout cas une longue histoire” (“Les Algérie de Fellag” 44). This multiplicity is evidenced by the multilingualism of his texts and performances, which not only combine Berber, Arabic and French, but also constitute word play and the mixing of accents, to create what Rosello terms an “idiosyncratic multilingual idiolect” (31). In this way, Fellag’s humor possesses the unique ability to make a multicultural audience laugh, while also bringing to the mainstream French consciousness the experiences of Maghrebis.

Although grounded in his written, and often, published texts, Fellag’s humor takes on an entirely new dimension in its performative aspect, thanks to the dynamism of his corporeality. As Olivier Mongin argues, humor for Fellag is not only a linguistic, but also a bodily exercise (“Les Algérie de Fellag” 53).⁹² Fellag often plays a clown-like figure in his one-man shows, dressed in red shoes, suspenders and a polka-dot shirt (Rosello 30). Through this harmless, yet incisive clownish alter-ego, Fellag narrates his experiences growing up in Algeria, and mocks everything from the ways of his French and Algerian brethren to French colonial history. In fact, Fellag’s performative corporeality, much like his language, is multiple, changing and dynamic, a fact that he self-reflexively remarks upon when he writes:

⁹² As an intrinsically performative and public cultural platform, one of the specificities of stand-up lies in the fact that it is not circulated through publication (like a book), but rather through direct human social interaction. For more on the particularities of communication that is performative or “outwardly staged,” see Douglas Robinson’s, *Performative Linguistics*. Taylor & Francis, 2002.

Je dis « je », mais il s'agit d'un moi décalé, théâtralisé, qui facilite la relation avec le public. À la fois : moi et un autre. Dans certaines situations absurdes, j'utilise le personnage du clown, dans d'autres, je raconte et deviens porteur d'un message plus moral. Cette mise en scène du moi rassure le spectateur. Je me dédouble pour effectuer le va-et-vient entre le clown blanc et l'Auguste (qtd. in "Les Algérie de Fellag" 53).

With this "va-et-vient" between a "generous naivety" (Rosello 62) and caustic critique, Fellag touches on the sensitive, even taboo subjects pertaining to French colonial history. This becomes amply evident in *Djurdjurassique Bled*, his first one-man show in France, which not only launched his career as a comic in France but also won him the *Prix du Syndicat de la critique*. During a brief episode in the beginning of the show, Fellag questions with the innocence of an *Auguste* to what extent *independence* brought *freedom* to Algeria; he declares, "Le 5 juillet 1962, après 7 ans de guerre, l'Indépendance est arrivée;" after a brief questioning pause, he continues, "ou bien elle est partie? Je m'en souviens plus, elle est passée très vite" (1:50-2:08). On the surface, this scene appears to consist of a seemingly innocuous question posed by a Charlie Chaplin-like figure, followed by an equally inoffensive-seeming response. However, couched under this veneer of innocence, Fellag calls attention to the instability and political conflict that plagued Algeria following independence. Through this dynamic theatrical self that oscillates between the guileless red-faced *Auguste* and the incisive *clown blanc*, Fellag not only enacts a caustic critique of French colonization of Algeria, but also breathes humor into a tragic history. Indeed, this "va-et-vient" allows Fellag to elaborate a unique brand of humor, which the renown French comedian Guy Bedos describes as "fai[re] du drôle avec du triste" ("Fellag: 60 ans" 7:28-7:34). As Fellag has noted in his interviews, laughter for him is a reparative mechanism (Rosello 29), a way for both him and his audiences to "se libérer, oxygéner le mental" ("Fellag: 60 ans" 8:04-8:07) without at

the same time falling into “pathos” or “victimisation” (“Fellag: 60 ans” 8:20-8:30). Through his humor, Fellag seeks to provide his audiences an escape from despair. He accordingly chooses his linguistic as well as corporeal strategies, which are underpinned by the credo that “le rire est ‘la politesse du désespoir’”⁹³ (qtd. in Rosello 61). Laying claim to this credo, the clown – sophisticated and naïve, generous and unforgiving – transforms “tout ce qui fait mal” (“Fellag: 60 ans” 8:40-8:50), providing his audiences a means out of anguish, in exchange for “le plaisir de rire ensemble” (“Fellag: 60 ans” 8:10-8:15).

If Fellag thus exemplifies the one-man show genre and the ways in which he used it as a tool to evince a plural identity, the comic that epitomizes the next phase in the transition of the comedy scene in France is Gad Elmaleh. Just as Fellag leaves Algeria for Paris, Gad Elmaleh was born in and grew up in Casablanca before his family immigrated to Montreal. There, he attended high school, before moving to France where he studied theater and would eventually go on to become a comedic superstar. Gad Elmaleh’s career was largely influenced by his childhood and upbringing – he was born to a Moroccan Jewish family of performing artists (his father was a mime, his brother, an actor, and sister, a director) and followed in his familial footsteps, himself becoming an actor and comic of renown. His comedy and films routinely deal with themes that reflect his own identities as an immigrant and Franco-Moroccan Jew. After beginning as Elie Kakou’s assistant, appearing alongside the comic in his performances, Gad Elmaleh launched his own one-man show, *Décalages* (1997),⁹⁴ which propelled him to fame.

Representing a liminal figure in French comedy’s shift to new styles of humor, Elmaleh’s earliest performances mix the traditional one-man show format with American style stand-up. His

⁹³ The origin of this expression is widely debated, attributed variously to Georges Duhamel, Oscar Wilde and Chris Marker.

⁹⁴ Largely autobiographical, *Décalages* recounts his journey from Casablanca through Montreal to Paris.

second one-man show, *La Vie normale* (2000), is a case in point. The show is divided into sketches, or little vignettes, in which Elmaleh plays various fictional characters based on common types or tropes, like the newly-initiated smoker, the ever-busy Frenchman who in reality spends his time doing trivial things, and most famously Coco, a wealthy Jewish businessman and Chouchou, a transvestite (the latter two inspired eponymous film adaptations, which will be discussed below). Elmaleh plays these characters with hilarity in his sketches, adopting the personalities of each of the characters that he portrays, as he modulates his voice, body language, mannerisms, language and accent to suit each character at play. However, these early performances already displayed signs of a shift in his comedic style. Self-avowedly fascinated with American style stand-up, Elmaleh introduces bits and pieces of stand-up-style improv into his one-man shows, which were otherwise dominated by pre-scripted character-based sketches. For example, in a brief episode half-way through *La Vie Normale*, the comic breaks character and also the fourth wall, to play himself in bits where he creates sketches with the help of his audience (“Gad Elmaleh – La Vie Normale” 21:25 – 28:12).⁹⁵ At the cusp of the traditionally French and Anglo-Saxon format, the transition would be complete in his third one-man show *L’Autre c’est moi* (2005), which broke records by attracting over 300,000 spectators with performances in Morocco, Canada and the US, in addition to France, on top of selling over 1.5 million DVD copies of the recorded show. Unlike his previous shows, in which he played characters, Elmaleh performs *L’Autre c’est moi* as himself in the stand-up comedy format, telling jokes in an informal, conversational tone, jokes that are

⁹⁵ Around the half-way point of the show, the lights routinely go off following a sketch, but instead of coming back as yet another character, this time Elmaleh returns as himself. In a *mise-en-abîme* of the present moment, he stumbles onto the stage, evidently in the midst of composing a sketch for a 10-minute period in the show where he has nothing scripted. After asking the audience to talk amongst themselves while he comes up with material, he asks his spectators to help him create a sketch. What ensues is a routine about a man walking down a street, which is improvised through audience participation.

often inspired by his own life or mundane quotidian events that he renders humorous by exaggerating or otherwise transforming them.

Parallely, Gad Elmaleh also made a mark in the big screen. Although he has starred in a large repertoire of films, many that he has written or directed see a spillover from his comedy. Two of his characters from his one-man shows have been adapted into films, *Chouchou* (2003) and *Coco* (2009), both explorations in the specificity of the Moroccan Jewish experience in France.⁹⁶ Like his comedy, his films portray the experiences of Maghrebi immigrants in France and the challenges of integration (in *Salut cousin !* (1996), for example), and also deal with Jewish cultural themes, often through caricatural portraits of Jewish diasporas in Europe (*La Vérité si je mens! 2* (2001) and *Comme ton père* (2007) are paradigmatic examples).⁹⁷ As his comedic and filmic journey continued, his fame propelled him to move to the United States, where the transition in his comedic style continued – perhaps in an even more dramatic fashion —as he adapted his comedy to a different cultural and linguistic context.

Dubbed the Jerry Seinfeld of France, Elmaleh moved to the US in 2015, according to the comedian, to challenge himself and to make it big in the birthplace of stand-up. Practically reinventing himself as a comic in the other side of the Atlantic, Elmaleh's *parcours* in the US exemplifies, in some ways, that of American stand-up comedians. While he is wildly famous in France, he commenced in (relative) anonymity at comedy clubs in New York, as is typical for

⁹⁶ Oren Kosansky and Aomar Boum argue that Gad Elmaleh is one of the first (Moroccan) filmmakers to explore the experiences of Moroccan Jews in cinema (428), contributing to a broader valorization of “Jews as authentic members of the Moroccan body politic” (421).

⁹⁷ Although Gad Elmaleh's shows and films prolifically deal with Moroccan themes, subjects and characters and Elmaleh himself identifies himself as belonging to the Moroccan diaspora, his work is largely not considered part of Morocco's *patrimoine*. Oren Kosansky and Aomar Boum point to Elmaleh's Jewish heritage as a possible explanation for this refusal; they argue that “Elmaleh's Jewish identity operates in his exclusion from full consideration as a Moroccan filmmaker, as does the fact that his shows and their cinematic adaptations are in the French language” (428).

American comedians.⁹⁸ Further, in the quintessentially experimental nature of American stand-up, Elmaleh “tried out” material with his audiences, and he was frequently seen on-stage with a pen and paper, jotting down over the course of his performances what jokes worked and what did not. As his American journey continued and he gained more exposure, each year brought him yet another milestone: in 2016, he starred in Stephen Colbert’s *Late Night Show*; the following year, he came out with a show distributed by Netflix called *Gad Gone Wild* (2017), a French-language stand-up show with a brief English segment; more shows followed suit in the popular streaming platform, including a Netflix special called *American Dream* (2018), his first English-language stand-up show, and a series called *Huge in France* (2012), an autobiographical fiction that recounts his move to the US. While this journey from anonymity to fame mirrored the *parcours* of many successful American comedians, his quest for a quintessentially “American” stand-up experience would in some ways be an impossible one, least of all because he was already rich and famous in France.

Elmaleh’s stand-up journey in the US vastly differed from that of American comedians in major ways, particularly as he faced challenges unique to his context as a French comic. Riding his new wave of success in the other side of the Atlantic, Elmaleh did comedy tours in the US and Canada, tours that, despite his success, proved challenging. On the one hand, Elmaleh was lauded for making North American audiences laugh through jokes that addressed cross-cultural difference, his impressions of America and his experiences moving to the country (McDermott). On the other hand, however, his routines were critiqued for not addressing what made him original as a comic, thus rendering his stand-up what critics described as stale and trite (McDermott).

⁹⁸ The “relative” in this sentence needs to be underscored. As McDermott points out in his podcast, Gad Elmaleh was in residence at Joe’s Comedy Club in New York for several months, where he tried out and refined his material over time. This opportunity is rarely afforded to true newcomers, for whom the chance to perform at a New York comedy club is hardly a guarantee, let alone for extended time periods.

Endeavoring to transform his Frenchness into a strength, he sought to capitalize on his specificity as a Franco-Maghrebi comic who had made it in France, but was now trying to make it in the US, by using this experience to bring a sense of individuality and originality to his English-language comedy. Perhaps what was even more challenging to Elmaleh was the linguistic and cultural barrier. Although fluent in English, he struggled with the nuances of intonation, timing and delivery,⁹⁹ which routinely quashed his jokes. In addition to learning the subtleties of language, the comic also had to learn to craft comedy for an American audience: while certain jokes worked for a French audience, he learned – through awkward silences and muted enthusiasm during his performances – that what was funny in France wasn't necessarily so in the US (McDermott). This untranslatability of his comedy points to another important feature of Elmaleh's original French stand-up: that despite it being an American art form, what he performs is a specifically French brand of humor.

In addition to the thematic content addressed above, Elmaleh's discursive practices in his French comedy are testament to a brand of humor that evolved from and responds to the particularities of a French sociopolitical context. In the episode of *This American Life* referenced above, Zack McDermott comments on Gad Elmaleh's "incredible stage presence": describing the comic as a "physical comedian" who is "elegant one minute" and "flopping around" and grimacing another, McDermott underlines Elmaleh's versatility as a comic. This multiplicity in body language carries over into his linguistic repertoire. In his French stand-up and sketches, Elmaleh, much like Fellag, often varies his accent (he regularly switches between Moroccan-accented and "standard" Parisian French), diction (he intersperses Maghrebi Arabic words within French

⁹⁹ He had an English-language coach with whom he practiced his jokes and dissected the linguistic nuances involved in their delivery (McDermott).

routines), register (he contrasts vernacular French spoken in immigrant communities, with standardized Hexagonal French associated with white, bourgeois speakers), dialect (he weaves in and out of Darija and Modern Standard Arabic) and even language (he peppers his French routines with Arabic and English). Perhaps Elmaleh's most illustrious embodiment of this heteroglossia is his character Chouchou, whom the comic styles as a recent Moroccan immigrant in France; in playing this character both in his one-man shows and his film, Maleh transforms not only his appearance (as a cross-dresser), but also his language, as he speaks French with a thick Moroccan accent, heavily peppered with Darija. Further, the stylized chunks of English that appear in his stand-up, perhaps most famously in his "Where is Brian" sketch, pokes fun at the mechanistic nature of English language-learning in France. As for his films, Elmaleh often performs in racially- and ethnically-marked roles; be it as a naïve Algerian visitor bewitched by the city of lights in *Salut cousin !* or as a newly-arrived Israeli Jew struggling to integrate into French society in *Comme ton père*, Maleh makes signs of his own racial, ethnic and linguistic otherness visible and audible in his film performances as he does in his stand-up. Other than rendering his comedy virtually untranslatable, what these discursive practices do is grant us "privileged access to Hexagonal France's contemporary sociopolitical dynamics" (Vigouroux 243): by means of his linguistic and cultural heteroglossia, Elmaleh challenges French Republican myth of national uniformity, demonstrating in its stead the linguistic as well as cultural heterogeneity that characterizes France today.

In epitomizing "new narrative[s] of the HERE-AND-NOW France" (Vigoureux 245), Elmaleh's comedy not only faithfully reflects contemporary French realities, but also acts as vector in transforming them, a fact that becomes evident from his comedy's critical reception. In 2007, Gad Elmaleh was voted the funniest man of the year in a poll conducted by TF1, France's most

popular television network. What is telling, not to mention ironic, is the fact Elmaleh secured this honor by performing comedy that challenges the very tenets of Frenchness, i.e., by addressing themes like race and diversity that are considered fundamentally un-French. This signals how Elmaleh has effectively coopted an American genre of comedy and made it authentically French – ironically again, by reconfiguring in fundamental ways what it means to be French. But more importantly, Elmaleh's humor and career trajectory exemplify the important ways in which stand-up comedy, and minority comedians particularly have reshaped ideas surrounding French national identity and belonging.

In the meantime, the effects of Elmaleh's rising popularity in the US could be felt back home. In France, well-known American stand-up comedians became increasingly popular, while French audiences became familiar with the stand-up genre and style that, not too long ago, was a novelty. While American cultural hegemony partly explains this transformation, it does not tell the entire story. To whom and to what phenomena can we attribute the popularization of stand-up in France and the birth of a uniquely French variety of this American art form? While several factors precipitated this change, the actor and comedian Jamel Debbouze played no small role in the rise and popularity of stand-up in France. In fact, Debbouze's comedy and stand-up initiatives effectively transformed the French comedic scene and inaugurated a new era of minority- and youth-based stand-up in France. Jamel Debbouze was born to a working-class family of Moroccan immigrants. He had a troubled childhood as he participated in gang activity and petty crime, which culminated in a train accident that left him with a permanently paralyzed right arm. It was his introduction to improvisational theater that gave him direction. Debbouze joined the improvisational acting troupe of Alain Degois, a teacher and theater director who organized workshops for suburban youths to provide them with productive avenues of extra-curricular

engagement. As part of the troupe, Debbouze toured internationally and won improv championships, and with this, the wheels had been set in motion. After acting in small television roles and hosting his own radio shows on Radio Nova, he was noticed by Canal+, which inaugurated an illustrious career. He achieved national fame by creating one-man shows and acting in small, but critically acclaimed roles in films such as *Zonzon* (1998) and *Le Ciel, les Oiseaux et...ta mère !* (1999). Debbouze's success continued to accrue first as he starred in secondary roles in box office hits like *Le Fabuleux destin d'Amélie Poulain* (2001) and *Astérix et Obélix : Mission Cléopâtre* (2002), then in primary roles in critically acclaimed films like *Indigènes* (2006), before returning to comedy in the mid-2000s.

Much like Fellag and Gad Elmaleh, Jamel Debbouze performs otherness and non-belonging in his comedy, while at the same time normalizing marginality. Using his own life as subject, Debbouze employs humor to bring visibility to life and sociopolitical realities in the *banlieue* – in his shows including *Jamel en Scène* (1999) and *100% Debbouze* (2002), he addresses his life growing up in the *cité*,¹⁰⁰ and his move from the margins to the center through comedy and show biz. In his stand-up, much like in his interviews and talk shows, he is transparent about the challenges that he faced in his path to fame, shedding light on the personal, professional and social issues that he confronted as a minority from Trappes, a French suburb with high rates of gang violence and poverty. In doing so, Debbouze humanizes life in the *banlieue*, makes visible to the mainstream public the sociopolitical realities of its inhabitants and debunks the negative light in which those in power have regularly cast it, particularly since the 2005 riots.¹⁰¹ By using

¹⁰⁰ *Cités* are the French equivalents of American housing projects, although located in French suburbs rather than in cities like its American counterpart. *Cités* offer housing for low-income families, often immigrants and children of recent immigrants.

¹⁰¹ France's interior minister during the time, Nicolas Sarkozy, was criticized for referring to *banlieue* youth as “voyous” and “racaille.” For more on linguistic responsibility in the representation of the *banlieue* in

autobiographical fiction and storytelling infused with socio-politically engaged humor, Debbouze thus promotes a different vision of the *cités* than is traditionally held in French society.

In addition to bringing to light the experiences of minorities to white French audiences, his comedy and films also seek to build intra-communal identification. In his capacity as a comic and stand-up host (more on this below), Debbouze uses specific linguistic tactics in order to create a sense of both “ethnocultural” and “socio-generational” identification (Béru 164). As Cécile Vigouroux demonstrates in her analysis of the comic’s linguistic repertoire, Debbouze routinely employs Verlan, Darija and African American Vernacular English – discursive practices associated not only with those originating from sub-Saharan African and North African origins, but also with the young from the *banlieue* using “non-hexagonal varieties of French”¹⁰² (253-258). Through these heteroglossic practices that mirror the diverse languages, diction, registers and dialects employed in youth culture, Debbouze’s comedy not only builds relation based on racial and ethnic affiliation, but also reaches young audiences. In addition to building relation through language in his comedy routines, Debbouze also furthers this work of generational identification through his cinematic presence. His films such as *Le Ciel, les Oiseaux et... ta mère !* and *Indigènes* have been avenues for “explor[ing] [...] the histories of the [*beurs*]’ parents’ generation” and for “breaking the silence about the legacy of France’s colonization of the Maghreb” (Tarr 35). This has in turn provided the sons and daughters of North African immigrants born in France access to cultural archives to mine from in their attempt to both relate to their parents’ experience of

popular and political discourse, see Olivier Mongin’s “‘Racaille’? Quel langage politique pour les banlieues.” *Esprit*, vol. 2, 2006, pp. 216-218.

¹⁰² For analyses of how non-Arabic speaking suburban youths, particularly of non-European descent, have coopted expressions from Darija and other Arabic varieties into vernacular French (also variously referred to as nonstandard French or “urban French”), see Dominique Caubet’s “Du ‘baba’ (papa) à la mère, des emplois parallèles en arabe marocain et dans les parloirs jeunes en France.” *Cahiers d’études africaines*, vol. 163-164, 2001, pp. 735-748.

displacement and to create an independent identity based on their unique experiences as native-born yet marginalized French citizens. In this way, his films have helped in the project of creating a collective *beur* memory, one that simultaneously legitimates *beurs*' presence in France and their connection to the Maghreb (Tarr 35). Thanks to this work of socio-generational affiliation, Debbouze not only has related to young audiences from suburbs, but also has actively promoted burgeoning talent from the ranks of France's underrepresented minorities, particularly through his stand-up initiatives like the *Jamel Comedy Club*.

Perhaps Debbouze's *magnum opus*, the *Jamel Comedy Club* (henceforth referred to as *JCC*) has promoted the cultural visibility of those marginalized by mainstream French society by giving opportunities to young, minority comedians. Created and produced by Jamel Debbouze, *JCC* was a half-hour TV show on Canal+ at its inception in 2006. Following the show's success, Debbouze opened a comedy club in 2008, where comedians from both the *JCC* troupe as well as other up-and-coming and well-known comedians perform. The sociopolitical context in France during the time *JCC* was created and its stated goals are crucial in helping us understand its cultural significance. Following the riots in 2005 popularly called the "émeutes des banlieues," national attention that focused on the suburban populace was divided into two contrasting currents: one used the events to portray the *cités* as spaces of disorder and chaos, and bolstered calls for increased surveillance and police presence¹⁰³; the other regarded the unrest as a product of discontentment fueled by the already-rampant police harassment in suburbs, compounded by high levels of unemployment and discrimination against North African immigrants after 9/11. This current also called for increased cultural visibility of France's minorities within French media (Ervine 97), and

¹⁰³ Sarkozy, the interior minister at the time was one of the architects of a "zero tolerance" policy towards rioters and deployed several police troops in suburbs across Paris.

it was in this polarizing climate that the *JCC* was founded, as part and parcel of a wider push to replace punitive action with increased resources and opportunities for suburban youths in the aftermath of the riots.¹⁰⁴ Debbouze's mentor Alain Degois explains the timeliness of the *JCC* initiative:

Entre 2006 et 2008, [stand-up] est très important [en France] car on est à un moment fort de l'expression des banlieues après les émeutes de Clichy-Montfermeil, ou les sorties de Nicolas Sarkozy sur le karcher. Ces jeunes qui avaient du talent ont eu besoin de s'exprimer et le Comedy Club a répondu cette attente et à une demande très forte de renouveau de l'humour (qtd. in "Comment le Jamel Comedy Club").

What Degois' statement illustrates, and the founders of *JCC* confirm, is its mission to give exposure to and provide a platform for up-and-coming comedians. Debbouze's national renown, combined with his own passage from a childhood of delinquency to stardom, made him well-poised to serve as both the face of and brains behind a project that sought to serve as a "révélateur de talents" in the emerging French stand-up scene. After all, Debbouze was all too familiar with what could come out of an experience of invisibility and domination if afforded the right opportunities.

In addition to increasing the visibility of emerging minority comedians, *JCC* was in large part a product of a wider cultural effort to rehabilitate the image of *banlieues* (Ervine 97). As we have seen over the course of this chapter, much of minority stand-up comedy in France is highly autobiographical, as comedians routinely discuss their experiences as (racial, ethnic, gender, socioeconomic) minorities in France. In fact, minority stand-up, particularly of the *JCC* kind, has

¹⁰⁴ Jonathan Ervine notes that the proportion of minority comics from suburban and working-class backgrounds was exaggerated in press coverage. He calls attention to the fact that many comics from *JCC*'s troupe in fact possessed degrees of higher education and came from non-suburban backgrounds and middleclass families (101).

frequently been accused of practicing humor grounded in narrow, closed forms of *communautarisme* and ethno-racial affiliation. Both comedians and critics have, however, contested this idea. Critiquing the media's tendency to dub *JCC*'s brand of comedy as "banlieue" humor, Fary, for example, has posited that "L'art du stand-up et du one-man-show est de raconter son quotidien. Moi mon quotidien c'est la banlieue, c'est des potes qui ont des oncles qui ne parlent pas bien français » (qtd. in Bihan). Similarly, Jamel Debbouze has argued that "avant d'être une histoire de banlieue, c'est une histoire de génération" (qtd. in Karmitz). Indeed, many comedians¹⁰⁵ and commentators¹⁰⁶ have argued that stand-up has attracted French youth because of its ability to mirror popular forms of youth entertainment, like hip-hop and rap (Ervine 104). In other words, stand-up's appeal is based not only on ethno-racial but also on generational identification. From a critical stand-point, scholars have argued that French stand-up is "highly autobiographical, but still universal" (Mieulusel 173). Without doubt, *JCC*'s comedians, as we will see in the cases of Fary and Souagnon, often deal with themes including sexuality and gender relations, all universally relatable subjects that transcend the particularity of the local and reach towards the globality of human experience. While popular attitudes regarded those from the *cités* as unassimilated immigrants practicing narrow forms of communitarianism and ethno-racial affiliation, the *JCC* emphasizes a commitment to plurality in its effort to redefine this negative cultural image of *banlieues*. In fact, the *JCC* defines "mixité sociale" (qtd. in Ervine 99) as an explicit category employed in the selection of its performers, a trait that is reflected both in the content and the biography of its comedians. As the press has observed, "l'arrivée de cette première troupe [de *JCC*]

¹⁰⁵ The comic Verino argues that there is a "parallèle évident" between rap and stand-up: "C'est l'émergence d'un art populaire, de gens qui se sentaient méprisés par l'art du dessus" (qtd. in "Spectacles d'humour").

¹⁰⁶ Stand-up has explicitly been compared to rap and hip-hop both in its formal and stylistic aspects. Jérôme Jeanjean has drawn a parallel between the former's rapid-fire form and the latter's "ruptures de rythme" (qtd. in Ervine 104). Laurent Béro has compared the contestatory nature of stand-up to the "critique radicale des rappeurs" (169).

sur le petit écran fait l'effet d'une bombe dans le paysage majoritairement masculin, blanc et âgé de l'humour français" ("Comment le Jamel Comedy Club"). Indeed, JCC's comedians perform a universal, hybrid brand of comedy, as they negotiate not only between their Frenchness and foreignness in their stand-up routines, but also between various other aspects of their cosmopolitan identity, including their class, sexuality, education, upbringing, etc. By thus showcasing its cast's plurality, the *JCC* stages France's contemporary heterogeneity, while also "celebrating the existence of diversity in France as a whole" (99).

The role of Debbouze and *JCC* in increasing the visibility of minority comedians cannot be exaggerated. Amongst the many ways in which *JCC* gave exposure to its comedians, primary among them is through the mediatic platform. As we already know, many of JCC's performances are televised by Canal+, a critically acclaimed television channel that holds considerable cultural capital in France's competitive mediatic landscape, in addition to having a widespread reach among (young) French audiences.¹⁰⁷ What this means is that JCC has provided its comedians not only opportunity, but also the kind of sustained exposure that has helped propel the careers of many of its humorists beyond the context of their "*naissance*."¹⁰⁸ As journalist Rossana Di Vincenzo has pointed out, many of JCC's comedians have gone on to have illustrious careers that have far exceeded the bounds of the TV show. Members from its troupe, like Patson, Thomas N'Gijol, Blanche Gardin, Fary and Shirley Souagnon have had success in comedy, cinema, television and the web, as they have performed at prestigious comedy festivals like the *Marrakech du rire* or the *Juste pour rire* in Montreal, created their own one-man and one-woman shows, starred in films

¹⁰⁷ See Jonathan Ervine's book chapter "Jamel Comedy Club: *stand-up comedy à la française*?" from *Humour in Contemporary France* for more on the role that Canal+ has played in helping increase the visibility of minorities in the media and in propelling the popularity of youth-based comedy.

¹⁰⁸ Critics have nuanced optimism in the potential for media to provide a platform for comedy. See Olivier Mongin's "Les corps du rire" and *De quoi rions-nous ? : Notre société et ses comiques*. Paris: Hachette, 2007 for more on the politically ambiguous import of "le rire télévisuel."

and TV series, featured in Netflix shows and specials, and won high stakes awards like the *Molière* (Blanche Gardin won the award for comedy in 2018 and 2019). In all these ways, the *JCC* has exceeded its scope as a TV show or a comedy club, to become a springboard that has launched the careers of several minority comedians, many of whom either grew up in the peripheries of French cities or are the children of immigrants.

Further, the *JCC* has played a major role in helping increase the prominence of stand-up as a comic form in France. Once again, its televised nature, compounded with the popularity of its namesake, has had a considerable impact in promoting both the visibility and reach of the genre. Consciously created to mirror American stand-up (and distancing itself from the one-man show genre), *JCC* allows its comedians no props, music or other special effects, but only a microphone; comedians come one after another in rapid-fire fashion, and only have between five to seven minutes to make audiences laugh. Both the televised and stage shows are compered by Debbouze, who serves as a master of ceremony (MC) of sorts, introducing comedians, facilitating the transition from one act to the next, and getting his audience excited for what is to come. In fact, Debbouze as well as articles in the French press frequently adopted a pedagogical approach in contextualizing this unfamiliar Anglo-Saxon genre for French audiences, particular during *JCC*'s inception (Ervine 102). Explaining to his audience the American origins of stand-up in his capacity as MC, Debbouze joked that “tonight we all are Americans” (qtd. in Vigouroux 254), thereby (re)framing the genre simultaneously as a foreign yet local form.¹⁰⁹ In fact, the visibility of minority comedians and the increased popularity of stand-up in France go hand-in-hand: many French comedians of North and sub-Saharan African origin have increasingly adopted this comic form, in

¹⁰⁹ This paradox is further evident in the way Debbouze's *Comedy Club* is characterized on its website. Simultaneously referencing its foreignness and Parisian-ness, the website's homepage describes the club as a “théâtre chaleureux au style New-Yorkais devient très vite LA référence du stand up parisien” (“Le Comedy Club”).

Vigoureux's words, as a "space of visibility and hearability" (244). Echoing such critical consensus, Kader Aoun, the co-producer of *JCC* contends that "standup brought forward a whole population left out by the system – the poor, uneducated sons and daughters of immigrants" (qtd. in Logan). In this sense, stand-up has emerged as an empowering platform for young minorities in France, providing "a way for [these] nontraditional social figures to access the media and by extension the public space from which they have been marginalized" (Vigoureux 267). This next section explores two such young comedians who have emerged from the *JCC*, and some of the ways in which they have employed stand-up to weigh in on some of most the contentious issues confronting modern French society.

French Stand-up Today: From Debates to Division

In this section, we consider some of most successful up-and-coming comedians of what I call the new generation of stand-up comedy in France. Products of the *JCC*, this new generation has carried the torch lit by artists like Gad Elmaleh and Jamel Debbouze, as its comedians have continued to transform existing comedic practices. Highlighting how the *JCC* has revolutionized the comedic style in France, those associated with *JCC* as well as its commentators have positioned stand-up, particularly of the *JCC* vein, as engaging in a novel form of comedy, with codes that are different from what French humor has traditionally known. In an interview with his co-producer Kader Aoun, Jamel Debbouze remarks that "à l'inverse des sketches, cette forme [de stand-up] est simple, accessible. Il suffit de monter sur scène, de prendre le micro et de se raconter" (qtd. in Karmitz). Simplicity, accessibility, frankness and a lack of artifice thus characterize the artistic codes of this new, youth-based form of humor that consists in comedians directly addressing their audiences to narrate humorous anecdotes from a first-person point of view. These innovations in

form have in turn allowed for a democratization of the art form, and of comedy more generally, a point advanced by Kader Aoun when he argues:

A cette époque, l'humour était encore quelque chose de très parisien, lié à l'économie du théâtre classique, du seul-en-scène et du one-man-show, c'était soit Fernand Raynaud, soit Philippe Caubère. Avec le *Jamel Comedy Club* et l'avènement du stand-up, il devient d'un seul coup populaire. Les stand-uppers du *JCC* ont apporté une nouvelle façon de s'emparer de la langue, en créant de nouvelles images, plus modernes et qui parlent d'actualité. Ils nous parlent de la rue, de ce qu'ils vivent. Ils sont le miroir de la société (qtd. in "Comment le Jamel Comedy Club").

Aoun's point illustrates how the informal codes associated with stand-up, compounded with its tendency to address contemporary issues relevant to the lives of its (young) audiences, render the art form more accessible and relatable than older forms of sketch-based French comedy. What Aoun's remarks further point to is another salient feature of stand-up of the *JCC* vein: its sociopolitical bent. *In fact*, co-producers Debbouze and Aoun explain that one of the principles guiding *JCC's* mission, in addition to opening "un espace de parole et de liberté à ceux qui n'y avaient pas accès" (qtd. in Karmitze), is that it elicits from its comedians un "une prise de parole politique" (qtd. in Dassionville). Comedians associated with *JCC* and those inspired by its novel format routinely hold up race, class, gender and sexuality as aspects of one's identity that are laugh-worthy and reflect with humor on forces that privilege some identities to the exclusion of others. Not only innovational in form, the *JCC* has thus inaugurated a new era of comedy in France, which has initiated stand-up as an avenue to stage and catalyze sociopolitical debates. This section considers two artists emerging out of the *JCC* – Fary and Shirley Souagnon – whose humor is paradigmatic of the kind of charged social and political issues that French stand-up comedy has

become a privileged platform to voice, debate and discuss. Through a case study of their stand-up, I show how these comedians perform humor based on stereotyping or even mocking racial, ethnic and gender relations. I argue that in doing so, these comedians call attention to the inequities omnipresent in France's purportedly universalist society and thereby challenge hegemonic French attitudes towards its minorities. While I demonstrate how these new-era comedians use such humor based on stereotypes to advocate for social cohesion, I will also highlight instances when playing with stereotypes has conversely sowed controversy and has *catalyzed* ethno-racial tensions rather than help to *alleviate* them.

At a young age, Fary achieved the kind of success that many humorists only dream of. He was born to parents of Cape Verdean origin and grew up in a Parisian *banlieue*. It was teachers in school that recognized his talent for comedy and pushed him to pursue it. Fary began his career doing comedy in TV shows on France 2, including *On n'demande qu'à en rire* and *On n'est pas couché*, the former a show aimed at discovering emerging comic talent and the latter a humor-based talk show. While taking theater and acting lessons in the renowned private Parisian drama school, Cours Florent (which Gad Elmaleh also attended), he participated in the *Humour en capitales* comedy festival, for which he won the Société des auteurs et compositeurs dramatiques's (SACD) 'Prix nouveau talent humour.' It was over the course of such performances that he was noticed by the then artistic director of *Jamel Comedy Club* and Fary subsequently joined its troupe in 2014. He has since performed full-house at various theaters around France, becoming one of the youngest comedians to perform alone at prestigious Parisian theaters including the Théâtre du Point-Virgule and the Bercy AccorHotels Arena. With his 2018 Netflix special *Fary is the New Black*, he set another record, becoming one of the first French humorists, alongside comedic giants

like Gad Elmaleh, to be produced by the coveted streaming platform. His second-one man show *Hexagone* (2020) followed suit on Netflix, distributed as a two-part stand-up special.

Much like the many humorists we have discussed over the course these chapters, Fary too challenges racist and xenophobic clichés even as he paradoxically reuses them in his stand-up. Characterizing the work of comedians as tantamount to that of a “sociologue” or “philosophe,” Fary describes his comedic style as reflective and philosophic, combining, according to the comic Verino, “le rire et la réflexion” (qtd. in “Spectacles d’humor). This measured style that simultaneously makes his audiences reflect as it does laugh is evident in the way he exploits racial stereotypes.

Of the many explosive instances in which Fary coopts stereotypes around blackness, his bit called “Le legging” (2014) provides one of the most illustrative examples. Performed in the *JCC*, the sketch is significant for many reasons: first, it is one of Fary’s most-watched sketches, as it crossed the one million viewership mark in just under three months of its posting on social media platforms like Facebook¹¹⁰ (“Fary: Etre humoriste”). Second and most importantly, it is demonstrative of the comic’s capacity to play with and transforms stereotypes in unexpected and surprising ways. Although the majority of this sketch pokes fun, arguably in a sexist manner, at a women’s garment popular among the youth (leggings), Fary later transitions into a topic that is more relevant for the purposes of this discussion. Towards the end of the sketch, Fary evokes a current event that provoked a polemic in France, when a leader of the *Front National*, Anne Leclerc, compared France’s then black justice minister Christiane Taubira to a monkey (5:05). Seemingly establishing complicity with this offensive cliché, the comic provocatively declares:

¹¹⁰ In fact, the sketch’s online popularity prompted a change in how his team marketed his stand-up: he has since posted short excerpts of his longer performances on free online video streaming platforms like Youtube and on social media networks like Facebook in order to increase the reach and visibility of his humor in both France and internationally (“Fary: Etre humoriste”).

“Ça m’a pas choqué [...]. On peut [même] trouver deux ou trois singes qui lui ressemblent” (5 :14-5 :28). When the initial shock of him apparently accepting, even perpetuating this highly offensive comparison dissipates, it quickly becomes evident that the comic intentionally adopts a comic indifference to this hurtful comment perpetuating racial hatred. In an almost didactic tone that is nevertheless tinged with sarcasm, Fary goes on to explain the reason behind his apparent apathy: “Parce que quand, nous, on se vexe quand on est comparés à un singe, ça voudrait dire que même nous, on a le doute. C’est pas sûr, c’est pas clair” (5:30-5:47). In this highly unexpected but skilled comic maneuver, Fary takes an offensive racial remark and transforms it into something empowering rather than marginalizing. Providing his black comparatists practical tools to survive oppression, Fary drives home the point that for him, a black comic of West African descent, allowing himself to be vexed or overcome by emotion is tantamount to accepting the comparison; feigning indifference, for him, is a strategy to deal with a history of discrimination and prejudice. This kind of socio-politically engaged stand-up is emblematic of the kind of comedy performed by the young generation of comedians coming out of or inspired by the JCC, which has seen comedians take to the art form to give voice to pressing issues surrounding race relations, diversity and multiculturalism confronting modern France. As Laurent Béro argues, these new-age comedians often rely on current events, like does Fary, to take stands on “les faits de l’actualité sociopolitique française” such as “sécurité, pauvreté, immigration” (169).¹¹¹ Another trademark of this new-age comedy, which Fary’s sketch epitomizes, is the use of a “gros catalogue de poncifs ethnoculturels” (Béro 167). An effective, if paradoxical tool, it allows comedians to critique hegemonic French attitudes towards race and the status of contemporary race relations in France, even as they make

¹¹¹ In fact, Laurent Béro points to this “utilisation d’un ensemble cohérent de faits d’actualité” as itself evidence of a “positionnement sociopolitique évident,” as he contends that current events that are “dissimulé[s] derrière l’efficacité humoristique” often serve comics as pretexts to engage in a “critique radicale” (169).

their audiences laugh in reusing these stereotypes. Acting as gadflies, this young generation of comedians of the *JCC* vein disrupt the status quo through comic routines that thus push boundaries of political correctness.

In a society that is reticent to talk about difference,¹¹² not only does Fary make his audiences laugh about racism and discrimination in French society, but he also pokes fun at its universalist values that render it taboo to talk about race. In the very first minutes of his Netflix special *Fary is the New Black*, Fary touches upon subjects like sexuality, sexism, religion, his black identity, race relations and ethnic stereotypes, all politically sensitive subjects in the French Republican context, which nevertheless frequently figure in his comedy routines. In a bit that follows, Fary seeks to understand how French people navigate discussions about race in a (racially) diverse society that ironically refuses to acknowledge difference. To do so, Fary calls attention to a peculiar French habit: the tendency, particularly among white French people, to substitute the term “noir” with its English equivalent “black,” as a sort of euphemism deployed in efforts to reduce the impact of the word (16:89-19:00). Poking fun at white French people’s evident discomfort with the word, he describes the various discursive strategies that they employ in attempts to sidestep the use of the term. He goes on to enact the comically circuitous ways in which white French people seek to convey the idea of blackness, without actually naming it, in what constitute (misguided) discursive shifts deployed in (equally misguided) attempts to circumvent the idea of racial difference. By enacting these oblique and often comical ways in which hegemonic white French society seeks to bypass references to and discussions of race, Fary highlights the futility of turning a blind eye to diversity in a nation with a burgeoning population of color, itself a remnant

¹¹² This reticence is owed largely to French Republican ideology, under whose tenets all are equal citizens in the eyes of the law, and all must in return sustain a relationship with the French state as individuals, rather than as racial, religious, ethnic or gendered subjects.

of “un douloureux passé esclavagiste et colonial” (Béru 166). In what begins as a naïve questioning of an idiosyncratic French practice, Fary effectively demonstrates how the vocabulary used in discussions of race, ethnicity and religion in France are dictated by France’s Republican ideology. In doing so, Fary thus builds a critique of the ways in which France’s universalist values structure even the most quotidian interactions in its society. Fary’s humor therefore exemplifies the contestatory, youth-based comedy that the *JCC* arguably pioneered in France.

If Fary typifies the image of a young, multicultural France breaking ties with an older generation that either ignored racial difference or engaged with it in marginalizing ways, the intersection of race with gender and sexuality is a subject that has equally captivated this young generation of French comedians. This is certainly the case for Shirley Souagnon, another young comic who gained visibility in the *JCC*. Souagnon was born in the French suburb Clichy to parents of Ivoirian descent. She began acting at a young age, appearing in advertisements and in TV shows. Souagnon had already made a mark in the world of humor before her foray into *JCC*, as she came out with her first one-woman show *Sketch Up !* in 2008, performed in comedy festivals like *Paris fait sa comédie* and won awards including ‘la Route du rire’ in 2009 and the ‘Prix Jeune Talent 2010’ in the *Palmarès Humour*. She joined the troupe of *JCC* in 2010 as the only woman in its initial troupe, which brought increased visibility to her name and comedy. She has since embarked on several television and radio ventures as an actor, program host and producer, most notably appearing on several seasons of *On n'demande qu'à en rire* and presenting young comic talent in the TV show *Mieux vaut en rire*. Not only has she added two more one-woman shows to her name, *Free! The One Woman Funky Show* (2014) and *Monsieur Shirley* (2018), but in 2019, she was featured as one among the 47 world comedians in the Netflix series *Comedians of the World*, in a 30-minute stand-up special that has brought her international exposure.

Souagnon's life both on and off stage exemplify the kind of sociopolitical activism that characterizes the new generation of French stand-up comedians. A strong LGBTQ activist and openly gay herself, she wrote and performed a sketch called *Gay, Gay, Gay* in 2013 in support of same-sex marriage. She is an ambassador of AMREF Health Africa, an organization that supports health care in East Africa. As a black activist campaigning against racism in the French film industry, she joined the *Noire n'est pas mon métier* movement in 2018 to rally against discrimination faced by black actors in the industry; in addition to protesting on the red carpet in the Cannes Film Festival, she also lent her voice to an eponymous manifesto that calls for changes in casting, along with a wider range of roles for black female actors in French cinema. In addition to underpinning her outreach and activism, her identity as a black and gay woman also inform her comedy. In her interviews, Souagnon self-reflexively describes her humor as grounded in the intersections of her experiences as a woman, a lesbian and a black person of African descent: "Aujourd'hui ce que je représente est devenu 'à la mode', alors tant mieux, mais ce n'est pas les Noirs d'un côté, les femmes, les homosexuels [...] Je me sens comme un "rond-point [...] Je suis cette putain de convergence des luttes" (qtd. in "Shirley Souagnon, humoriste"). Indeed, Souagnon's stand-up is testament to the kind of nuanced explorations of intersectional, hybrid identity that characterizes the young generation of comedians emerging out of the JCC.

Even while portraying complicated negotiations of identity, Souagnon's humor simultaneously engages with a host of stereotypes. This dynamic is evident in her stand-up routines, including in her newest one-woman show aptly named *Monsieur Shirely*, which challenge binary notions of gender despite simultaneously exploiting gender-based clichés. Appearing on stage sipping whiskey (instead of water) and wearing gender-neutral clothing, Souagnon calls attention to her non-gender-conforming identity both through her androgynous

appearance and through self-effacing humor that describes how she is often mistaken for a man. She jokes in a sketch that a man, confused by her appearance, stops her on the street to ask her whether she is “un mec” or “une meuf.”¹¹³ She recounts a time when a man perplexingly courted her by referring to her as “mon frère” and comparing her appearance to “Will Smith” (“Je suis une fille !” 0:39-1:08). In a sketch on street harassment, she describes how women, mistaking her for a (black) man, pick up their pace or even cross the street when they see her walking behind them at night (“Le harcèlement de rue 0:17-0:51). Despite laying claim to a non-binary gender identity, she frequently resorts to gendered stereotypes. In another sketch, she recounts that she once asked an attractive server “y a pas la serveuse au menu?” going on to joke that “je drague comme un homme” (“Je drague comme un homme” 4:55-5:10). Acknowledging that her identity as a feminist is a complicated one, she refers to herself simultaneously as a “féministe” and “un beauf,”¹¹⁴ even concluding that the only way to justify the unsavory ways in which she courts women is that “en moi, y a un mec qui s’appelle Robert.”¹¹⁵ C’est ma seule explication” (qtd. “Humour à Paris”). In these ways, Souagnon paradoxically perpetuates gendered ideas of men as unabashed “drapeurs,” even as her own way-of-being challenges binary notions of gender. Souagnon’s humor thus exemplifies, to quote Ervine, “the emergence of spaces within which complex notions of identity can be explored [...thereby] provid[ing] an arena in which processes of simplification can be challenged” (174). What Souagnon’s humor is testament to is how comedians can paradoxically deploy these very simplifications in comic processes that nevertheless challenge them.

¹¹³ Slang terms used to refer to a young man and woman respectively, loosely translating to “guy” and “chick.”

¹¹⁴ There are no exact English translations for the term “beauf,” which is an abbreviation of the word “beau-frère.” It connotes a man with questionable morals when it comes to relationships with women, evoking a sense of vulgarity, lack of taste and obnoxiousness.

¹¹⁵ A stereotypically old-school French name, it is associated with commonness and “basic” Frenchness – someone ordinary, boring, and not modern.

Moreover, Souagnon's stand-up is incisive, often mercilessly critiquing French society and its contradictions. In her Netflix stand-up special on *Comedians of the World*, for example, Souagnon effects a caustic critique of French colonial history. The bit in question begins with the comic recounting her experience performing as a gay woman in Haiti and starts off as a criticism of popular attitudes towards homosexuality in the country. Citing Haitian laws against homosexuality and its connection to a religion imposed by a violent colonial regime, she jokingly asks a fictional Haitian audience with a feigned sense of indignation:

Vous voulez imposer une loi contre l'homosexualité [au nom du Christ]? Non, c'est bien.

Bravo ! Jésus, c'est pas le mec qui vous a été imposé à l'esclavage ? On n'a pas violé vos familles et brûlé vos terres pour ça ? [...] Vous étiez pas Chrétiens, vous étiez vaudous, d'accord ? Vous respectiez toutes les sexualités et vous étiez non-genrés (8:12-8 :40).

Outwardly, Souagnon appears to be mocking Haitians and Haiti, a country that she describes as “un pays de Noirs comme tous les pays de Noirs : en galère” (24:21). Souagnon plays on the history and origins of the term “galère” – a term that refers to slave ships, but colloquially used with the verb “être,” also means to be in deep trouble.¹¹⁶ By tapping into this duality of the phrase “être en galère,” Souagnon evokes the colonial and slave past of Haiti, attributing Haiti's current socio-political condition to this past. Beneath this façade of mocking a “pays Noir en galère,” however, Souagnon offers a powerful critique of the lasting effects of a French colonial regime

¹¹⁶ Arguably the most well-known instance of this phrase comes from Molière's comedy *Fourberies de Scapin* (1671): “Que diable allait-il faire dans cette galère?” After Géronte learns that his son has been kidnapped by Turks, he utters this phrase seven times in the play, each time conveying a sense of humorous desperation. The “galère,” a slave ship, was originally fabricated in the Mediterranean, hence its association with Turks. The way the protagonist uses this phrase evokes its doubleness. Because his son is kidnapped and held captive, it refers on the one hand to the “galère's” history of enslavement. On the other hand, the repeated retorque is a humorous phrase that refers to his son being in deep trouble and is meant to provoke laughter in the audience.

that enslaved, looted and pillaged Haitian people and culture in the name of religion and its “mission civilisatrice.” She pursues her bit with a comparison between Christ and Harvey Weinstein:

C’est quoi votre délire de mettre ‘Merci Jésus’ sur vos taxis ? Qui met le nom de son violeur sur sa cassie, bordel !? Vous avez vu une actrice à Hollywood marquer, ‘Merci Weinstein’? Non!” (8:50-8:59).

This comparison provokes scattered cries of indignation amongst her Canadian audience to whom she is performing live, exemplifying the kind of provocative humor that Souagnon practices. Characterized by this boldness, Souagnon’s stand-up serves as a tool for the comic to voice unfettered critiques of social injustice, sparing nothing from homophobia, religion to colonialism.

Even though both Fary and Souagnon use stand-up to critique hegemonic French attitudes towards its minorities, both use their humor to spread a message of tolerance and unity. Towards the end of the first episode of *Hexagone*, Fary self-reflexively calls attention to the criticisms leveled at his humor. He explains that following his speech at the *Molières* awards ceremony, several commentators viewed his brand of comedy with suspicion, seeing it as either being communitarian, or at worse, exacerbating racial tensions. But instead of explicitly refute such critique, he lets his stand-up and the characteristically careful diction that he employs in it to speak for themselves. The words “ma France,” “mon pays,” “enfant de la République,” “nous les Français” reverberate throughout the show, making it difficult for anyone to argue that his is anything but a message of unity.¹¹⁷ Arguably a meta-reflection on his brand of humor, the second episode of the show unpacks ideas surrounding what it means to critique France and who has the

¹¹⁷ Fary explains that the title of his latest one-man show (*Hexagone*) constitutes a reference to Renaud’s eponymous song, which vehemently critiques France. An epitaph of sort that Fary enters into conversation with, the title invites comparison in order to establish a contrast – unlike Renaud’s song, Fary sees his performance as a means to “dialoguer avec mon pays” rather than “critiquer la France” (49:32).

right to do so. In answering these questions, Fary compares France to a mother, his mother, whom he loves and respects very much, but who is not perfect. “C’est dans cette manière que j’aime la France” (56:05), he declares at the of the show, making it amply evident that if he critiques France – its attitudes towards its minorities, the status of race relations, its policies on immigration, etc. – he does so from a place of love and a sense of belonging to it. Fary echoes these sentiments in his interviews, in which he explains that even though he critiques race relations, the goal of his humor is not “affrontement mais la conciliation” (qtd. in “Humour: le rire”). He argues that if his stand-up distinguishes between “ma France” (ceux qui me ressemblent, ceux qu’on dit de culture urbaine, très mélangée mais qui est française” and “sa France” (celle de France 2, la province, la ménagère, le grand public), it is to “les aider à se regarder et à s’identifier comme faisant partie de la même chose” (qtd. in Merle).

The same can be said of Shirley Souagnon. If her stand-up makes her audiences laugh about discrimination and prejudice in France, it is not to provoke conflict, but to promote cohesion in France’s diverse, multicultural society. Indeed, her humor celebrates difference, as she proudly lays claim to her own non-conformity to societal expectations, particularly those surrounding gender and sexuality. Souagnon, like Fary, exemplifies the new generation of socially engaged humorists, who use their art and their language as tools for sociopolitical activism. Souagnon calls attention to this politically engaged nature of stand-up when she affirms: “quand on a commencé on ne savait pas pourquoi on prenait un micro [en] main. Aujourd’hui on sait que c’est pour prendre la parole. On ne raconte plus des blagues, on raconte des idées” (qtd. in “Comment le Jamel Comedy Club”). Souagnon’s characterization confirms that stand-up constitutes what Debbouze calls a veritable “mouvement collectif” (qtd. in “Comment le Jamel Comedy Club”) – a political act aimed at effecting change in French society. In fact, both Fary and Debbouze are ones of the

few humorists to have opened their own comedy clubs (Fary's Madame Sarfati Comedy Club¹¹⁸ and Souagnon's Barbès Comedy Club); thanks to Jamel and the *JCC*, France has seen an entire generation of comedians who perpetuate a cycle of promoting the visibility of and providing opportunities to those marginalized from and by mainstream French society. However, to think that this politically-engaged brand of humor universally promotes cohesion or challenges the status quo would be a mistake.

On the contrary, we need to look not very far back in French history and politics to understand how comic discourses, particularly the kinds that engages in sociopolitical debate, can be politically risky. The events that followed in the years after *Charlie Hebdo* published controversial cartoons mocking Islam, including the fatal shooting of the newspaper's cartoonists, is a telling instance of how humorous play with stereotypes can exacerbate rather than alleviate socio-ethnic tension. The attacks, carried out in 2015, were orchestrated by Islamic extremists in response to the newspaper's publication of a series of satirical cartoons that depicted the Prophet Mohammed and lampooned Islam. The attacks provoked intense mediatic and academic debates about freedom of expression, *laïcité*, and how to balance these values with religious and cultural sensitivity to the already vulnerable minorities of a society. The attacks and the cartoons that catalyzed them elicited polarizing responses not only in France, but also internationally: the cartoons became the subject of debates around the world, with various newspapers across the globe taking their own stands on whether or not to publish the cartoons. In France, protestors took to the

¹¹⁸ The name is a tribute to Elie Kakou's famous character Madame Sarfati, a caricature of Jewish motherhood.

streets in a demonstration of solidarity with victims of the attack, rallying under the multivalent hashtag *#Jesuischarlie* that became popular on social media.¹¹⁹

While much has been written about the attacks and what it reveals about French society, of interest for the purposes of our discussion is what this controversy unveils about how Republican ideology shapes comedic practices in France. The debates that followed the *Charlie Hebdo* shooting highlighted the profound and contradictory ways in which Republican universalism dictates the paradigms for discussions of race, ethnicity and religion in France. While universalist tenets deem it un-French to recognize racial or religious difference, as Fary demonstrates in his sketch, the very same tenets were paradoxically deployed in defense of the newspaper's depiction of Islam. *Charlie Hebdo* and its proponents justified the newspaper's move to publish cartoons of the Prophet, first, in the name of freedom of speech; second, in the name of universalism – if everyone is equal under French law, regardless of ethnicity, religion or race, then that means that this equal treatment must extend into the realms of comedy and caricature, such that all identities are fair targets of humor. The “right” to be poked fun at, it was argued, cannot be extended to some groups and not to others for the sake of protecting certain groups' cultural and religious sentiments (Ervine 62). As Ervine suggests, this demonstrates the competing, even contradictory uses of French Republican discourse in debates surrounding humor, freedom of expression and offensiveness – while the ideology is used to quash discussions surrounding race, ethnicity, religion, in an effective defense of “colorblindness,” it is simultaneously used in support of

¹¹⁹ Although united under one hashtag, those who laid claim to this slogan demonstrated varying, even competing sentiments regarding who they were in solidarity with, what they sought to defend and who they considered as victims of the attack. For nuanced analyses of the ambiguities and paradoxes that underlie the *#Jesuischarlie* movement, see Michel Duvivier's *Je suis Charlie...?* (2015).

sensitive, even offensive depictions of minority identities in (selective) comedic discourses (24). Further, the controversy highlights the asymmetrical applications of *laïcité* – it brings to the fore the hypocrisy of French secularist ideology that bans the expressions of (certain) religious symbols and sentiments, while simultaneously deeming it acceptable to depict (certain) religious identities in ways that are considered indelicate, even hurtful. In the context of a nation that teeters between its racial, ethnic and religious diversity on the one hand and its founding values of universalism and secularism on the other hand, the *Charlie Hebdo* controversy thus demonstrates the close, but ambiguous relation that humor sustains with debates about multiculturalism and national identity.

Further, the controversy highlights the limits of humor that caricatures racial, ethnic or religious affiliation. While we have heretofore focused on humor that exploits stereotypes for constructive ends, the events that followed in the years after the *Charlie Hebdo* shooting underscore the potential for comedic discourses that humor stereotypes to exacerbate both ethno-racial divisions as well as minorities' experiences of marginalization. A wave of anti-Muslim fervor swept Europe in the shooting's wake, prompting numerous advertisements and caricatures that demonized Muslims, effectively holding an entire religion and its practitioners for the actions of a few. Moreover, several countries across the continent adopted changes in policies related to immigration, which subjected non-Europeans and non-white migrants to increased scrutiny. In fact, French comedic history is rife with instances of humorous play with stereotypes going too far. Mainstream (white) comedians like Michel Leeb have performed notorious sketches that have propounded a host of offensive racial stereotypes. Even the comedians we have studied in this chapter, who have used their humor to challenge hegemonic notions of alterity and Frenchness, have sometimes been the subject of controversy. Fellag's one-man show *Tous les Algériens sont des mécaniciens* has been criticized for purportedly perpetuating stereotypes about Algeria and

Algerians as uncouth and technologically backward (“Le dernier spectacle”). Gad Elmaleh provoked a polemic when he played a Chinese man in a short sketch with Kev Adams in 2016 that was dubbed racist and offensive (Assouline). As discussed above, Fary’s 2019 speech during the *Nuit des Molières* drew critiques from many who viewed it as inflammatory. Even though these artists have dealt with politically-sensitive subjects in ways that have been considered indelicate,¹²⁰ few have pushed the limits of comic sensibility as far as has the comedian Dieudonné.

A highly controversial figure, Dieudonné’s brand of comedy has provoked much debate about the limits of humor and its capacity to offend. Dieudonné M’Bala M’Bala was born to a Cameroonian father and French mother, both left-leaning intellectuals. He grew up in Parisian *banlieues*, and worked odd jobs during his youth, staying unemployed for long periods during which he wrote comedy sketches. Dieudonné began his career in humor by exploiting stereotypes in sketches that were applauded for their perspicacity. He famously performed alongside Élie Semoun between 1990 and 1997, playing various racial and ethnic tropes that sought to showcase the diversity and multicultural fabric of France¹²¹ (Ervine 57). In the 1990s, the pair was a highly popular comic duo. Their performances seemed to embody ethnic fraternity – Élie Semoun is of Moroccan Jewish origins, and Dieudonné, a Frenchman of Cameroonian descent. Their sketches emphasized the contrast in their background and origins, and together, they played on these differences to parody and comment on racism and intolerance in France. With his rising fame, however, Dieudonné’s political allegiances and comic persona underwent a radical transformation.

¹²⁰ In exploring the relationship between morality and humor, Martin Shuster provocatively suggests in “Humor as an Optics: Bergson and the Ethics of Humor” that the more ethically suspect a joke, the funnier it tends to be.

¹²¹ See their performances *Un grand noir et un petit brun* (1991), *Elie et Dieudonné : Une certaine idée de la France* (1993) (which was released as a DVD) and *Elie et Dieudonné en garde à vue* (1996).

Once associated with the far left, Dieudonné began to be influenced by Alain Soral, a far-right political activist and member of the *Front national*, while he also cultivated a friendship with the Holocaust denier Robert Faurisson.

Soon, his polemical political associations began to influence both his off- and on-stage personas, which became increasingly controversial. In interviews, Dieudonné often compared the Holocaust to the slave trade, while he complained that the plight of Jews unfairly overshadowed the victims of slavery. He moreover expressed fraught opinions with regards to the Israeli-Palestine conflict, opinions that he dubbed anti-Zionist, rather than anti-Semitic (Ervine 62). While expressing such incendiary sentiments off-stage, his on-stage comic persona provoked mixed reactions. Jonathan Ervine provides a detailed analysis of these reactions, which can be summed up into three distinct attitudes that critics have adopted towards Dieudonné's brand of comedy. Some labeled his highly controversial sketches as a mockery of the stereotyping process itself. For example, Dieudonné preformed a sketch on Marc-Olivier Fogiel's *On ne peut pas plaire à tout le monde* in 2003, in which he played a Zionist extremist dressed in garb associated with Orthodox Jews and which he ended with a controversial hand gesture that many read as a Nazi salute. Some critics have defended the sketch as a caricature of anti-Semitism, and Dieudonné himself called attention to his use of irony to legitimize his performance (Ervine 59-62). Other critics have argued that his humor must be assessed in light of his polemical public declarations; they contend that his anti-Semitic declarations off-stage cannot be dissociated from his humor on-stage, and that the two must be taken in tandem when evaluating whether or not his comedy is offensive (Ervine 73). Jewish religious authorities, like Rabbi Haïm Korsia, advisor to the General Rabbi of France, have ascribed his humor to ignorance of Judaism rather than to anti-Semitic sentiment (Ervine 67). Yet others describe the negative media attention and governmental action against his comedy as

evidence of a racist double standard. The intense controversy provoked by his humor resulted in the ban of some of his performances and films, as well as in lawsuits that have culminated in convictions of incitation of racial hatred. Pointing to sketches by comedians like Michel Leeb, critics question why it is acceptable for white comedians to freely make jokes at the expense of minorities without consequences, while not allowing the same artistic license to a black comic (Ervine 67). Dieudonné himself justifies his stage material and public declarations, arguing that he is an unfair victim of censorship and restrictions to his freedom of expression (Ervine 65-67). In fact, many critics have echoed this sentiment by drawing parallels to the *Charlie Hebdo* controversy, questioning why the media's support for the newspaper in favor of freedom of speech was not extended to Dieudonné, and whether this discrepancy is indicative of mediatic and societal racism more broadly.

Regardless of what position critics adopt towards Dieudonné's humor, what his comedy demonstrates is the potential for comedic discourse, particularly the kind that recycles stereotypes, to be politically risky. It hinges on the cusp of social acceptability and political correctness, and it can perpetuate the status quo as much as it has the potential to undo it. Although Dieudonné's represents an extreme case of humorous play gone wrong, it raises important questions that bare mentioning here: When does humorous play with stereotypes challenge hegemonic discourses and when does it contrarily end up complicit with its agendas? What tools do both comedians and their audiences possess to distinguish play that uses stereotypes critically from the kind that repeats them problematically? Where and how do humorists draw the line between subversive and offensive play, and what does it mean to cross this line? On a more fundamental level, what are considered acceptable subjects of mockery? How are the parameters of acceptability defined and who has the purview to judge these standards? If the controversy provoked by the *Charlie Hebdo*

cartoons and by Dieudonné are any evidence, it is that these are complicated questions with very little consensus, and the best we can do is examine them on a case-by-case basis, as this dissertation has sought to do. That is not to say that there have not been attempts to set out criteria for judgment for what constitutes offensiveness in humor. Pierre Desproges, who himself gained popularity in part by using stereotypes ironically to challenge prejudice and discrimination, sought answers to complicated questions surrounding humor (“Peut-on rire de tout ? Peut-on rire avec tout le monde ?”) by famously suggesting that “On peut rire de tout, mais pas avec tout le monde.”¹²² Although his comment has been a subject of intense debate and speculation over the years,¹²³ the deceptively simple maxim highlights the contingent nature of humor – what is offensive or not depends on the context, including who is joking, for what audience, when and where. Desproges himself adopted an ambiguous stance on the matter, a fact that becomes evident from his controversial statement on SOS Racisme, an anti-racist organization:

J'adhérerai à SOS racisme le jour où vous mettrez un "s" à racisme. Il y a des racistes noirs, arabes, juifs, chinois, et même des ocre-crème et des anthracite-argenté. Mais par chez vous, à SOS Machin, on ne fustige que le Berrichon de base ou le Parisien-baguette. C'est sectaire.

Desproges here critiques the NGO's focus on white racism against racial and ethnic minorities, claiming that it constitutes a form of “sectarianism” that marginalizes “le Berrichon de base ou le

¹²² Although Desproges first pronounced the maxim in a program on France Inter, he reformulated it in several ways in his books and interviews following the initial pronouncement. Two versions have prevailed: “On peut rire de tout, mais pas avec tout le monde,” and “On peut rire de tout, mais pas avec n'importe qui.”

¹²³ This statement has provoked debate for two main reasons. First, as stated above, because of the differing versions of the maxim and the variations in meaning associated with each. The second has to do with the versatility and ambiguity of the adage, which has allowed it to be used to wildly differing, even contradictory ends. Coopted by the controversial likes of Alain Soral and Dieudonné, it has been deployed to defend laughing at the victims of stereotypes, as much as it has been used to justify laughing at the stereotyping process itself (like did Desproges).

Parisien-baguette,” namely white French people. Often interpreted as a case for anti-white or reverse racism, the comment above highlights how even those who champion the kind of *second degré* that Desproges practiced can still perpetuate ideas championed by far-right, racist and anti-immigrant discourses. How, then, to assess which kind of humor works in serve of the status quo and which kind subverts it?

Literary critics like Olivier Mongin have made a case for judging humor that uses stereotypes based on what sense of identity such comedy relies on and promotes:

de manière très neuve, des comiques issus de l'immigration (Gad Elmaleh, Jamel Debbouze ou Fellag) inventent un comique « identitaire » qui s'efforce de jouer sur la limite, d'aller d'un endroit à l'autre, d'être plusieurs moi (identités) [...] On saisit le contraste avec les dérives d'un comique ethnique « fermé » qui se protège de la confrontation comme celui de Dieudonné (“Les corps du rire” 76).

By evoking notions of openness and closeness, and of plurality, Mongin characterizes as subversive the kind of humor that opens outward beyond the self and promotes Relation with the Other, in the Glissantian sense. Glissant’s concept of Relation privileges precisely multiplicity, in which identity is situated not in origins, but in connections. In this sense, the humor of comedians like Fellag, Gad Elmaleh, Jamel Debbouze, Fary and Shirley Soagnon differs from what Mongin calls “comique ethnique ‘fermé’” in its ability to destabilize fixed notions of identity. Instead, their humor offers “plusieurs moi” — a sense of being in which human existence is connected through histories of relations and connections. The importance of movement (“aller d'un endroit à l'autre”) further highlights a *pensée nomade*,¹²⁴ in Deleuze and Guattari’s sense, as an important feature of

¹²⁴ Deleuze and Guattari formulated the idea in *L'Anti-Oedipe* (1972), while Deleuze presented the term in his seminal 1972 talk “Pensée nomade” that he delivered in a conference on Nietzsche. Deleuze and Guattari since then explored and elaborated the concept in *Mille plateaux: Capitalisme et schizophrénie* (1980).

contestatory humor. As an anti-structuralist stance in relation to the capitalist State, nomadic thought presents a continuous state of becoming and change as a mode of resistance against centralized, hierarchic State structures, in a spatial model that they characterize as rhizomic (a concept that Glissant takes up in proposing his concept of Relation). Indeed, comedians like Fellag, Elmaleh, Debbouze, Fary and Souagnon, unlike Dieudonné, put into practice this errant logic in their comedy as they start with a set of official discourses, but never end up at the point of departure. Guided by the questions “comment faire corps ensemble,” and “comment ne pas valoriser la fermeture collective au nom d'une identité close” (“Les corps du rire” 76), they play with the foundations of hegemonic narratives, to reimagine and transform them in (ludic) ways that consistently seek to foster a “relation identitaire” (“Les corps du rire” 76).

Conclusion

As stand-up comedy burgeoned in France from its fledgling state in the last decade and a half, the young art form was shaken with plagiarism scandals. Comedians like Gad Elmaleh and Jamel Debbouze were accused of stealing jokes from their counterparts in the Anglo-Saxon world, where stand-up is a more established art. However, what this chapter shows is that there is indeed a stand-up unique to France in both form and content. It has shifted from the one-man show format into the conversational style particular to the comic form. But more importantly, it has staged pressing contemporary debates surrounding racial politics and national identity that have taken center stage in French society following the 2005 *banlieues* riots and the 2015 terror attacks. We examined the personal and career trajectories of three comedic pioneers who represent the various stages in the shift of the French comedy scene, beginning with Fellag, who epitomizes the one-man show genre, continuing to Gad Elmaleh, who by peppering his performances with bits of

stand-up, introduced the new comic form to French audiences; and culminating with Jamel Debbouze, who democratized the art form by popularizing it among French minorities and youth. In a context where stand-up was seen as a borrowed art form, these pioneers made it their own, as they routinely used personal experience and autobiography as material for humor. What their personal and career trajectories in turn demonstrate is how these comedians are, to echo Jamel Debbouze, ‘politique[s] de par [leur] parcours’ (qtd. in Ervine 97). Fellag, an Algerian-born comic fleeing the violence of the Algerian civil war in aftermath of independence, became a star in France by addressing the legacies of colonialism in his one-man shows; Gad Elmaleh, a comic of Moroccan Jewish origins, earned the title of funniest man in France by performing comedy and film roles that anatomize the experiences of Maghrebis and Maghrebi Jews in Europe; and Jamel Debbouze, a Moroccan-origin boy with a disability and from the *cités* of Paris, went on not only to become the face of French stand-up, but also to inaugurate an entire generation of comedians that in turn perpetuates this legacy of diversity in stand-up. Testament to a new era, these comedians demonstrate how minority comedians are reconfiguring not only comedy in France, but also the very definition of what it means to be French. Indeed, these comedians have developed a heteroglossic comedic repertoire that destabilizes the Republican myth of France as a uniform nation, thereby making visible and audible its marginalized diasporas.

Appropriating the comic form from these pioneers, young French comedians have continued innovating stand-up. Through a case study of Fary and Shirley Souagnon’s humor, the chapter illustrated the emergence of this new age of stand-up comedy in France, which has seen young and minority comedians take to stand-up to call attention to inequities in French society and to promote tolerance in a diverse, modern France. Their stand-up is novel in both cultural and artistic terms – it addresses everything from subjects about sex, sexuality and gender relations, to

questions of diversity, multiculturalism and national belonging. In its formal aspects, it is significantly different from the older forms of French comedy that tended to be apolitical and/or character- and sketch-based. Taking root as young racial and ethnic minorities sought a voice and more visibility in the media, contemporary stand-up utilizes cultural and linguistic codes familiar to the youth in order to “leur parler d'un quotidien qui leur ressemble” (qtd. in Karmitz). Thanks to this transformation in codes, stand-up has thus rendered comedy accessible to young and minority performers by giving them a platform to make themselves heard, while also rendering the French comic scene itself more relevant to young audiences by reflecting the concerns of their everyday lives.

However, as Ervine argues and as we saw over the course of the chapter, “comedy is not always a subversive art form” (13). It can perpetuate hegemonic power structures just as it can challenge them. Indeed, “humor is a matter of moral, political and aesthetic debate,” in the words of Michael Billig (28). There are no universal prescriptions regulating it, nor are there how-manuals outlining ways to evaluate it, which means that there have been and will always be “debates about the appropriateness, morality and funniness of humour” (Billing 28). This chapter dealt precisely with this ambiguous nature of comedic discourses that play with stereotypes. On the one hand, stand-up that coopts racial and ethnic clichés possesses the potential to disrupt the homogeneity of French Republicanism simply by recognizing and showcasing France’s multicultural fabric, particularly as some of the biggest names in French stand-up are from minority backgrounds. On the other hand, this kind of humor can go too far, hurt sentiments and pose a threat to this very diversity by reinforcing hegemonic power relations, which the international reactions provoked by the *Charlie Hebdo* events and the polemic triggered by Dieudonné’s humor demonstrate. It is this curious duality of humor – its capacity on the one hand

to normalize French multiculturalism and on the other hand, to reinforce the myth of French uniformity, that makes it so tricky but also so interesting to study. Apt as a beginning, it provides a starting point for a more detailed study of how minority stand-up comedians use humor to navigate thorny questions of race, religion, gender and ethnicity within the uniquely French context of colorblindness and Republicanism. Paving the way on the other hand for a conclusion, this duality simultaneously highlights the strengths and limits of humor in artistic creation and in socio-political dialogue.

Conclusion

The Ambivalent and Contested Politics of Laughing at the Other

A few years ago, I had the privilege of watching a riveting performance of Wajdi Mouawad's play *Seuls* (2008) in Philadelphia. In this one-man show authored, directed by and starring Mouawad himself, the renowned Quebecois-French-Lebanese playwright mines from his experience of exile from his birthplace Lebanon, which the civil war forced him to leave as a child. Delving into the pain of parting and never getting to know his homeland, a stark-naked Mouawad plays an ambivalent protagonist. Captivated, I watched a clown-esque protagonist poke fun at his fate as a writer, unable to conclude his never-ending dissertation at one moment, who in the next, transforms into a deeply desolate artist working through the tragedy of a lost homeland and mother tongue. Struggling with my own emotional response to what I saw on stage, I looked around at the audience, as I wondered whether to laugh or to cry. There was no clear answer: some audience members chuckled at the bumbling protagonist's self-deprecating humor, while others were brought to tears at his moving soliloquies. It was, however, not only the audience but also the play's hero who displayed this ambiguity of emotion: Mouawad intertwines humor and pathos in depicting this fictionalized version of his autobiography.

This ambiguity left me puzzled. The first place I sought to understand it was with Wajdi Mouawad himself, with whom I had the privilege of speaking following the performance. Why, I asked him, did he perform his role as a lost, alienated, and deeply desolate protagonist, with so much levity and humor. "La vie n'est jamais pure, jamais juste la tragédie et la tristesse," he responded; "elle est pleine de contradictions, jamais blanc et noir. C'est pour ne pas avoir le monochromisme dans la vie qu'il y a l'humour." What Mouawad's response sought to convey was

simple, yet powerful: no society, its people or their realities are uniformly sad or homogenously desolate. Indeed, there exists humor in the gravest of circumstances.

Mouawad's remarks triggered what has become an inquiry that would culminate in this dissertation. The motivations behind *Humoring Pathos* were two-fold. First, the project sought to understand what we can make of the decision to deal with serious subjects in a comical manner. To answer this question, I examined the works of writers, artists and performers who take painful themes like colonial history, racism, oppression and exile, and subject it to comic processes. The literary texts and cultural productions studied here make visible this ambivalence of humor: they are at once wrapped in joy as well as suffering. The primary motivation in doing so was to unpack the implications not only of the circulation but also their reception: namely, to understand the implications of homogenous representations of postcolonies as "deathworlds" (Mbembe) and what we can gain by adopting levity itself as a lens to studying the French postcolonial literary and cultural corpus. Such a way of reading is meant to, above all, correct the tendency built into the academy towards horror and violence. The humor in these works enables us to bring together conflicting and paradoxical human experiences and emotions, thereby preventing the traditional focus on tragedy that has informed scholarly practice as much as the popular cultural imaginary.

Second, the study sought to shed light on what role humor plays in subjecting colonial history to critique. And subsequently, what we can make of the decision by writers and artists to deal with somber subjects in a humorous mode. The humorists that I investigated, including Dany Laferrière, Alain Mabanckou, Joann Sfar, Leila Sebbar and the stand-up comics that I study all establish a certain proximity with official discourses, particularly stereotypes and other colonial narratives. The paradoxes that consequently arise from recycling the colonial economies that they ultimately seek to contest are telling. They give rise to an ostensibly oppositional aesthetic, which

renders the practices of these writers and artists seemingly complicit with colonial and neocolonial narratives, while simultaneously questioning, dislodging, and sometimes reinscribing them. What this complex interplay between complicity and critique shows is that stereotyping processes are as ripe for humor as they are for rigorous engagement with hegemonic discourses.

But making fun of what is tragic can be a tricky undertaking – a gesture of questionable taste that can sometimes be subversive and freeing, but at other times, can promote intolerance, hurt sentiments, sow prejudice, and reinforce hegemonic power structures and narratives. In fact, humor's historical standing in the eyes of Western philosophy has been less than positive. In writing about humor, thinkers like Plato, Hobbes and Descartes have all focused on its scornful quality, its capacity for malice (Morreall). Plato, for example, writes that "Taken generally, the ridiculous is a certain kind of evil, specifically a vice" (qtd. in John Morreall). The potential of humor, in other words, to work as a less-than-positive aesthetic practice cannot be taken lightly. As far-right groups increasingly resort to digital platforms like social networking sites and media outlets like YouTube to disseminate their views, humor has increasingly become a tool in propagating neofascist ideology. Neo-nazi movements like the Proud Boys and the Alt-right, which have spread to both sides of the Atlantic, have adopted online harassment and trolling techniques to promote anti-Semitic, racist and misogynistic ideas, with humor serving as a cover that gives its perpetrators a guise of harmless banter and plausible deniability. Its increasing weaponization by extremists disturbs our understanding of humor as an antidote to systems of oppression, making us question to what extent it has the capacity to be the destabilizing and liberating tool that we have traditionally understood it to be. What role digital media platforms and social networks play in the nexus between humor and far-right extremism thus becomes an increasingly urgent question that merits further study.

This intertwining of hegemonic discourses and humor only deepens the ambivalence of humor: joyful when tragic, seemingly complicit when contestatory, with the capacity to question but also to reinforce the status quo. In all these cases, one thing is evident – that for those postcolonial writers and comedians who resort to comic processes to expose and ridicule colonial practices and discourses, humor is serious business. As Sheri Klein writes,

“It is clear that more and more contemporary artists explore humor to confront personal, social, political, and art world issues, and not just as a means to entertain. The aim of contemporary artists who have comic intent is to evoke smiles and laughter, while at the same time to problematize and magnify issues of race, gender, culture, ethnicity, the environment, and consumerism. [...] Their intent is to engage, educate, and bemuse us, but ultimately disrupt our thinking and challenge our beliefs and attitudes” (48).

Clearly, then, one of the greatest strengths of humor lies in its ability to stake claims on positions and problems that are not immediately about humor. What this investigation, in turn, sought to do was to offer a way to challenge the existing geopolitics of circulation and reception by using humor as a lens to examine the intersections between critique and play. Ultimately, this study aims to encourage us to assess our assumptions about the way the Global South should be approached in popular and critical representations – not only as a repository of death, pathos and violence, but also one of humor, levity and laughter.

Works Cited

- Arentsen, Maria Feranda. "Le rôle – complexe – des stéréotypes dans le discours du narrateur migrant de *Comment faire l'amour avec un nègre sans se fatiguer*." *Dalhousie French studies*. Vol. 79, 2007, pp. 93-110.
- Assouline, Gary. "Gad Elmaleh relance la polémique après la rediffusion sur W9 d'un sketch avec Kev Adams sur les Chinois." *HuffPost*, April 20 2018, https://www.huffingtonpost.fr/2018/04/20/gad-elmaleh-relance-la-polemique-apres-la-rediffusion-sur-w9-dun-sketch-avec-kev-adams-sur-les-chinois_a_23416061/.
- Ayo A. Coly. "Afropean Masculinities as *bricolage*." *Francophone Afropean Literatures*, edited by Nicki Hitchcott and Dominic Thomas, Liverpool University Press, 2014, 155-172.
- Baldensperger, Fernand. "Les Définitions De L'humour." *Études d'histoire littéraire*. Vol. 1. Paris: Hachette, 1907.
- Barbery, Muriel, et al. "Pour une 'littérature-monde' en français." *Le Monde*. 15 Mar. 2007. https://www.lemonde.fr/livres/article/2007/03/15/des-ecrivains-plaident-pour-un-roman-en-francais-ouvert-sur-le-monde_883572_3260.html.
- Barthes, Roland. *Le Bruissement de la langue*. Paris: Éditions de Seuil, 1984.
- Behdad, Ali. *Camera Orientalis: Reflections on Photography of the Middle East*. Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2016.
- Bélanger, René-Pierre, director. "Shirley Souagnon." *Comedians of the World*. Netflix, 2019.
- Benveniste, Émile. *Le Vocabulaire des institutions indo-européennes*. Paris: Éditions de Minuit, 1969.
- Bergson, Henri. *Le rire*. Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1940.
- Béru, Laurent. "Un humour ethnoculturel et socio-générationnel: L'exemple du programme télévisuel Jamel Comedy Club." *French Cultural Studies*, vol. 22 no. 2, 2011, pp. 163-172.
- Bhabha, Homi. *The Location of Culture*. London and New York: Routledge: 1994.
- Bihan, Julien. "Fary : 'Les médias ont réduit le Jamel Comedy Club à un humour communautaire'." *Yard Media*, <https://yard.media/fary-les-medias-ont-reduit-le-jamel-comedy-club-a-un-humour-communautaire/>.
- Billig, Michael. "Violent Racist Jokes." *Beyond a Joke: The Limits of Humour*, edited by Sharon Lockyer and Michael Pickering. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009.

Blanchard, Sandrine. "Fary : 'Être humoriste, c'est être de mauvaise foi. On aime défendre l'indéfendable'." *Le Monde*, 19 Sept. 2019, https://www.lemonde.fr/festival/article/2019/09/19/fary-ce-qui-m-anime-c-est-de-prouver-que-le-stand-up-est-un-art-de-la-scene_5512359_4415198.html.
_____. "Humour : le rire doux-amer mais rassembleur de Fary." *Le Monde*, 19 Oct. 2018, https://www.lemonde.fr/scenes/article/2018/10/12/humour-le-rire-doux-amer-mais-rassembleur-de-fary_5368617_1654999.html.

Booth, Wayne C. *A Rhetoric of Irony*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1974.

Burnham, Michelle. "Between England and America: Captivity, Sympathy, and the Sentiment Novel." *Captivity and Sentiment: Cultural Exchange in American Literature, 1682-1861*. Dartmouth: Dartmouth College Press, 2000.

Camus, Jean-Yves. "Quelle place pour l'extrême droite chez les gilets jaunes ?" *Libération*. 8 January 2019.

Casanova, Pascale. *La République mondiale des lettres*. Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1999.

Caubet, Dominique. "Du 'baba' (papa) à la mère, des emplois parallèles en arabe marocain et dans les parlures jeunes en France." *Cahiers d'études africaines*, vol. 163-164, 2001, pp. 735-748.

Chamoiseau, Patrick. *Écrire en pays dominé*. Paris: Gallimard, 1997.
_____. "Que faire de la parole." *Ecrire la parole de nuit : la nouvelle littérature antillaise : nouvelles, poèmes et réflexions poétiques*. Paris: Gallimard, 1994.

Chancé, Dominique. *L'Auteur en souffrance : Essai sur la position et la représentation de l'auteur dans le roman antillais contemporain (1981-1992)*. Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 2000.

Compagnon, M. Compagnon. "Qu'est-ce qu'un auteur." Cours de licence, Université de Paris IV-Sorbonne. <https://aphelis.net/wp-content/uploads/2012/03/Compagnon-Auteur.pdf>

Costaz, Gilles. "Fellag, L'Arlequin De L'Algérie." *Les Echos*, 12 June 2008, <https://www.lesechos.fr/2008/06/fellag-larlequin-de-lalgerie-491343>.

Deleuze, Gilles. "Pensée nomade." *L'île déserte et autres textes 1953-1974*, Paris: Minuit, 2002.

Deleuze, Gilles, and Félix Guattari. *Capitalisme et schizophrénie. L'Anti-Œdipe*. Les Éditions de Minuit, 1972.

_____. *Capitalisme et schizophrénie. 2. Mille plateaux*. Les Éditions de Minuit, 1972.

_____. *Kafka : Pour une littérature mineure*. Paris: Editions de Minuit, 1975.

Desproges, Pierre. *Les étrangers sont nuls*. Grand Livre Du Mois, 1992.

"Les rues de Paris ne sont plus sûres." *Youtube*, Feb. 18, 2012.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ITRFzf_3WeY
____. "On me dit que des Juifs." *Youtube*, Oct. 4, 2008.
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NiFZvsiQMEk>

Duvivier Michel. *Je suis Charlie...?* Paris : CreateSpace, 2015.

De Souza, Pascale. "Trickster Strategies in Alain Mabankou's *Black Bazar*." *Research in African Literatures*, vol. 42, no. 1, 2011, pp. 102–119.

Ervine, Jonathan. *Humour in Contemporary France: Controversy, Consensus and Contradictions*. Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2019.

"Fary - Le Legging - Jamel Comedy Club." *Youtube*, 26 Aug. 2014,
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zC7ff6w7x-Y>.

"Fasciner." *Dictionnaire Littré*. <https://www.littre.org/definition/fasciner>.

"Fellag : 60 ans d'histoire de l'Algérie revisités avec humour et tendresse." *France 24*, March 28 2017, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OouIvnA2iLc>.

"Fellag présente son spectacle 'Petits chocs des civilisations'." *France 3 Rhône-Alpes*. 15 Feb. 2015, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nZ9iJ6IRcoQ>.

Foucault, Michel. *Les Anormaux : Cours au Collège de France, 1974-1975*. Paris: Gallimard/Seuil, 1999.

____. *Il faut défendre la société : Cours au Collège de France, 1975-1976*. Paris: Gallimard/Seuil, 1997.

____. "Of Other Spaces." Trans. Jay Miskowiec. *Diacritics*, vol. 16, no. 1, 1986, pp. 22-27.

Freud, Sigmund. *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious*. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1976.

Gauvin, Lise. "Ecriture, surconscience et plurilinguisme: une poétique de l'errance." *Francophonie et identités Culturelles*, edited by Christiane Albert, Editions Karthala, 1999, 13-29.

Gikandi, Simon. "Realism, Romance, and the Problem of African Literary History." *Modern Language Quarterly*. Vol. 73, no. 3, 2012, pp. 309-328.

Girard, Étienne. "Ni Macron, Ni Mélenchon, Ni Le Pen : les gilets jaunes votent... Coluche." *Marianne*, 10 Dec. 2018, <https://www.marianne.net/politique/ni-macron-ni-melenchon-ni-le-pen-les-gilets-jaunes-votent-coluche>.

Glissant, Édouard. *Poétique de la relation*. Paris : Gallimard, 1990.

Grunberg, Gérard. "Les 'gilets jaunes' et la crise de la démocratie représentative", *Le Débat*, vol. 204, no. 2, 2019, pp. 95-103.

Hutcheon, Linda. *A Theory of Parody: The Teachings of Twentieth-century Art Forms*. New York: Methuen, 1985.

———. *Irony's Edge: The Theory and Politics of Irony* 1994. London: Routledge, 1994.

Jameson, Fredric. *The Political Unconscious: Narrative As a Socially Symbolic Act*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1981.

Julien, Eileen. "The Extroverted African Novel." *The Novel*, edited by Franco Moretti, Princeton University Press, 2006, 667-699.

Karmitz, Elisha. "La comédie des banlieues." *L'Express*, 28 Jan. 2011, https://www.lexpress.fr/culture/scene/la-comedie-des-banlieues_459349.html.

Kauffman, Judith. "L'humour (juif), arme des désarmés." *Imaginaire & Inconscient*. Vol. 15, no. 1, 2005, pp. 93-104.

Kerbrat-Orecchioni, "L'ironie comme trope." *Poétique*. Vol. 41, 1980, pp. 108-127.

Klein, Sheri R. "Comic Liberation: The Feminist Face of Humor in Contemporary." *Art Education*, vol. 61, no. 2, pp. 47-52, 2008.

Kosansky, Oren. and Aomar Boum. "The 'Jewish Question' In Postcolonial Moroccan Cinema." *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, vol. 44, no. 3, 2012, pp. 421-442.

Lafferrière, Dany. *Comment faire l'amour avec un nègre sans se fatiguer*. Paris: Le Serpent à Plumes, 2014.

———. *Je suis un écrivain japonais*. Paris: Grasset, 2008.

Laferrière, Dany, and Bernard Magnier. *J'écris comme je vis*. Outremont, Québec: Lanctôt, 2000.

Lagier, Adrien and Ousmane Ly, directors. *Hexagone – Partie 1*. Netflix, 2020.

Lawson-Hellu, Cyriaque L. "L'ironie du « Pleurer-rire » chez Henri Lopès." *Études littéraires*. Vol. 30, no. 2, 1998, pp. 123-140.

"Le Comedy Club." <https://lecomedyclub.com/le-comedy-club/>.

Leeb, Michel. "L'Africain." *Youtube*, 10 Aug. 2016. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=z1ikVS7BJd4>

Leménager, Grégoire. "Dany Laferrière : 'Depuis 50 Ans, on Nous Emmerde Avec L'identité.'" *Bibliobs, L'Obs*, 2 Jan. 2015. <https://bibliobs.nouvelobs.com/la-video-boite/20141125.OBS6029/dany-laferriere-depuis-50-ans-on-nous-emmerde-avec-l-identite.html>.

Libin, Mark. "History and its Doubles in Alain Mabanckou's African Psycho." *Research in African Literatures*, vol. 47, no. 1, 2016, pp. 39-56.

Logan, Brian. "Allez les standups! Are French comics gutsier than their British rivals?" *The Guardian*, 4 Mar. 2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/stage/2020/mar/04/allez-les-standups-are-french-comics-gutsier-than-their-british-rivals>.

Lopes, Henri. *Le Pleurer-rire*. Paris: Présence africaine, 1982.

Mabanckou, Alain. *Verre Cassé*. Paris: Seuil, 2005.

_____. *Mémoires De Porc-épic*. Paris: Seuil, 2006.

_____. *Black Bazar*. Paris: Seuil, 2009.

Marie, Annabelle. "La Mémoire longue du porc-épic (à propos d'un roman d'Alain Mabanckou)." *Nouvelles Études Francophones*, vol. 28 no. 1, 2013, pp. 77-88.

Mbembe, Achille. "Life, Sovereignty, and Terror in the Fiction of Amos Tutuola." *Research in African Literatures*. Vol. 34, no. 4, 2003, pp. 1-26.

Meizoz, Jérôme. *Postures littéraires: Mises en scènes modernes de l'auteur*. Geneva : Slatkine Érudition, 2007.

McDermott, Zack. "Je suis ici toute la semaine." *This American Life*, 1 Sept. 2021, <https://www.thisamericanlife.org/596/becoming-a-badger/act-one-5>.

Merle, Sylvian. "Fary va faire rire Bercy." *Le Parisien*, 28 Feb. 2019, <https://www.leparisien.fr/culture-loisirs/sortir-region-parisienne/fary-va-faire-rire-bercy-28-02-2019-8022354.php#:~:text=%C2%AB%20Ceux%20qui%20me%20ressemblent%2C%20ceux,chose%20%C2%BB%2C%20sourit%2Dil>.

Mohamed, Fellag. *Djurdjurassique Bled*. Youtube, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0tZUYttO10k>.

_____. "Un coing en hiver." *Le dernier chameau et autres histoires*. Paris: JC Lattès, 2004.

Mongin, Olivier. *De quoi rions-nous ? : Notre société et ses comiques*. Paris: Hachette, 2007

_____. "Les Algérie de Fellag." *Esprit*, vol. 288, no. 10, 2002, pp. 43-54.

_____. "Les corps du rire." *Esprit*, vol. 371, no. 1, 2011, pp. 66-77.

_____. "'Racaille'? Quel langage politique pour les banlieues." *Esprit*, vol. 2, 2006, pp. 216-218.

Montaigne, Michel De., and Emmanuel Naya. "Des cannibales." *Essais*. Paris: Gallimard, 2009.

Morreall, John. "Philosophy of Humor." *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Fall 2020 Edition). Ed. Edward N. Zalta. <<https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2020/entries/humor/>>.

Moura, Jean-Marc. *Le sens littéraire de l'humour*. Paris: Presses universitaires de France, 2010.

Mol, Christof Van, and Helga de Valk. "Migration and Immigrants in Europe: A Historical and Demographic Perspective." *Integration Processes and Policies in Europe: Contexts, Levels and Actors*. New York City: Spring International Publishing, 2015.

"Molières 2019: Des gilets jaunes perturbent la soirée." *Youtube*, 13 May 2019, www.youtube.com/watch?v=gXNxeVRR3c.

Molière. *Les Fourberies de Scapin*. Ligarán, 2014.

Narayan, Uma, *Dislocating cultures: Identities, Traditions and Third World Feminism*. New York: Routledge, 1997.

Pessoa, Fernando. *Le Livre de l'intranquillité*. Trans. Françoise Laye. Paris: Christian Bourgois, 1982.

Plouviez, Grégory. "Humour à Paris : Shirley Souagnon, un savoureux mélange des genres." *Le Parisien*, 4 April 2018, <https://www.leparisien.fr/culture-loisirs/sortir-region-parisienne/humour-a-paris-shirley-souagnon-un-savoureux-melange-des-genres-02-04-2018-7642086.php>.

_____. "Spectacles d'humour : comment le stand-up a fait plier (en deux) la France." *Le Parisien*, 3 Nov. 2019, <https://www.leparisien.fr/culture-loisirs/spectacles-d-humour-comment-le-stand-up-a-fait-plier-en-deux-la-france-03-11-2019-8185401.php>

Quémener, Nelly. *Le Pouvoir de l'humour : Politiques des représentations dans les médias en France*. Paris: Armand Colin, 2014.

Ravi, Sonali. "Humor in French Postcolonial Literature and Culture: A paradox?," *Contemporary French & Francophone Studies*. Vol. 26, no.1, 2022.

Robinson, Douglas. *Performative Linguistics: Speaking and Translating as Doing Things with Words*. Taylor & Francis, 2002.

Rosello, Mireille. Algerian Humour: 'Jay Translating' Words and Silences." *The Reparative in Narratives: Works of Mourning in Progress*. Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2010.

Sartre, Jean-Paul. "Préface." *Les Damnés de la terre*. Frantz Fanon. Paris: Editions François Maspero. 1961.

Satrapi, Marjane. *Persepolis*. Paris: L'Association, 2007.

Sembène, Ousmane. *Le Docker Noir*. Paris: Présence africaine, 1956.

Sfar, Joann. *Le Chat Du Rabbin. 1. La Bar-Mitsva*. Paris: Dargaud, 2002.

_____. *Le Chat Du Rabbin. 2. Le Malka des lions*. Paris : Dargaud, 2002.

_____. *Le Chat Du Rabbin. 5. Jérusalem d'Afrique*. Paris: Dargaud, 2006.

Shuster, Martin. "Humor as an Optics: Bergson and the Ethics of Humor." *Hypattia*, Vol. 28, no. 3, 2013, pp. 618-632

Simek, Nicole. "The Politics of Parody in Patrick Chamoiseau's 'Solibo Magnifique' and Maryse Condé 'Célanire cou-coupé.'" *Romance Notes*. Vol. 4, no. 2, 2006, pp. 253-262.

Spivak, Gayatri Chakravarti. "French Feminism Revisited." *Feminists Theorize the Political*. Ed. Judith Butler and Joann W. Scott. New York: Routledge, 1992.

Souagnon, Shirley. "Je drague comme un homme." *Youtube*, 14 June 2017, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rKaJtgoKV8Q>

_____. "Je suis une fille !" *Youtube*, 10 July 2013, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dRYTWTMOSIk>

_____. "Le harcèlement de rue." *Youtube*, 10 March 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pDtM58OnWF0>

Steemers, Vivan. "Broken Glass Or Broken Text?: The Translatability of Alain Mabanckou's *Verre Cassé* (2005) into English." *Research in African Literatures*, vol. 45, no. 1, 2014, pp. 107-124.

Tarr, Carrie. "Maghrebi-French (Beur) Filmmaking in Context." *Cinéaste*, vol. 33, no. 1, 2007, pp. 32-37.

Tchak, Sami. *La couleur de l'écrivain*. Paris: La Cheminante, 2014.

Thomas, Bonnie. "Migrations of Identity in Dany Laferrière's *Une Autobiographie Américaine*." *Australian Journal of French Studies*, vol. 47, no. 3, 2010, pp. 266-276.

Thomas, Dominic. "New Technologies and the Popular: Alain Mabanckou's Blog." *Research in African Literatures*, vol. 39, no. 4, 2008, pp. 58-71. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/30135303.

Touré, Marie-Amaëlle. "'C'est Trop Blanc : Le discours du comédien Fary sur le manque de diversité Dans Le Théâtre.'" *Le Temps*, 15 May 2019, <https://www.letemps.ch/culture/cest-blanc-discours-comedien-fary-manque-diversite-theatre>.

Vigouroux, Cécile B. "Genre, heteroglossic performances, and new identity: Stand-up comedy in modern French society." *Language in Society*, vol. 44, no. 2, 2015, pp. 243-272.

Vincenzo, Rossana Di. "Comment le Jamel Comedy Club a imposé le stand-up en France." *Télérama*, 13 Sept. 2018, <https://www.telerama.fr/sortir/comment-le-jamel-comedy-club-a-impose-le-stand-up-en-france,n5803039.php>.

_____. "Shirley Souagnon, humoriste, productrice, noire, lesbienne... Et alors ?" *Télérama*, 4 April 2018, <https://www.telerama.fr/sortir/shirley-souagnon,-humoriste,-productrice,-noire,-lesbienne...-et-alors,n5621203.php>.

Walsh, John. "Sarkozy, Mabanckou, and Notes from the Bar: Alain Mabanckou's *Verre Cassé*." *The French Review*, vol. 84, no. 1, 2010, pp. 127-139.

