

5-2011

## A 'Picture Perfect' Banlieue Artist: Abd Al Malik or the Perils of a Conciliatory Rap Discourse in France

Olivier Bourderionnet  
*University of New Orleans*, [obourde1@uno.edu](mailto:obourde1@uno.edu)

Follow this and additional works at: [https://scholarworks.uno.edu/fl\\_facpubs](https://scholarworks.uno.edu/fl_facpubs)



Part of the [French and Francophone Language and Literature Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Bourderionnet, Oliver. "A 'Picture Perfect' Banlieue Artist: Abd Al Malik or the Perils of a Conciliatory Rap Discourse in France." *French Cultural Studies* 22.2 (May 2011): 151-161.

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Department of English and Foreign Languages at ScholarWorks@UNO. It has been accepted for inclusion in Foreign Languages Faculty Publications by an authorized administrator of ScholarWorks@UNO. For more information, please contact [scholarworks@uno.edu](mailto:scholarworks@uno.edu).

## A 'Picture-Perfect' Banlieue Artist: Abd Al Malik or the Perils of a Conciliatory Rap Discourse

This paper concentrates on the media representation of young rapper Abd Al Malik, whose recent albums Gibraltar (2006) and Dante (2008) have been largely embraced by the Parisian elite. Along with the cultural legitimation that affords Malik's articulate rap discourse access to a mainstream audience, questions regarding cooptation, authenticity and identity politics reveal strong divides in the French public sphere, as well as the general sense of a preordained space assigned to rap artists in the media. Malik's artistic vision, successfully blending rap and the most aristocratic of *chanson*, while asserting a strong multicultural identity, comes across as gently subversive and echoes France's struggle to reconcile its attachment to tradition and its need to adapt to a changing society.

**Keywords:** French rap, *chanson*, media, cooptation, minority identities

As France boasts the second largest rap music industry in the world after the United States (Negus, 1994: 159-160), The French hip-hop phenomenon, has been examined by many scholars interested in its function as a platform for social and political expression. At a time when electoral reasons have placed minority communities at the heart of the political debate (Wihtol de Wenden, 2007: 57), French hip-hop artists, most often the children of immigrants make use of their position to voice dissent, give accounts of their experience growing up as under-privileged minorities in France and negotiate multiple identities. Studies such as La France de Zebda: Faire de la musique un acte politique by Danièle Marx-Scouras have revealed the lack of nuance and the limitations of the mainstream French press when it comes to rap music and those involved in the performance of it (Marx-Scouras, 2005: 103). Starting in 2006, the case of Abd Al Malik (born Régis Fayette-Mikano) a French rapper of Congolese origin, who grew up in the 'quartier en difficulté'<sup>1</sup> of Neuhof, south of Strasbourg, gave way to a new

representation of rap in the French press where older clichés were replaced by new ones, signaling an increasingly incestuous relationship between the political power, the press, the music industry and the artist. This paper aims to examine the trajectory of Abd Al Malik as a public figure in France since 2006 while taking the measure of a polyphonic discourse on minority identities in the French public debate.

### **The Post-November 2005 era and Presidential Campaign On the Way: A New Context for Young Rap Artists.**

Abd Al Malik founded the rap group *N.A.P. (New African Poets)* in 1988, and he released his first solo album in 2004, *Le face à face des cœurs* followed by the much acclaimed *Gibraltar* in June of 2006 and *Dante* in November 2008. His solo career debut in 2004 also coincided with the publication by Albin Michel press of an autobiographical essay, *Qu'Allah Bénisse La France*<sup>ii</sup> an account of his spiritual trajectory and reflection on his experience as a troubled youth growing up in the banlieue of Strasbourg. Throughout the chapters of his book and in most of the songs on the album *Gibraltar*, key biographical elements provide the foundation to an introspective narration and meditation on love, peace, tolerance and justice. Malik grew up leading the double life of a small-time criminal and a successful student. He sold drugs, stole wallets and made straight A's in school despite adverse living conditions. In desperate search for guidance during his teens, he embraced Islamic fundamentalism before gradually renouncing it. In his book he famously compared 'l'islam des banlieues' to a 'banlieue de l'islam':

Je comprenais enfin que mon islam de banlieue était effectivement une religiosité répondant à l'état d'esprit des banlieues françaises, mais qu'il n'était aussi qu'une banlieue de l'islam: il demeurait en périphérie, touchant même parfois à des zones troubles, mais n'abordait pas le cœur, le noyau spirituel et universel de l'islam.

(Malik, 2004: 149) <sup>iii</sup>

Malik has since become a follower of Sufism and defines himself as a 'pur républicain, démocrate, laïque, noir, musulman et alsacien'.

*Gibraltar* has won a 'Victoire de la musique' (the equivalent of a *Grammy Award*) in the 'Urban Music' category, as well as the prestigious prizes *Prix Constantin*, *Prix de L'Académie Charles Cros* and *Prix Raoul Breton*. An unusual number of professional awards for an album that reached the 'double-gold' sale records in March of 2007 (over 200 000 records sold). Beyond the musical and conceptual quality that vouch for its success, *Gibraltar* clearly benefited from other favorable circumstances that can further explain the Abd Al Malik phenomenon. *Gibraltar* was released at a time when the debate over the street violence of November 2005 and March 2006 had brought the situation of the youths living in 'zones urbaines sensibles' to the forefront of the political debate. France was preparing to elect a new president and one of the likeliest candidates for the job was none other than Nicolas Sarkozy, the Interior Minister who had created an uproar by promising to 'pressure wash' the 'banlieue' and rid it of its 'scum'.<sup>iv</sup>

In the context of a new reflection on immigration and living conditions in the public housing projects that border large French cities, voices from the new generation of young French citizens of foreign origins suddenly gained more interest in the eyes of the media. Politically engaged music artists such as female rap artist Diam's became a

household name after her second solo album *Dans ma bulle* became the top selling album in France in 2006. In May 2006 the *Nouvel Observateur* published a four page article entitled ‘Enfants du Hip-hop et de Derrida: les intellos du Rap’. Artists and groups such as La rumeur, Rocé, Le Ministère des Affaires Populaires and Abd Al Malik were among the rap artists featured in the article. Other press articles reflecting on the resurgence of a strong political conscience among French rappers appeared in music magazines such as *Vibration* or *Les Inrockuptibles* but also became more frequent in daily newspapers such as *Le Monde* and *Libération*. While Abd Al Malik has been largely represented in the specialized press (*Chorus*, *Planet Rap*, *Groove*, *Rap Mag*) he was also featured in *Le Figaro*, *Elle magazine*, *Télé 7 jours*, *Télérama*.

Music journalist Véronique Mortaigne wrote ‘La colère civique des rappers’, (Mortaigne, 2007a) while Stéphanie Binet wrote ‘Quand les rappers font de l’incitation civique’ (Binet, 2007). Earlier, in an article on Abd Al Malik cleverly entitled ‘Bien sous tout rappers’, she used the following headline: ‘Abd Al Malik, 31 ans, rappeur. Ancien délinquant converti à l’islam, licencié en littérature et en philosophie, il propage une parole apaisée et respectueuse, loin des provocations’ (Binet, 2006).<sup>v</sup> Further down in her article Binet wrote: ‘Il pratique l’équilibre entre sa culture française et sa religion. Il est pour que l’islam respecte les lois de la République, se prononce contre les signes religieux à l’école. Les grands slogans qui divisent tels ‘Ni putes ni soumises’ ou le nouveau gimmick du rap, ‘F[...] Sarko’ ce n’est pas trop son truc: ‘Pourquoi j’insulterais quelqu’un juste parce que je ne suis pas d’accord avec lui?’<sup>vi</sup>

These passages clearly point to several reasons why the media, in the post-‘riot’ and pre-election context, were bound to see in Abd Al Malik a very compelling ‘story’.

At hand was a former drug dealing philosopher with a message of peace and strong words against Islamic fundamentalism, someone who had suffered severe economic hardship yet did not pose as a victim, who professed gratitude to the French school system and a belief in the French Republican ideal. His favoring of a slam ‘flow’ over a more conventional rap technique, his softer voice treatment and sophisticated musical approach as well as his deference and tribute to Jacques Brel, a legendary artist of ‘chanson française’, all of these elements contributed to giving ‘l’enfant des cités’<sup>vii</sup> a lot of media appeal. Moreover, in the post-‘riot’ context, as a ‘minorité visible’, an immigrant body with a Muslim name, Abd Al Malik synthesized the collective fears that had permeated the populist political discourse (often referred to as ‘l’épénisation des esprits’).<sup>viii</sup> His past proximity with drugs and violence in the French suburbs that journalists conveniently juxtaposed with a one-size-fits-all ‘rappeur’ identity made it possible for the media to play with those fears, to encourage voyeuristic instincts while maintaining the appearance of best intentions. ‘Vive la France arc-en-ciel, unie et débarrassée de toutes ses peurs’ says Malik in ‘Soldats de plomb’.<sup>ix</sup>

### **Playing the Media (Or Being Played?) and Negotiating One’s Space Within an Increasingly Conservative Music Industry**

The media interest in Abd Al Malik has brought him unusual visibility for a hip hop artist in France. In the past two and half years he has appeared on an impressive number of talk-shows and cultural programs alongside other artists and entertainers, as well as writers, philosophers, historians and politicians, taking part in debates revolving around France’s societal issues. Although Malik only accepts television invitations that

will include a musical performance of his, he is a very eager participant in debates involving the place of Islam in France, discussions regarding the French banlieues, education and hip-hop culture. Hence, Malik's media presence goes well beyond the world of youth culture and music shows.

On television, he has appeared as a guest in prime-time and late night national news broadcasts (*Journal de 13h* on *France 3* and *Journal de 20h* on *France 2*) and on talk shows such as Thierry Ardisson's *Tout le monde en parle*, Marc-Olivier Fogiel's *On ne peut pas plaire à tout le monde*, Laurent Ruquier's *On est pas couchés* or Frédéric Taddeï *Ce soir ou jamais*. He was also featured in Serge Moati's *Ripostes* alongside historian Michel Wieviorka and politician Bernard Kouchner. In addition to the rap oriented radio station *Skyrock*, and other music stations such as *Génération*, *Couleur 3*, *Nova*, *RFI*, Malik has enjoyed a considerable amount of airplay on State-subsidized French generalist station *France Inter*, and he participated in two separate shows on the highbrow station *France Culture* although the latter were confined to the summer-months programs of 2007.

As suggested by this brief overview of his media representation, Abd Al Malik enjoys the ability to navigate between different cultural strata. I would like now to turn to another aspect of Malik's reception and offer a few remarks on the process of legitimation that can be observed at the critical level as well as the production level. First of all, it is revealing that the release of *Gibraltar* in July of 2006 was made 'en partenariat' with *Télérama* and *Le Monde*, whose readership is most closely associated with the intellectual elite. By November of 2006 when Malik's record sales had reached a steady five thousand copies a week, the press began to react to the phenomenon, insisting

on Malik's being a different kind of rap artist, and a different product of the banlieue. Writing in *Le Monde*, Stéphane Davet describes 'Les métamorphoses d'Abd Al Malik' (Davet, 2006). He comments on Malik's past as a drug dealer / philosophy student, and quotes him as saying 'je pouvais vendre du shit, avec sous le bras, un bouquin d'Alain ou d'Epicure'.<sup>x</sup> Davet goes on to describe Malik's music as 'un rap déconstruit de ses clichés, troquant l'agressivité des scansion pour la spiritualité d'une déclamation inspirée du slam, revigoré par l'apport de musiciens de jazz et une puissance émotive qui doit beaucoup à Brel'.<sup>xi</sup> Beyond the reassuring presence of western philosophers, such words as 'déclamation' are bound to bring to mind echoes of Racine's theater, or 'musiciens de jazz' immediately conjuring 'high culture' in France, it is the reference to Jacques Brel (in final position) that carries the most weight here. Not only is Abd Al Malik turning away from rap's clichés and aggressiveness, not only is he well-versed in philosophy and poetry, but his music and performance pay a tribute to Jacques Brel, granting him instant access to the glorious patrimony of chanson française. Abd Al Malik's successful collaboration with Brel pianist and arranger Gérard Jouannest on *Gibraltar* as well as the palimpsest 'Les autres', a clever reworking of Brel's 'Ces gens là', on the same album, attest to Malik's respect for the French cultural monument that Brel is. It can be interpreted as a symbolic gesture of allegiance to French institutions and while it demonstrates a certain amount of docility and reverence, it also denotes a willingness to create a new music that builds on the French poetic tradition of chanson. Hence, the particular form of 'métissage' or hybridization that characterizes Abd Al Malik's album can be perceived as a manifesto for social 'integration' through literacy and deference to the culture of the elite. Abd Al Malik appears fully aware that his call for a 'France Arc-



en-ciel, unie'<sup>xiii</sup> can only be heard if expressed in terms that the dominant class will judge appropriate. Of all the genres in *chanson française*, 'chanson poétique' or 'chanson à texte' is still perceived as the most authentic and respectable form.

If Jack Lang's early years as *Ministre de la Culture* had been marked by a strong support of a multicultural popular music (Looseley, 2003), his more conservative successors have concentrated on institutionalizing *chanson française* (through the creation of *Le Hall de la Chanson* and the *loi sur les quotas* for example) and have helped the French music industry orchestrate a form of nationalistic 'repli identitaire' that celebrates *chanson* artists of the sixties and the seventies and requires young artists to seek legitimation through a *chanson* affiliation. Véronique Mortaigne wrote in *Le Monde* that fifteen years ago, for many new French artists, to be classified in *chanson française* was considered an insult (Mortaigne, 2007b). But now, even established rap artists attempt to broaden their audience through the power of authentication carried by *chanson*: rapper Joey Starr recently recorded Georges Brassens's 'Gare au Gorille', but the late singer's estate blocked the release of the song. Former Zebda frontman Magyd Cherfi recently recorded a *chanson* album while confessing he would like to be 'un Brassens maghrébin' (Squaaly, 2004).

However, wrapping yourself in French *chanson* is not a strategy known to pop entertainers only, French cinema is exploiting the nostalgic vein copiously with such films as *Podium* (2004), *Quand j'étais chanteur* (2006), *La vie en rose* (2007), and politicians are clearly aware of the possible benefits of it as well. Surfing on the recent re-release of Barbara's complete recordings, Ségolène Royal recently published an autobiographical account of her presidential campaign deftly entitled *Ma plus belle*

*histoire c'est vous* in reference to Barbara's famous song 'Ma plus belle histoire d'amour c'est vous'. Not to mention President Sarkozy's well publicized affair and subsequent marriage with Carla Bruni whose songwriting the press incessantly compared to Brassens's when she made her debut as a singer in 2002. At the occasion of the opening of MIDEM (Marché International du Disque et de l'Édition Musicale) in January 2008, cultural minister Christine Albanel, awarded Abd Al Malik the title of *Chevalier dans l'ordre des Arts et Lettres*. Defining him as 'un vrai poète au verbe sensible et engagé'.<sup>xiii</sup>

Abd Al Malik's chanson affiliation has made it possible for him to touch a larger audience and has earned him authenticity as a French pop artist as attests his appearance at the prestigious festival *Le Printemps de Bourges* in April 2007. It is interesting to take a look at what Bruno Lesprit writes in *Le Monde* about Malik's presence as an opening act for Juliette Gréco.

Le Printemps de Bourges a programmé un rappeur en première partie de Juliette Gréco, mercredi 18 avril au Palais d'Auron. A priori un pari osé, sinon risqué.

Seulement, l'intéressé se nomme Abd Al Malik. Loin des provocations machistes et martiales de certains courants du hip hop, il représente le rappeur idéal.

Originaire du quartier de Neuhof, à Strasbourg, l'ancien chanteur de NAP est passé de la petite délinquance à la découverte du soufisme et prône un islam sage, tolérant et lettré (Lesprit, 2007).<sup>xiv</sup>

Similar wording here, as in Stepanie Binet's article 'Bien sous tout rappeurs' quoted earlier, stress the absence of 'provocation', this time followed by the problematic expression 'le rappeur idéal'. Undoubtedly, it is Abd Al Malik's powerful control of the language of the elite as well as his astute understanding of how to present himself to the

media that make it possible for his message of tolerance and his call for an end to discrimination to be delivered. And yet, these very skills can ultimately undermine the process, since they situate his speech in an ordered space that will only allow a representation of itself.

Abd Al Malik's performance with Gréco at Printemps de Bourges gave the spectacle of 'la grande famille de la chanson' welcoming among its ranks an unthreatening 'rappeur' with very good intentions. Together, Gréco and Abd Al Malik performed 'Né Quelque Part' a popular song by another celebrated author of *chanson poétique*, Maxime Leforestier. 'Est-ce que les gens naissent égaux en droits à l'endroit où ils naissent' <sup>xv</sup> asks the refrain of the song, prompting us to respond with another question regarding the fair representation of pop artists in the press of the elite. Young artists who wish to address current social issues in their work seem to be expected to 'montrer patte blanche' <sup>xvi</sup> and bow to the tradition of French *chanson poétique* in order to receive an endorsement from the cultural press and the ministry of culture. The non-threatening and all-encompassing category of *chanson* will be granted to any artist ('true poets' in Albanel's words) so long as their work shows deference to what the dominant class has erected as 'patrimoine'. The ever-present notion of cultural capital makes it possible for the voice of some to be heard louder than that of others.

### **The Slippery Slope of a 'Consensual' Rap Discourse in Today's France**

It is precisely this very form of discrimination through language and education at play in the media, prompting such telling expressions as Lesprit's 'le rappeur idéal' that Jacques Denis opposes in an article published in Le Monde Diplomatique in September of 2008. In *Rap Domestiqué, Rap Révolté*, <sup>xvii</sup> Denis singles out Abd Al Malik's media

popularity as a sure sign of cooptation and corruption of the message of revolt that rap, in his view, should have a responsibility to convey (Denis, 2008). He invokes a number of other figures of contemporary French rap (D'de Kabal, Rocé, La Rumeur, Kenny Arkana) whose positions come through as more antagonistic, and therefore, in his opinion, more credible yet less attractive to the elite-run media. Unfortunately, the logic behind this rather normative intellectual approach betrays a desire to confine 'authentic' rap discourse to a conventional angry narrative whose subversive power may appear limited as well. As Todd Boyd writes about certain representations of American rap: 'race and class struggle have become a series of rhetorical catch phrases and visual signposts absent of any political or social relevance'. (Boyd, 1995: 327). Along with Abd Al Malik, Denis also attacks slammer Grand Corps Malade whom he calls 'a positive spokesperson' and 'une figure de rédemption quasi-chrétienne'<sup>xviii</sup> for his recent success and media visibility. Elaborating on the issue, Denis quotes Hamé, the sharp-tongued leader of the rap group La Rumeur, as saying: 'ces figures de la bonne conscience arrangent symboliquement les élites médiatiques et désamorcent les problèmes'.<sup>xix</sup>

However, as Boyd remarks, quoting Cornel West's "New Cultural Politics of Difference", there is no arguing that rappers are bound to be both caught in an 'inescapable double bind' and 'simultaneously progressive and coopted'. An illustration of the uncomfortable tension, as regards counter-culture, between high visibility and authenticity, came in the form of a television appearance by Malik in the very last days of 2008. The rapper appeared for a second time on Laurent Ruquier's television show *On est pas couchés* to promote his newest album *Dante*, released in November of 2008. The highly controversial and conservative journalist Eric Zemmour praised Malik's work, calling it

‘truly subversive’ as opposed to what he called the ‘self-righteous’ mainstream French rap discourse that limits itself to an ‘aggressive, hateful, anti-France position’. According to Zemmour, Malik’s professed love of the culture of his country of adoption, his references to Camus and Brel, constitute a ‘truly subversive’ position that puts many cultural observers at odds. He went on to declare his amusement at watching the confusion of some music critics from the magazine *Les Inrockuptibles* who do not know what to make of Malik’s message:

Ce qui me fait vraiment marrer, c’est les contorsions des gars des *Inrockuptibles* [...] Ce que vous écrivez, par exemple, quand vous dites “Que Dieu (sic) bénisse la France”, si vous étiez blanc et français depuis mille ans, les mecs des *Inrockuptibles*, vous traiteraient de fachiste, de nazi, de tous les noms. Seulement comme vous êtes noir, ils se contorsionnent, [...] en disant “ah, mais non, il est gentil...” Ne les croyez pas! En fait vous leur rentrez dedans, et moi je vous félicite.<sup>xx</sup>

Clearly aware of the potentially damaging undertones of Zemmour’s remarks to his own ‘political’ image, Abd Al Malik offered a polite ‘thank you’ and later took an opportunity to defend the undifferentiated community of ‘angry rappers’ disparaged by Zemmour. Anger, Malik explained, may well be a necessary phase that some need to go through before being able to articulate a more constructive discourse. But as we are about to see, Malik makes no secret of his own contempt for the weaknesses displayed in the most conventional of rap, and his writing about them has drawn considerable criticism.

### **Rapping about the Poverty of Rap**

On the second track of his latest album ‘Gilles écoute un disque de rap et fond en larmes,’ Malik does unequivocally condemn a certain kind of traditional rap, ‘rap classique’, which he calls “consternant, égotripé, bourré de clichés victimaires, de lieux communs et d’attitudes pseudo gangsta’.<sup>xxi</sup> The title and the narrative proposed in the lyrics refer to the late philosopher Gilles Deleuze whose name had already appeared in Malik’s previous album Gibraltar alongside Jacques Derrida’s et Régis Debray’s. In ‘Gilles écoute un disque,’ Deleuze becomes the central character of a short story that depicts him at home, in his daily environment. The text offers seemingly random details about the character’s life, thoughts and tastes, blending true biographical elements and philosophical references. It culminates with the account of Gilles’ tears (of despair?) after the audition of a rap recording (‘un disque de rap classique’). If it weren’t for a reference to Spinoza and to his Deleuze’s ‘friends’, ‘Felix’ and ‘Michel’, whom one might understand to be Felix Guattari and Michel Foucault, the identity of the person who inspired the character Gilles would not automatically bring Deleuze to mind. It was probably Malik’s choice to keep the reference indirect and accessible only to people with a vague familiarity with element’s of Deleuze’s bibliography or biography. To many listeners, Gilles will most likely remain an enigmatic figure, an aging, reclusive, and emotionally fragile intellectual who listens to a rap recording and is moved to tears (most likely by the mediocrity of it). Yet, Malik’s text may also stimulate a listener’s curiosity, tease them into further investigating the references in the song, lead them to understand Malik’s admiration for Deleuze’s work, and more importantly, become inspired to read it. A professor of Philosophy, author of *Le Racisme Républicain*, and *La République du Mépris*, Pierre Tévanian who was also an early participant in the *Appel de Indigènes de la*

*République* penned a particularly acerbic critique of this track by Malik, and ridiculed it in a piece entitled *Pierre écoute un disque de slam et vomit* (Tévanian, 2009).<sup>xxii</sup> As a philosopher, Tévanian obviously had no difficulty in identifying Deleuze behind the first name Gilles. His main criticism of ‘Gilles écoute un disque’ lies in the fact that he views the rapper’s reference to Deleuze as mere ‘name dropping’, marking Malik’s ‘desire to differentiate himself’ from other rappers and their production. His critique points to the fact that Malik’s song seems to have been inspired by the viewing of a film on Deleuze, *L’abécédaire de Gilles Deleuze* (1996). Tévanian, who is familiar with the film, then proceeds to enumerate a number of points where Malik tends to betray the philosopher’s thought or shows a poor understanding of it, and offers a series of disapproving remarks, comparing Malik’s text to a ‘Deleuze for dummies’, or suggesting that Malik may have ‘gone to sleep’ during the viewing of the film. Coming from a philosophy professor trained at the Ecole Normale Supérieure noted for his work as a writer and political activist in the fight against discrimination and racism, one might expect a more cautious handling of the matter. Recognizing the social reality that denies certain groups equal access to culture should also command extra caution when discussing attempts of cultural appropriation by these same groups. Tevanian continues:

Il est vrai aussi que le besoin d’afficher à outrance des références culturelles prestigieuses peut être perçu comme une réaction de défense, voire de révolte, contre un certain discours dominant qui dénie aux classes populaires et aux jeunes issus de la colonisation toute capacité de connaître, comprendre et apprécier un philosophe comme Gilles Deleuze. Mais l’impression qui prédomine, quand on écoute le morceau d’Abd Al Malik, est ni celle d’un simple hommage à un

philosophe apprécié ni celle d'un défi adressé à la caste des intellectuels professionnels, mais celle, beaucoup plus déplaisante, d'une volonté de distinction aux dépens des prolétaires, indigènes et autres 'jeunes de banlieue'.<sup>xxiii</sup>

In other words, Malik is asked to not try to differentiate himself from his group of origin by using references he cannot master. He should stick to the language of the street to avoid becoming suspicious. According to the quoted passage, Malik's message is essentially self-serving and undermines the work of authentic rappers where the absence of dominant cultural references is the true sign of a well-ordered society where people know their place. To the article's proposition that Malik's own criticism of rap's clichés perpetuates 'l'un des lieux communs les plus réactionnaires de l'époque, qui ne sert qu'à une chose : disqualifier a priori tout discours vindicatif, revendicatif ou simplement critique contre l'ordre dominant',<sup>xxiv</sup> one might object (as we did earlier with Jacques Denis) that confining rappers to a predetermined discourse in form and content is equally regressive. 'Quand on fait quelque chose, il s'agit d'en sortir et d'y rester', a direct quote from Deleuze's interview in the *abécédaire* under the letter *C* for *Culture*) constitutes Malik's refrain in 'Gilles écoute un disque'. This simple revolving line in the text serves as an invitation to everyone, including himself and other rappers, to consider the dangers of a stationary intellectual position. Furthermore, in the last lines of the song Malik draws an analogy between his understanding of the theory of 'deterritorialization' and the teachings of his spiritual guide in Morocco. Unfortunately, his critic's essay makes no reference to the refrain nor to this final analogy.

Strangely similar in style and composition, is another equally severe essay on Malik signed Faysal Riad posted on the *Collectif Les Mots sont importants* : 'Un truc de



Malade: Abd Al Malik ou la pétainisation du slam' (Riad, 2009) The very long article consists of a systematic reinterpretation of Malik's song 'C'est du lourd'. Riad takes issue with what he considers to be nothing more than an apology for the Vichy doctrine 'travail, famille, patrie'. Calling Malik 'the official translator of Sarkozy's ideology to the "natives"' he concludes by saying that 'C'est du lourd' is an example of 'assimilation intégrale de la Francité la plus réactionnaire et raciste de la part d'un enfant d'immigré africain'.<sup>xxv</sup>

Reactions we have just observed, such as those by Denis, Tévanian or Riad should prompt us to ask further questions. Should a privileged point of view, while allowing someone to identify mechanisms of cooptation at play, not also require extreme caution with respect to minority discourse? Should Malik's praises, however offensive they may appear to some, for hard-working immigrants who served as his role models in 'C'est du lourd', make way to the demonizing of his character? Is there only one type of narrative and positioning acceptable for French children of immigrants?

In addition to managing a musical career and the set of opportunities often unhoped for that come with it, should it be a young minority rapper's responsibility to tailor his/her production to the taste of journalists or political activists? It would seem that other rappers understand the distinction between the artist's discourse and what the media make of it. Let us now turn to what other minority rap artists are saying about Abd Al Malik, keeping in mind that tradition of 'clashing' between rappers (through song or public statements) has never been known to hurt record sales.

### **Arguing Yet Agreeing on the Basics?**

Dias et HK from the rap band MAP (Ministère des Affaires Populaires) were talking to Pierre Tévanian in October of 2008, for the on-line journal Mouvements. On the topic of French national identity, the interviewer brought up Abd Al Malik and other rappers as examples of diverse positions. The response was: ‘the problem here is not to decide who is suspicious or not’ (*‘infréquentable ou non’*) ‘Abd Al Malik is not the problem here. He is probably very talented. What constitutes a problem is the media’s treatment of Abd Al Malik. [...] He has become a symbol of intellectual integration’.

Although they may object to Malik’s conciliatory discourse, Dias and HK seem to mainly take issue with his appropriation by the media and the cultural elite who have erected him as a monument to ‘integration’, a concept and term that they reject. In the song ‘Faudra faire avec’, on their latest album *Les bronzés font du ch’ti*, (Pias) released in April of 2009, MAP exposes the position of a youth born of immigrant parents who refuses to ‘play nice’ and bow to France, who refuses ‘leur projet d’intégration’ and insists on sticking out as a sore thumb. In a direct reference to Malik, the text continues: ‘si tu as mauvaise conscience, écoute Abd Al Malik si tu veux de la bienséance, de la poésie qui fera plaisir à madame la France, madame la France tu sais déjà ce que j’en pense’.<sup>xxvi</sup> As we can see it in the quoted lines above, ‘integration’ formerly ‘assimilation’ until the late eighties, has gradually become tainted with the unacceptable notion of a State-prescribed identity. It has often been opposed, in the public debate, to the universally suspicious notion of ‘communautarisme’ but for many today, ‘integration’ and ‘communautarisme’ represent the two sides of the same fake coin (Dhume, 2007: 88). In ‘Faudra faire avec’ MAP exposes an affinity of thought with the fiercely ‘anti-intégrationniste’ *Mouvement des Indigènes de la République* whose representatives and followers marched in the

streets of Paris in May of 2005 to the slogan of ‘Intégration, non! non! non!’ (Lévy, 2005: 43). Undeniably, MAP’s and Abd Al Malik’s professed positions towards the country they live in appear radically different. In their 2006 album *Debout la d’dans*, MAP had proposed a very acerbic ‘Elle est belle la France’, to which Abd Al Malik seems to respond in 2008 with ‘C’est du lourd’ where he genuinely proclaims ‘La France, elle est belle, on l’aime’. Yet, despite a markedly different stance on their attachment to France as a symbol, MAP and Abd Al Malik appear strikingly similar in their fight for and affirmation of individual freedom of identity. They mix American rap beats with ethnic and regional influences. Malik raps in Alsatian over the accordion notes of ‘Conte Alsacien,’ and MAP fill their text with colloquialisms from northern France while blending the sounds of the accordion and the violin with Arabic scales and percussions. In the seemingly unavoidable reverence to a chanson-française heritage they both champion Jacques Brel; Malik does so with ‘Les autres,’ or ‘Circule Petit,’ and MAP with ‘Les bronzés font du cht’i’. MAP also proposed a reworking of a Charles Aznavour song on *Debout la d’dans*. An even more striking similarity lies in the legitimation process we witnessed with Malik’s performance alongside Juliette Gréco (first at the Printemps de Bourges and then on ‘Romeo et Juliette’, the first track of *Dante*) mirrored on *Les bronzés font du ch’ti* with Jeanne Moreau’s appearance. An entire track is devoted to Moreau’s reading of a letter, written by Brigitte Wieser (a member of the *Collectif Réseau d’Education sans Frontière*) addressed to Brice Hortefeux, Minister of Immigration, Integration, National Identity and Cooperative Development, denouncing the government’s policy on the deportation of undocumented workers. Gréco and Moreau (respectively born in 1927 and 1928) belong to the same generation of outspoken female

French artists who, in the nineteen fifties became symbols of women's sexual emancipation in France. By their collaboration with these young rappers, Gréco and Moreau build a bridge between the France of the Algerian war era and the country of today, facing the reality of her post-colonial heritage. Furthermore, by taking these rappers under their protective wings, Gréco and Moreau, once international symbols of French culture abroad, undoubtedly become surrogate Marianne figures, reminding everyone that la "mère-patrie", or "Liberté" has often been portrayed as a revolutionary leader.

The similarities between MAP's and Malik's visions also manifest themselves in the general themes that color their texts. The collective experience of economic hardship, racial discrimination, police brutality, pride in one's humble origins, solidarity. To Malik's 'name dropping' (in Tévanian's words) of Deleuze and Spinoza we can juxtapose MAP's reference to Frantz Fanon in 'Appelle-moi camarade'. But if Malik refuses to indulge into the rather conventional game of calling Sarkozy names, MAP on the other hand makes liberal use of it. Just as 'la France' seems to have, 'Sarko' has become an Orwellian devilish figure, an open symbol that crystallizes discontentment of all natures, much as 'les Arabes' in the voice of many *Front National* sympathizers.

Ultimately, it seems that below the surface of contrasted positions, lies a mutual desire to promote the idea of a multicultural society that recognizes, values and protects individual rights and cultural differences. It is indeed a program that appears wide and complex, and many in France disagree, among its proponents, on the modalities to achieve it. In the rap world, such groups as MAP or La Rumeur vow to keep a fairly hard, vindictive line, at the risk of confining themselves to a limited audience, while Abd Al

Malik, through a more diplomatic approach, enjoys easier access to television networks, and reaches out to a wider public, slowly reshaping the collective unconscious into accepting that young French rappers represent the future of French popular music, that children of immigrants are French citizens inherent to the new French social fabric, and that some of them may very well choose, today, to define themselves as ‘pur républicain, démocrate, laïque, noir, musulman et alsacien’ or as in the song by MAP ‘Les bronzés font du ch’ti’ as ‘franco-blédar bérbero ch’ti, même presque belge’. The very diversity of perspectives in the categories used by either Malik or MAP point to the challenges and opportunities present in the ongoing construction of a renewed French society in a globalized, post-national era.

---

<sup>i</sup> Tough neighborhood.

<sup>ii</sup> *Allah Bless France.*

<sup>iii</sup> ‘It became clear that my ‘ghetto’ Islam was in fact a religiosity directly connected to the state of mind of the French ‘ghettos’, but also that it was nothing more than a ‘ghetto’ of Islam [...] it did not address the heart, the spiritual and universal core of Islam’.

<sup>iv</sup> In a public address at La Courneuve, in June of 2005, Nicolas Sarkozy exclaimed ‘On va nettoyer la cité des 4000 au Kärcher,’ and few months later, in late October, speaking in Argenteuil: ‘Vous en avez assez de cette ‘bande de racailles’? Eh bien on va vous en débarrasser!’ Both sentences were heavily commented upon in the press and throughout the presidential campaign as the Socialist party accused Nicolas Sarkozy of exploiting the Front National’s xenophobic rhetoric.

<sup>v</sup> Abd Al Malik, 31, rapper. A former delinquant converted to Islam, has a double major in literature and Philosophy he spreads a message of peace and respect and he avoids provocation.

<sup>vi</sup> He found a balance between his French culture and his religion. He believes Islam should respect the Republican laws, disapproves of religious signs in schools. Loud dividing slogans such as ‘Ni putes ni soumises’ or the new [French] rap gimmick ‘F[...] sarko’ do not appeal to him. ‘Why would I insult someone simply because I do not agree with him or her?’

<sup>vii</sup> ‘the ghetto kid’.

<sup>viii</sup> Immigrants of non-European origin are sometimes referred to as ‘visible minorities’. The term ‘lepénisation des esprits’ comes from the National Front extreme right wing leader Jean-Marie LePen.

- 
- ix 'Long live a unified, multi-colored France, freed from all its fears'.
- x 'I would sell weed while holding a copy of a book by Alain or Epicurus under my arm'.
- xi 'A form of rap that is free of clichés and trades the aggressive delivery for a declamation closer to slam. A rap enriched by the presence of jazz musicians and a level of emotional expression reminiscent of Brel's'.
- xii A unified multi-colored France.
- xiii 'A true poet with a sensitive voice and a social conscience'.
- xiv The printemps de Bourges Festival programmed a rap artist to open for Juliette Greco [...] A bold move to say the least. However, the concerned party is none other than Abd Al Malik. Far from the macho, incendiary provocations of certain hip hop artists, he embodies the 'ideal rapper' (my quotation marks). Originally from the Neuhof neighborhood outside of Strasbourg, he is the former front man of the band NAP. He abandoned a life of petty crime when he discovered Sufism. He now preaches an enlightened, tolerant and erudite form of Islam.
- xv 'Are people born with equal rights wherever they are born'
- xvi to show some identification.
- xvii *Domesticated Rap and Rebellious Rap.*
- xviii 'the symbol of a Christ-like form of redemption'.
- xix 'As symbols of a clear-conscience, these characters play into the game of the media elite and defuse the crisis'.
- xx 'What really cracks me up is the convolutions in *Les Inrockuptibles* [...] What you write, for example when you say 'God (sic) bless France'. If you were white and had a thousand years of French ancestry, the people at *Les Inrockuptibles* would call you a fascist, a nazi and what have you. However, since you are black they turn things around and say 'Oh, no, he is a nice guy...' Do not believe them. In fact you shock them and I command you for that'.
- xxi 'Appalling, megalomaniac, filled with self-pity, platitudes, and pseudo *gangsta* posing'.
- xxii 'Pierre listens to a slam record and vomits.' The [Appel des indigènes de la République pour la tenue d'assises de l'anticolonialisme](http://www.indigenes-republique.fr/) is a text that was first published and circulated on-line in the form of a petition in January of 2005 by a group of activists denouncing racial and religious discriminations as well as anti-immigrant sentiment in France. <<http://www.indigenes-republique.fr/>>
- xxiii 'It is true that the need to drape oneself in prestigious cultural references can be understood as a defensive reaction, a form of rebellion even, against a certain dominant discourse that denies the working class population and youths of colonial heritage the ability to know, understand and appreciate a philosopher such as Deleuze. But the main impression, when listening to Abd Al Malik's track, is neither that of a tribute to an admired philosopher nor that of a challenge to the high-cast professional intellectuals.

---

Rather, one gets the much more unpleasant sentiment of a desire to differentiate oneself from the proletariat, the ‘savages’, or the youths who live in public housing’.

xxiv ‘One of the most reactionary commonplaces of our time that does nothing more than discredit any type of vindictive discourse, protest, or criticism directed at the dominant order’.

xxv ‘A Complete assimilation to the most reactionary and racist idea of Frenchness coming from the child of an African immigrant’.

xxvi ‘If you are feeling guilty, if you want political correctness, poetry that will flatter Her Ladyship France, listen to Abd Al Malik, as for me, you already know what I think about Her Ladyship France’ This line makes a reference to MAP’s earlier song ‘Elle est belle la France’.

## References:

- Appel des indigènes de la République*. Viewed 1 December 2010 <<http://www.indigenes-republique.fr/>>
- Barbara. (2007) ‘Ma plus belle histoire d’amour, c’est vous’ in: *Barbara, Les cinquante plus belles chansons*. Paris: Universal. [Music CD]
- Binet, S. (2007) ‘Quand les rappeurs font de l’incitation civique’, *Libération*, 7 April.
- Binet S. (2006) ‘Bien sous tout rappeurs’, *Libération*, 1 November.
- Boyd, T. (1995) ‘Check Yo Self Before You Wreck Yo Self: Variations on a Political Theme in Rap Music and Popular Culture’ in: *Black Public Sphere Collective* The Black Public Sphere (ed.). Chicago: U. of Chicago Press.
- Davet, S. (2006) ‘Les métamorphoses d’Abd Al Malik’, *Le Monde*, 28 November.
- Denis, J. (2008) ‘Rap domestiqué, rap révolté’, *Le Monde Diplomatique*. September, viewed 8 January 2009 <http://www.mondediplomatique.fr/2008/09/DENIS/16290>
- DIAM’S. (2006) *Dans Ma bulle*. Paris: EMI [Music CD]
- Dhume, F. (2007) ‘Communautarisme: l’imaginaire nationaliste’, *Diversité V&E* n°150: pp. 85-90
- Jean-Philippe* (2006) Directed by Laurent Tuel. France: Fidélité Production.
- L’abécédaire de Gilles Deleuze* (1996) Directed by Pierre-André Boutang. France: La Femis.
- Leforestier, M. (1988) ‘Né Quelque Part’ in: *Maxime Leforestier*. Paris: Polydor. [Music CD]
- Les chanson d’amour* (2007) Directed by Christophe Honoré. France: Alma Films.
- Lesprit, B. (2007) ‘A Bourges, Juliette Gréco convie le rappeur Abd Al Malik’, *Le Monde*, 19 April.
- Lévy, L. (2005) *Le spectre du communautarisme*. Paris: Amsterdam.
- Looseley, D. (2003) *Popular Music in Contemporary France: Authenticity, Politics, Debate*. London: Berg.
- Malik, A. (2008) *Dante*. Paris: Universal [Music CD]
- Malik, A. (2006) *Gibraltar*. Paris: Universal [Music CD]
- Malik, A. (2004) *Le face à face des cœurs*. Paris: Universal [Music CD]
- Malik, A. (2004) *Qu’Allah bénisse la France*. Paris: Albin Michel
- Marx-Scouras, D. (2005) *La France de Zebda 1981-2004 : Faire de la musique un acte Politique*. Paris: Autrement.
- Ministère des Affaires Populaires. (2006) *Debout La D’dans*. Paris : Pias [Music CD]
- Ministère des Affaires Populaires. (2009) *Les Bronzés font du ch’ti*. Paris: Pias [Music CD]
- Mortaigue, V. (2007a) ‘La colère civique des rappeurs’, *Le Monde*, 17 May.

- 
- Mortaigne, V. (2007b) 'La bonne santé de la chanson française' *Le Monde*, 3 February.
- Negus, K. (1994) *Producing Pop: Culture and Conflict in the Popular Music Industry*. London: Edward Arnold.
- On connaît la chanson* (1997) Directed by Alain Resnais. France: Arena Films.
- Podium* (2004) Directed by Yann Moix. France: Fidélité production.
- Quand j'étais chanteur* (2006) Directed by Xavier Giannoli. France: Europa Corp.
- Riad, F. (2009) 'Un truc de malade: Abd Al Malik ou la pétainisation du slam' *Collectif les mots sont importants* viewed 1 December 2010 < <http://lmsi.net/Un-truc-de-malade>>
- Royal, S. (2007) *Ma plus belle histoire, c'est vous*. Paris: Grasset.
- Squaaly. (2004) Magyd Cherfi, la vie sans Zebda. [www.rfimusic.com](http://www.rfimusic.com), April. Viewed December 2008 <[http://www.rfimusic.com/musiquefr/articles/060/article\\_14903.asp](http://www.rfimusic.com/musiquefr/articles/060/article_14903.asp)>
- Tévanian, P. (2009) 'Pierre écoute un disque de slam... et vomit' *Collectif les mots sont importants* viewed 15 May < <http://lmsi.net/spip.php?article859>>
- Tevanian, P. (2009) 'Les bronzés font du ch'ti, entretien avec Dias et HK du MAP' in *Mouvements des idées et des luttes* issue 57. January-March 2009/1
- Vigoureux, E. (2006) 'Enfants du hip-hop et de Derrida', *Le Nouvel Observateur*, 18-24 may, (pp.90-93).
- West, C. (1990) 'New Cultural Politics of Difference' in Russel Ferguson, Martha Gever, Trinh T. Minh-Ha and Cornel West (eds) *Out There: Marginalization and Contemporary Culture*. New York, The New Museum of Contemporary Art; and Cambridge, MIT Press, 1990. (pp 18-38).
- Wihtol de Wenden, C. (2007) 'Debating Cultural Difference in France', in Raymond, G. & Modood, T. (eds), *The Construction of Minority Identities in France and Britain*. London: Pallgrave. (p.48-58).