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Frances métisses, Frances métèques ? How Poet-Rappers Gaël Faye and Abd al Malik are claiming and shaping homes, identities and belongings in contemporary France

France's particular notion of citizenship and national belonging not being *a priori* related to ethnicity makes it on the surface open to national subjects of all backgrounds. However, as has been extensively discussed¹, the demands of integration require a *de facto* effacement of the expression of native cultures in favour of a performance or realisation of prescribed or perceived 'Frenchness'. This has been a source of difficulty, division and even trauma for many immigrants to France; overcoming this division and staking a place in contemporary France considered valid without annihilating one's sense of belonging to a distant 'home' country or culture forms a central concern of numerous works of post-migration French literature, music, cinema, and other creative and artistic expressions, by writers and artists of immigrant descent, who refuse to 'pick' one 'home' over another. Another issue, not unique to France and not unique to people of immigrant descent, is the divide between so-called high culture which has been positioned as forming, and is seen to form, a central part of French cultural identity and is upheld as such, and popular culture, often scorned, belittled, or ignored by major national institutions and establishments, or considered under foreign (usually American or Anglophone) influence. As such, those in a marginalised position in society, whether by dint of their origins, or more often their economic and social status, or both, encounter many difficulties accessing what is considered as valid French culture, and its

¹ See for example, Jennings, Jeremy, "Citizenship, Republicanism and Multiculturalism in Contemporary France." *British Journal of Political Science*, 30 (2000): 575-598. *Jstor* (<http://www.jstor.org/stable/194286>); Blatt, David, "Immigrant Politics in a Republican Nation" in Hargreaves, Alec, & McKinney, Mark, ed., *Post-Colonial Cultures in France*. London & New York: Routledge, 1997; Balibar, Étienne & Wallerstein, Immanuel, *Race, nation, classe : les identités ambiguës*. Paris : La Découverte, 1988; etc.

language, content and subject matter (as well as its authors or creators) are often far removed from their everyday lives and experiences. These processes and attitudes have a profound effect on how 'French' certain members of society are able to feel, and to what extent they are able to make themselves at home within prescribed ideas of what constitutes Frenchness.

This problem is explored by the social historian Pap Ndiaye in his detailed study of the black French 'minority', *La condition noire*: the introduction and opening chapter explain the paradox of a country which does not count ethnic minorities in its census and denies the existence of race not only as scientific fact but, by extension, as social construct. Thus, the French state seeks to eliminate ethno-cultural (or indeed, any) difference under the guise of universality offered by "le modèle républicain [qui] s'est construit sur une figure abstraite de la citoyenneté *théoriquement* indifférente aux particularités de sexe, de couleur de peau ou autres" (my emphasis); Ndiaye highlights the exclusionary nature of the French Republic's delegitimation of minority and anti-discrimination activists "en les réduisant au qualificatif péjoratif de 'communautaristes'." (Ndiaye 40) In popular culture, the work of journalist Rokhaya Diallo, and her podcast *Kiffe ta race*² with the writer-blogger Grace Ly, has created a space for France's ethnic minorities to express their problems and frustrations, expressing the particularities of their situation whilst affirming their specifically French identities without necessarily fully aligning themselves with the French state or its republican model; they frequently discuss the limited (popularly accepted) definition of Frenchness and its impact on feelings of identity and belonging for younger generations of immigrant descent in France. Diallo's book, *Ne reste pas à ta place!*, part-autobiography, part-social commentary, part-self-help guide for young minority women

² <https://www.binge.audio/podcast/kiffetarace/>

in France, explicitly explores navigating this problem in its first chapter, “Être fidèle à soi-même”, which opens with the section and sub-sections “Clamer son identité”, “Une autre culture” and “Je suis d’ici”.

Minority strategies of belonging and identifying with and against French Universalism

Nonetheless, marginalised members of French society and writers and artists of immigrant background have made and continue to make their presence felt and receive public and (to a lesser extent) critical recognition. An important part of contemporary French popular culture is rap music: the country’s most listened to musical genre, France is now often considered the country where the genre is the second most popular in the world³, after the USA, from which it of course originated; following its American origins, rap in France has maintained its role as a medium of expression for marginalised groups and particularly urban ethnic minorities. For many young and marginalised groups of people in France, rap is the means of expression that is closest to their daily lives and seen as the most accessible. However, as is the case in many countries, a large proportion of cultural and literary elites do not or would not consider rap as worthy of critical attention or consideration as part of national culture. For example, in *Une histoire du rap en France*, Karim Hammou explores how rap has been stigmatised and discredited as a legitimate French cultural form. Nonetheless, the two editions of *Rap ta France* (1997 and 2017) trace a rich cultural history of the form and its links to immigrant identities, and its original appearance as a black American form, a counter-example to French high culture, and the fine line that rappers have had to walk to find acceptance, as Olivier Cachin (former presenter of RapLine) explains:

³ https://next.liberation.fr/musique/2019/11/15/la-france-royaume-des-musiques-urbaines_1763647; <http://www.slate.fr/story/186227/musique-rap-francais-exportation-etranger-youtube-fans-anglophones-collaborations-concerts>; <https://www.franceinter.fr/emissions/le-telephone-sonne/le-telephone-sonne-24-aout-2018>

Au début, le rap français, il s'habille bien, il veut être accepté, il pense qu'il a le droit, c'est légitime, d'exister comme les autres musiques. Et très vite, le rappeur s'aperçoit à travers diverses humiliations plus ou moins publiques qu'il n'est pas le bienvenu, que les gens comme lui, on n'en veut pas. [...] Et le rappeur va porter une musique qui parlera beaucoup plus à des gens comme lui plutôt que d'essayer de plaire aux autres. (Bocquet & Pierre-Adolphe 281-282)

In parallel, scholars such as Eleanor Hodgson (Exeter University)⁴ examine the ways in which rap deals with and renegotiates French culture and identity, and Frank Jablonka⁵ proposed counter-identifications to the (Parisian, elitist) French state in the establishment of a 'Sudiste' culture through the rap of artists such as IAM (who I mention below). Whilst I do not wish to conflate genres and artistic forms, nor argue that rap should be considered as literature, the skill, poetic detail, and literary artistry of certain rap artists is in itself argument, as its popularity amongst listeners, for a reconsideration of what could, should and in fact does constitute French culture and given recognition as such.

Gaël Faye, born in Burundi to a French father and Rwandan mother, moved to France as a child to escape civil war and genocide. Also a novelist, his work (coming from a background in spoken word poetry) confidently and knowingly straddles the border between rap and poetry, making it a particular case in point, as does the work of Abd al Malik, Congolese by birth but raised in France. In this paper I seek to go beyond asserting the validity or cultural value of French rap, as Hammou has, in order to show how the *œuvre* of Faye, and other immigrant-origin lyricists (rappers and poets) such as

⁴ See, for example, her recent Association of Modern & Contemporary France conference paper, "Rapping narratives of exile, home, and belonging in contemporary France: a comparative analysis of Abd Al Malik, Youssoupha, and Gaël Faye".

⁵ Jablonka, Frank, "Déconstruction de l'identité nationale d'État dans le rap et le contre-modèle du Sud", *Chimères*, 2009/3 71: 27-47.

Malik, both performs and constructs identifications, belonging and a sense and expression of home with confidence, through its lyrics, rhythms, music and references: claiming *their own* French identities rather than attempting to fit into pre-existing moulds. This expression of home and belonging does not refuse Frenchness but attempts to open it up from a minor position *inside* France and French culture, thus allowing others of immigrant origin or minority backgrounds to create and shape their own homes and personalised senses of belonging within it, identifying as French and at home in France but not along prescribed lines. As such the works of Faye and Malik reflect and construct the culture and society within which they live, write, and perform. The differences between the ways in which the Faye and Malik (dis)identify – Faye’s mixed sense of belonging versus Malik’s affirmations of a Frenchness - allow for a comparative overview of the ways in which minority writers can claim or reshape French national and cultural discourses, defining themselves with and/or against their definitions and limits. The two rappers’ appropriation of this international form and hybridisation of it expands French literary-cultural tradition and inscribes minority experience within it, without conceding to implicit or explicit demands to assimilate. They achieve this, in different but parallel ways, through a rap-poetic *métissage* of French literary tradition - including the rhythms of its poetry, which has long been shaped by immigrants -, solidarity between French minorities and personal cultural references and life experiences expressed in new ways. The effect of such work on the French cultural landscape can be considered as analogous to what Deleuze and Guattari name ‘minor literature’ in terms of its position within national culture and consequent political nature⁶.

⁶“Une littérature mineure n’est pas celle d’une langue mineure, plutôt que celle qu’une minorité fait dans une langue majeure.” (Deleuze & Guattari 29) “Le second caractère des littératures mineures, c’est que tout y est politique” (Ibid. 30); “tout prend une valeur collective” (Ibid. 31).

Whilst various French popular lyricists and rappers, including MC Sollar, IAM, Nevche, Grands Corps Malade, Youssoupha and Diam's, have discussed issues of belonging and expressed and affirmed new, métis versions of French identity, in this article I concentrate principally on the work of Faye and al Malik because of their overt confrontation with such issues, through numerous songs dedicated to ideas of contemporary French identity and what it means to be an immigrant or of immigrant origin in France today, including notions of home, exile and postcolonialism, in songs with such telling titles as 'A-France', 'Métis', 'Paris Métèque', 'Le Marseillais', 'Roi de France', and more besides. I examine their work with reference to the concepts and strategies of 'désidentification', as discussed by Jacques Rancière and José Esteban Muñoz, and 'départenance' (as coined by Mireille Rosello), as well as *métissage*, both as fact and, following Françoise Lionnet, as concept or strategy. This will allow me to frame and present an analysis of the strategies used by Faye and al Malik to create a sense of belonging and shape, question, deconstruct and expand notions of home and Frenchness, directly and indirectly. Beyond the semantic content, I argue that the mixing of linguistic registers and careful word choices of the two lyricists both lend a strong literary sensibility and quality to their work, as well as use of poetic and rhythmic devices often associated with traditional poetic forms rather than rap music (thus showing the false and artificial nature of a binary opposition between the two, an innovation that in itself demonstrates their ability to reshape French culture from the inside). I will demonstrate how their fluency in both French high culture and contemporary popular culture and everyday life puts them in an ideal position to negotiate their clashes, confusions, overlaps and borders. They thus position themselves firmly within France and French culture whilst maintaining links to foreign homelands and personal subjectivities that are lyrically shared in service of a bottom-up (*par le bas*)

dialogue reflecting and participating in the evolutions of French society and national identity.

In order to consider the strategies of identification and processes of shaping a sense of home and belonging within the notions of Frenchness and French culture, three concepts can be useful. Firstly, the notion of 'disidentification' (*désidentification*): for Jacques Rancière, disidentification is a political act that is part of a process of subjectivation. Subjectivation, the process of becoming *a subject* (with an attendant subjectivity), is usually defined (for example in psychoanalysis) as the moment at which the adolescent psyche becomes conscious of itself as an independent subject. For Foucault, taken up by Althusser (see below), subjectivation is the activation of one's subjectivity by a process of interpellation by dominant discourses or ideologies that force the becoming-subject to confront themselves with their subjectivity. For Rancière, this subjectivation is a coming-to-politics, in which the subject (through an internal decision or an external force), comes to 'disidentify' with their socio-cultural or national group – in the example examined by Rancière in "La cause de l'autre", this is the French state, in relation to the concrete realities of its actions during the Algerian war (particularly the massacre of the 17th of October, 1961) and its inaction during the Balkan war, which provoke a reaction that leads to political awareness in the becoming-subject, who could then 'disidentify' with the French state, which acts in their name. As Rancière says, such a coming to politics is "d'abord une désidentification par rapport à l'État français qui avait fait cela en notre nom"(Rancière 43); however one must consider *who* is implied by the 'notre' in this sentence and if all minorities, immigrants or their descendants would actually consider that the French state acted in their name. Rancière goes on to state that a disidentification is "par rapport à un certain soi" (Ibid. 44), which would imply that the subject considers themselves as a part of the group from

which they then disidentify. Someone with a more complicated relationship to France or the French state (such as postcolonial immigrants or other marginalised persons) may already have gone through a process of political subjectivation in relation to the French state while growing up, thus developing a political conscience at a young age. Indeed, the lyrics of Abd al Malik⁷ and many other rappers suggest, sometimes violently, such a process – IAM⁸ famously affirmed that they were “non soumis à l’état” and Diam’s argued that *her* France “vit en groupe, parle de bled et déteste les règles” because it is not the “France profonde [qui] aimerait que l’on plonge” (‘Ma France à moi’). Furthermore, whilst certain people (subjects) may identify with the French state, others may not, and still others may identify to a certain extent or with certain parts of France, Frenchness and French culture. In this light, a disidentification on Rancière’s terms seems less likely for immigrants or other marginalised groups; though of course this does not mean that such people could not disidentify through a political (or other form of) subjectivation vis-à-vis other groups, categories, or identities.

Nevertheless, Rancière’s definition is not the only usage of the term ‘disidentification’. Based in the thought of Michel Pêcheux, who also considered how ideology interacts with the person through a process of subjectivation, and rethinking Althusser’s notions of identification, *détournement* and counter-identification, José Esteban Muñoz proposes an alternative definition of ‘disidentification’. Muñoz’s reading of Pêcheux posits disidentification as a third way, between identification and counter-identification, “one that neither opts to assimilate within such a structure nor strictly opposes it; rather, disidentification is a strategy that works on and against dominant ideology” (Muñoz 11).

⁷ The lyrics of songs such as ‘Roi de France’ (“depuis l’enfance”) or ‘Black French Like Me’ (“À partir de quand, de quelle date on peut dire il y a longtemps ?/Toute une vie a votre avis, est-ce suffisant ?”) suggest an awareness of ethnic or visible difference for al Malik from a young age.

⁸ Whose lyrics more often claim allegiance to their home city of Marseille, whose urban form and long history as a port city and multicultural immigrant melting pot make it an exception in France, and as such easier to identify with as a minority.

Thus, for Muñoz, a 'disidentificatory subject' "tactically and simultaneously works on, with, and against a cultural form" (Ibid. 12). I do not wish to suggest a symmetry of experience nor of expression between the queer people of colour in the USA that are the object of Muñoz's study and ethnic minorities or immigrants in France. However, Muñoz's notion of disidentification is capacious and expansive, and he gestures explicitly to 'minority subjects' more broadly, who he hopes will be able to employ disidentificatory strategies, or do so already. Muñoz positions his work as part of a larger struggle against monolithic categories, stating that "For the critic, disidentification is the hermeneutical performance of decoding mass, high, or any other cultural field from the perspective of a minority subject who is disempowered in such a representational hierarchy" (Ibid. 25). I argue that the lyricists whose work I discuss in this article undertake such work and I seek to demonstrate the creative ways in which they renegotiate categories such as 'French' and their meanings and scope – just as Diam's described her "France à moi [elle]", Gaël Faye and Abd al Malik evoke, invoke, rewrite and re-rap the France that they know: a country, culture and society that they play an active role in shaping.

However, Muñoz is not the only theorist to propose such a way of considering literary and artistic work by minorities. In her discussion of the literary work of immigrants and their descendants in France, Mireille Rosello coins the term "départenance" (which could be roughly translated as 'dis-belonging'), which she defines not as a strict opposite of "appurtenance" (belonging) but as a way of recognising the different calls on people of immigrant origin to belong – whether to the French state and French society, to their country and culture 'of origin', or, often, both – and, rather than accepting an imposed identity, negotiating their own belonging that would not force them to lose the different specificities of their identities and cultures. Rosello argues that "the term offers an

opportunity to rethink the supposed necessity to choose between universalism and culturalism without succumbing to disaffection or indifference” (Rosello 23). The word itself is a neologism that according to Rosello’s definition marries the idea of ‘départ’ and that of ‘appartenance’, and is a word which itself is the ‘illegitimate offspring’ which can speak for the children often seen as the illegitimate children of two countries and cultures – much like the ‘métis’ child Faye describes himself as, or the ‘Roi de France’ that Abd al Malik styles himself as, from his own self-chosen name to the single of the same name.

There are clear parallels between the concepts proposed by Muñoz and Rosello, which, despite cultural and contextual differences, enable us to consider identifications outside of rigid frameworks and binary oppositions. The notions of ‘désidentification’ and ‘départenance’ open up our ways of thinking identity and belonging, allowing for an inclusion of the particular and of affective, creative dimensions. These terms gesture towards what Françoise Lionnet has called literary ‘métissage’, a ‘métissage’ that is limited neither to people of métis origin nor to people of immigrant origin, but open to appropriation by all those who make up societies and cultures that are currently mixing (‘en cours de métissage’). For Lionnet, this ‘métissage’ is characterised by “an incessant and playful heteroglossia, a bilingual speech or hybrid language that is a site of creative resistance to the dominant conceptual paradigms.”(Lionnet 100) These literary processes and techniques are, according to Lionnet’s conception, a distancing from assimilatory efforts (on the part of the government or that of the immigrant-origin person), “in favor of *créolité*, a movement that does not aim at the outright rejection of French, but at valorizing the multilingual and multiethnic character of creole cultures,”(Ibid. 104) inspired by the Caribbean literary movement (*créolité*), but taking place in the former colonial centre, i.e., France.

Rap as the inscription of minority experience in French culture

How, then, do Faye and Abd al Malik disidentify or *départient*, how do they enact the *métissage* of contemporary France in their work? They do so through *mises en scènes* of their own lives and of wider immigrant experiences, inscribing them against a stereotypical or elitist, *de souche* conception of French culture, an minoritarian act (in the Deleuzian sense) that modifies the identity of French culture itself. The first and most obvious strategy is through the direct declarations for which rap is a perfect medium. Abd al Malik, whose style is more grandiose and full of bluster than Faye's, declares that he was "couronné roi de France depuis l'enfance" and that "c'est même pas ironique, je m'appelle Abd Al Malik/Normal que mon symbole soit celui de la fleur de lys" (Malik, 'Roi de France'), in a song that references French literary history via *La Nouvelle Héloïse* (by the Swiss Rousseau) and Ionesco (who is of Romanian origin), amongst others, as well as his childhood in the *quartiers* and calling for unity and understanding. Malik's given name was 'Regis', and he chose (upon his conversion to Islam), differentiating himself from his Congolese origins, an Arabic name meaning servant of the King, name of many leaders and eminent figures of the Arab and Islamic worlds – which through this song he links to the 'fleur de lys', highlighting the Frenchness of the Arabo-Muslim traditions that are now an integral part of contemporary France, thanks in large part to the legacy of the country's imperial expansion. In addition to this, in a more recent song, Abd al Malik also declares himself 'Le jeune noir à l'épée', appropriating the image of the (freed) black slave as painted by the white French man (Puvis de Chavannes) as the reality of its descendants in metropolitan France; he also uses the 'nous' to refer to himself as a voice of the Strasbourgeois, the 'Black French' and those who live or grew up in HLMs. Whilst on one

level an expression of anger, protest even, Malik is clearly positioning himself and other minority individuals as an integral part of the French nation, reclaiming space, imagery, words for them: as such this is not a negative act, but an act of disidentification aligned with Muñoz (and to an extent Rancière)'s conception thereof.

Gaël Faye, on the other hand, is more subtle and less grandiose in his claims: he too uses the 'nous' to speak of the minorities and marginalised groups of contemporary France in 'Irruption' or 'Paris Métèque' but highlights his personal trajectory through 'Métis', which by dint of its title describes both himself and by extension the other 'métis' figures who have origins elsewhere but are now a part of contemporary France, in lines such as "Depuis mes sources du Nil jusqu'en haut de la tour Eiffel" or "Blanc et noir, quand le sang dans mes veines se détraque/Je suis debout aux confluent du fleuve et du lac", as a "bloc d'humanité" (Faye, 'Métis'), arguing, like Malik in 'Roi de France' for understanding and acceptance of humanity above and beyond arbitrary distinctions of ethnicity, race or origins. Similar political or even utopian statements or expressions of hope and desire can be found elsewhere in the work of both rappers.

However, the strategies and literary qualities of Faye (and Malik) go much deeper and further than this. Their carefully crafted lyrics, whether closer to poetry or song in format, are closely linked to the expression of personal experience that is central to the artistic (literary and otherwise) production of minority, marginalised, and more specifically, immigrant-origin people in contemporary France (and beyond). This desire or need to express one's personal experiences, life story, and feelings, I would argue, is a direct reaction to the exclusion of minority figures, immigrants, and the legacy of colonialism in national narratives and political theories and approaches to living together, of assimilation and integration. Indeed, much of Faye and Abd al Malik's *œuvre* can be seen through the lens of what I refer to as the 'récit de vie', a form which crosses

genres and allows us to consider the importance of subjectivity, storytelling and oral culture in contemporary lyrics and literature from people of immigrant origin. A close look at much hip-hop reveals it to be the story of real or imagined people, either way anchored in everyday life experiences, evoking the affects, feelings and places of the everyday, the local, rather than broader, intangible and more abstract notions of home that are closer to the idea of the nation-state and to republican ideals of citizenship. The home, the France, and the Frenchness expressed by Faye and by Abd al Malik, are homes and ways of being French shaped by their everyday experiences and relationships with the places and people that surround them, that they know and interact with.

Indeed, the lyrics recount the stories of real people and real lives, anchored in everyday lived experiences, as well as other important parts of the life stories of immigrants and people with multiple cultures or origins: Faye's 'A-France' and 'Slowoperation', for example, he speaks explicitly of 'exil'; mixing in 'A-France' all aspects of Paris, the everyday, the dream image of the city, and its ethnic minorities, "La pollution, les épiciers berbères et leurs mauvaises bananes" with his own life story. He outwardly depicts how own life as ordinary "je suis franco-rwandais j'avais pas vous faire un topo": an apophasis that serves both to underline the commonness of such immigrant stories in contemporary France, the "diaspora" that he also cites, and rhetorically emphasise their exceptional nature, brought out by words such as "sinistre", "souffrance", "amertume", "espérance", and references to the UN and Nato (Faye, 'A-France').

Similarly, in a fictionalised but entirely credible account, Abd al Malik uses a narrative style that he actively foregrounds in 'Château Rouge' to indirectly show the multicultural nature of contemporary Paris, with its "vieux couple d'origine malagache" and its "furieuse rumba rock congolaise". Framed as the story of one the neighbourhood's

inhabitants, but really a slice of contemporary French urban life, 'Château Rouge' is told in a mixture of the archetypal style and register of a French tale and the slang of such people and neighbourhoods; the lives of marginalised people and their modes of expression placed into French narrative tradition through rap music. Thus, "Il quitta le PMU/Seul/Et s'abrita bientôt sous un abribus" and "Ce qu'il avait bu et fumé entre 15h et 18h aurait mit KO n'importe qui mais lui était toujours frais/Et pimpant/Question d'habitude et peut-être de génération" (Malik, 'Château Rouge'). Once again, Malik's image of poverty on the margins of Paris is not a simple criticism of the failure of integration and equal opportunities but also a celebration of the rich, living, métis cultural patchwork of the 18th *arrondissement*. His story-telling style and use of the *passé simple* and other clichés of the French *conte* serve elevate minority experience to the mythology of French oral-literary culture, neither fully assimilating into it nor rejecting it.

Affectively charged language is in evidence throughout the œuvre of both Malik and Faye: in 'A-France', Faye describes himself as "écartelé entre Afrique et France" (Faye, 'A-France'), and Malik sings of his love for his hometown, Strasbourg, in the eponymously titled song, "Où ne faisaient qu'un Alsaciens d'adoption et Alsaciens de souche," (Malik, 'Strasbourg') and for France in 'C'est du lourd', in which he declares "La France elle est belle, tu le sais en vrai, la France on l'aime", whilst describing the hardships of life for the country's poor and minorities "Et puis t'as tous ces gens qui sont venus en France parce qu'ils avaient un rêve/et même si leur quotidien après il a plus ressemblé à un cauchemar" (Malik, 'C'est du lourd'). The evocative, universal language of dreams and nightmares is here presented side by side with harsh feelings and experiences, expressed eloquently. By both explaining to the listener and invoking feelings and sensations that, in different contexts and ways, people of all backgrounds

can relate to, Abd al Malik compares and contrasts the experience of *living* France on a daily basis for minorities and the majority population, allowing for identification, relation and similarity to be established without suggesting that a minority person's relation to France, the French state and its culture is the same as someone who would more closely resemble the implied republican model citizen.

Similarly, Faye uses affectively charged language to evoke both his own life story, from Burundi to France to London and back, and daily experiences that reflect how he is seen and treated as a visible minority in France, and how he feels as an immigrant and a *métis*, and in so doing, inscribing immigrant experience and memories *d'ailleurs* in French cultural discourse, into which his work has been warmly welcomed. For example, in 'A-France' he speaks of recollecting his childhood in Burundi "Ma mémoire se paralyse, et ma peine se cauterise/Des machettes qu'on aiguisé, de tous nos morts dans nos églises/J'oublie pas que l'exil c'est comme une porte d'exit/Je crie mes origines car c'est comme ça que j'existe/Trop de larmes ont coulé, beaucoup de textes j'ai gribouillé;" (Faye, 'A-France') whilst in 'Petit pays,' he delivers the following lines, "Un soir d'amertume, entre le suicide et le meurtre/J'ai gribouillé ces quelques phrases de la pointe neutre de mon feutre,"(Faye, 'Petit pays') dramatically demonstrating the impact of his life of exile and the heritage of civil war on his mental state, and also the vital importance of written expression (which is also a recurrent theme in lyric poetry). His repeated use of the word "gribouiller" (to scribble) implicitly positions his writing as marginal, amateur, *minor* but it is as such that he is able to work on dominant culture and discourse, in a freer style that casually mixes African music with Alexandrines and street references. In 'Métis', he confronts head on how he is treated because of his ethnic origins and appearance, "Métissé, prisé ou méprisé, j'ai dû m'adapter/Ballotté entre deux cultures, ça commence à dater," (Faye, 'Métis') succinctly and powerfully showing

the effect of how others see him on his own feelings. At this juncture it is also worth noting that this relative negativity to Faye's position as *métis* compared with Malik's assertion that he is "roi de France," as well as nostalgic referencing of his African childhood, is echoed by his real life move to Rwanda and continued straddling of African and French geographical spaces and cultural and professional spheres.

Everyday life *métissé*, reclaimed and exalted

Whilst Faye's depiction of "écartement" and being rejected by or thrown about between two different countries or cultures may at first seem a rejection of both Burundi and France as a home space, I would argue that a deeper reading of his lyrics suggests rather that he posits both countries simultaneously as home, and that it is the rejection of this double belonging and *métis* notion of identity by other members of French society that is the source of this pain or frustration. This frustration at the felt or perceived refusal of French society to accept such double belongings or identities comes across perhaps the most clearly in 'Paris Métèque', which reclaims the derogatory term for an immigrant, by describing a Paris far removed from the stereotypical image maintained to a certain extent by cultural institutions and canonical literature, and celebrating its immigrant, pluricultural nature. It is a realistic yet seductive vision of Paris, and a love song, with the refrain "Paris ma belle je t'aime quand la lumière s'éteint/On n'écrit pas de poème pour une ville qui en est un," but this poem is not a simple elegy for the boulevard cafés and the quais de Seine, rather a celebration of its multiplicity and the multiple origins and cultures of its inhabitants, which create the 'métèque' version of Paris which Faye loves and celebrates today. Far from the "lumières tamisées" that he admits still exist, Paris is a city of "ruelles cruelles" and "fines particules" – here, like Baudelaire (who he seemingly references in the line "Je suis une

fleur craintive dans les craquelures du béton”), it is in the ugliness of modern urban life that Faye finds beauty, and from it he makes lyric poetry and rap music all at once, work that is *métis* like its author and the French capital, which he knows intimately and belongs to, and which belongs to Faye, in whose mouth its identity is transformed and celebrated. This is the Paris “d’ancre et d’exil/”Je piaffe l’amour” médite une chinoise à Belleville,” yet another reference to a *métisse* France where Faye sees “la vie en rose [...] dans ces bras pakistanais,” (Faye, ‘Paris métèque’) Faye’s wordplay linking both himself and the immigrant streetsellers to Édith Piaf and thus to the greats of French culture.

Thus, Paris is positioned as home for Faye, just as it is for the “personnage principal” of Abd al Malik’s ‘Château Rouge’. Malik’s other love poem to everyday Paris, ‘Paris mais’ is very much in the same vein as Faye’s ‘Paris métèque’: a Paris of all its inhabitants, the poor and minorities included, “je te prend Paris dans mes bras trop frêles,/Dansant un HLM tango afin que tu m’aime.” (Malik, ‘Paris mais’) Malik also celebrates Paris in ‘Centre Ville’, as well as his hometown, ‘Strasbourg’, and Marseille, in ‘Le Marseillais’, rewriting the national anthem for the second city and its rich mixture of inhabitants of different origins. Each time, love is declared, a city is celebrated, but not as somewhere or something pure, but as a place defined by its multiple, *métis* inhabitants. Malik is careful not to reject France or notions of Frenchness, sometimes explicitly defending it against the complaints and insults of immigrant-origin inhabitants who feel alienated, conjoining them, rather, to contribute to the on-going construction and evolution of the country which they are a part of - as in ‘C’est du lourd’, where he raps, communicating directly with listeners once again, “la France elle est belle [...] /Et quand t’insultes ce pays, quand t’insultes ton pays, /en fait tu t’insultes toi-même, il faut qu’on se lève, /faut qu’on se batte dans l’ensemble.” (Malik, ‘C’est du lourd’) Here we can see clear evidence of strategies of ‘disidentification’ or ‘départenance’, where rather than rejecting France,

he claims it as something different, something that he helps shape and whose identity he can claim in his own way – identifying neither as the traditional establishment and its colonial legacy of racism and exclusion, nor as entirely marginal, relegated to the outside, but drawing on both inside and outside to extend what it means to belong to contemporary French society and nation today.

Whilst both Malik and Faye often depict Paris as grey and speak of the sometimes grim realities of life in its *quartiers* and *banlieue*, it is nonetheless a place and a milieu known inside out, even cherished. They speak of its “macadam” and “goudron” whilst their African origins are celebrated through joyful, upbeat music and references to tropical colours; in many ways the other home(s) of Faye (perhaps origins would be a more appropriate term for Malik) are idealised, sources of nostalgia, whilst the banal and the everyday are evidence of the reality of living, that makes up a de-romanticised version (like the ‘Paris métèque’ or the cities of Malik’s French lyrical landscape) of home. Whilst this banality may go against typical celebrations of the home place, the *mère patrie*, or images sanctioned by dominant discourses of the nation-state, it shows an intimate knowledge of and attachment to the home place, the place lived in, in a way closer to a more recognisable experience of what it is to be French and to live in (at least some parts of) France for many people today, thus disidentifying from prescribed forms of Frenchness and the French nation and showing their constructed, symbolic or abstract nature (think of the stereotypical images of Paris replaced by a harsher but more multicultural and still joyous reality in ‘Paris métèque’), in favour of one *à la portée de tous*, including minorities.

French language and poetry reappropriated and reshaped

In a similar vein, both Faye and Malik work to make those scorned, considered unworthy or even ugly, beautiful, worthy, and essential. Thus we have Malik's 'HLM Tango' and celebrations of the history and details of the poor immigrant neighbourhoods of the 18th arrondissement, Marseille, and the *cités* of the *banlieue*; and Faye's *métissage* is celebrated as grandiose, just as this métis nature of Paris is shown as rich, full, and beautiful. He reclaims the word "mulâtre" rhyming it with "ébène albâtre" to give it poetic lustre, in a song that mixes African music with French poetry and a vast vocabulary full of images, transforming his identity, at once fragile like "porcelaine" and "prisé ou méprisé" into a celebration of having "le cul entre deux chaises" – at once high and low culture, vulgar and elegant, African and French (Faye, 'Métis'). Again the image of "porcelaine" is an act of what could be called disidentification or *départenance*, affirming that identity categories are fragile, breakable: here he has chosen to break the images and reform them in his own image, his own choices, against what is imposed.

Through and beyond the words themselves (taken on a literal level), both rappers show themselves to be at home in the French language by showing their mastery of it and its literary history (as demonstrated by the multiple references cited in this article, and many more besides) in order to appropriate them for themselves and to give them new meaning, both demonstrating and creating evolutions in French language, literature and culture. Firstly, the organisation and structuring of their songs often demonstrates a knowledge or mastery of forms and conventions: as with many songs and the works of other rappers, rhymes arranged in verses (often with choruses, which of course come from a multi-national tradition of refrain) form the backbone of most of their works, and both make use of couplets as part of their rhyme schemes. In particular, Faye makes great use of that most typically French poetic meter, the alexandrine, which he uses in songs such as 'Paris métèque' and 'Irruption' to compare classic, traditional or

conventional images of France and Frenchness with the (his) contemporary reality. Using the alexandrine allows him to organise the ideas into rhyming couplets of two hemistichs, making links through the rhymes (two per line) and divisions through the caesurae. Thus in 'Irruption' he gives us "Nous sommes des cargaisons de femmes voilées, des youyous stridents/Des rastas, des casquettes tournées, des voyous prudents," (Faye, 'Irruption') not only describing the veiled women but also inserting their 'youyous' into the rhythms of French poetry that Faye's rap moves through. In the same song, he reclaims the insults thrown at France's minorities, "On nous appelle "PD", "blancos", "bougnoles" ou bien "nègres"," (Ibid.) making racist and homophobic terms into poetry, rhyming 'nègres' with 'tenèbres', simultaneously revealing the term's darkness and its prevalence, its *Frenchness*, whilst sublimating it in the rhythms of French poetry.

In 'Paris Métèque' the same technique serves to further entrench divisions presented in subsequent lines: "C'est pour ça que je l'ouvre, ma gueule est un musée/Je vis loin du feutré et des lumières tamisées/Dans tes ruelles cruelles ou tes boulevards à flics/Dans la musique truelle des silences chaophoniques,"(Faye, 'Paris métèque') surprising the uninitiated reader with unpicturesque realities, or reinscribing the daily realities for many Parisians. Of course this nod to French literary tradition is not accidental, as 'Irruption's' references to Prévert, Césaire and Manouchian, amongst others, show, inscribing Faye himself into the same line of French and Francophone poets, and opening up space for other métis, ethnic minority and immigrant-origin people to do the same. All of these aspects of France, tradition and high culture, cruel streets and poverty, people of all backgrounds, are brought together as a multifaceted France to which all can belong and in which all can be at home, underlined through the omnipresent "on"

pronoun, both the voice of the (lyric) poet and of a community, a society, open to appropriation.

Faye's continued political engagement as a French minority is shown on his recent album, *Lundi méchant*, on which he juxtaposes a speech from French (black, Guyanese) political Christiane Taubira, 'Seuls et vaincus' with a message of hope for the French minorities in the determined tone of the follow-on song, 'Lueur', minorities in whose name Faye "arrache des murs de France les sourires Banania," gathering their forces together in "L'éclat de nos vies entêtées." (Faye, 'Lueurs') Violence and joy overcome despair as Faye places optimism for the future in the hands of minorities themselves and their ongoing struggle of which his lyrics are a part.

In this way, Gaël Faye is choosing his identifications, with which parts of France to identify, how and where he belongs. He does this through his self-positioning in a careful selection of poets, writers, and artists, on the one hand, demonstrating their and his role in the creation of French culture, and the ways in which previous immigrant-origin writers and artists had made themselves at home in France through the French language, just as Faye so cleverly does. This is reflected by Abd al Malik's similar referencing of French and francophone writers as well as artistic works, the *métissage* of registers of language and cultural-linguistic sources of 'Château rouge', or the references of 'Centre ville' to all parts of French culture and its authors, bastardising the French language and reformulating its words as a tableau that re-presents tradition and culture in its true, contemporary, métis form:

Dompter le Sud de notre fougue à Gare de Lyon

Embastiller ce jugement qui change les gens en cons

En érodant leur cur sous l'effet de cette pierre ponce

Être à l'autre comme Bashung fut à Chloé Mons

OK, Wallen est Elsa, moi Louis Aragon -C'est pour rire !-

La culture mime Marceau, une même Nation

Des châtelains d'un autre genre vivent à Château d'Eau

Des Rastignac en dreadlocks comme dans Le Père Goriot (Malik, 'Centre ville')

His choice to work with the Musée d'Orsay for a major exhibition (*Le modèle noir*) and to reinscribe black French presence in the works of white artists, here symbolised by 'Le Jeune noir à l'épée', exemplify the ways in which he identifies at the same time with the marginalised, the poor, and specifically black experience. It becomes as such impossible to write-off either poet-rapper as 'communautariste' but neither can they be simply 'universalist': their notions of Frenchness, their sense of belonging, and the way that they shape and present notions of home(land) are specific and personal but also actively open, thus opening up space within cultural discourse and specifically literature for other minority (immigrant-origin) people to feel at home, to make, write and rap their own homes and identities.

This skilful mixing of high and low registers of language and references, which, as I have demonstrated, occurs throughout the œuvre of both Faye and Malik, is present to a certain extent in various other new oral poetic, lyric and rap forms by immigrant-origin and minority writers, rappers, and singers in contemporary France. This mixing, this linguistic *métissage* within French, embodies the anchorage of these lyricists in a *French* home, whilst acting to change what 'Frenchness' means (or is seen to mean), and what constitutes or is accepted as constituting a sense of home or belonging within the spaces of the French nation state and French culture. Gaël Faye and Abd al Malik's *métis* work uses strategies that could be described as disidentificatory or 'départenance' to deconstruct binary conceptions of home or identity (France vs Africa, French vs

immigrant, white vs black, etc.). It is important nonetheless to make distinctions between the two - Abd al Malik (perhaps most particularly in 'Roi de France') asserts his *francité* with more vigour than Faye, avoiding resorting to ethnic categorisation and challenging the perception of his blackness whilst insisting on the 'Frenchness' of him and other people and places in France; Faye's lyrics, particularly in songs such as 'Paris Métèque', 'Irruption' and 'Métis' seem to point towards a 'foreignisation' or *métissage* of France and French culture, rather than arguing or suggesting simply that minorities and foreign-origin people are, or have become, French, though this too is clearly part of his poetics: comparing the work of the two rapper-poets (and others) allows for a broader understanding of how immigrant-origin people may choose to identify.

Through both the lyrics themselves and the prosody and references used in their work, both Faye and Malik gesture to the need for an idea of home or belonging to be 'appropriable' and supple rather than rigidly imposed, thus countering the *de facto* French republican notion of sameness or assimilation, in order to show that people are and have been able to create their own senses of home and belonging beyond rigid definitions based on historical archetypes. Whereas such assertion of hybrid, minority identities has been loudly advocated by cultural output in countries where policies of multiculturalism are the norm, the work of Faye and Malik stands in stark contrast to earlier generations of literary and musical output in France which either sought or discussed assimilation (for example, Kim Lefèvre's first twenty years in France marked by a renunciation of her Vietnamese origins until they were thrust back upon her⁹), claimed counter-identities (IAM's Marseillais identity) or rejected France outright (as some rappers, such as Booba, now based in Miami, could still be seen as doing), or the failure to find a home as someone of immigrant origin (for example, Sakinna

⁹ Lefèvre, Kim, *Métisse Blanche*. J'ai lu, 1989.

Boukhedenna's conclusion that she will only ever be "nationalité : immigré(e)"¹⁰, or Farida Belghoul's child protagonist of *Georgette !*¹¹ whose conflicting cultural poles drive her to insanity and death).

Faye and Malik therefore propose a generative approach to thinking about the place of immigrants within the French nation and its culture, and ways in which they can be allowed to feel at home and to make their own home against explicit and implicit calls upon them to 'integrate'. They demonstrate need to accept different notions of what it is to be French, the idea that if ideas and theories of Frenchness were opened up to the lived reality of people of immigrant origin, this would lead to a happier *vivre ensemble*. The work of *métissage*, *départenance* and 'disidentifying' is already taking place, and their lyrics are evidence of this, and this is culture being negotiated from below (*d'en bas*) and not from above (*par en haut*). These acts of *métissage* or *départenance* blur the boundaries between high and low culture, what is 'French' or not and shows how identities, communities, cultures can be renegotiated in perpetuity. It shows how high culture can be changed 'from below' and it prevents easy categorisation of such works as simply 'rap' or 'literature' – why can it not both, just as Faye and Malik can be both French and immigrant-origin, without this cultural complexity threatening their allegiance to France? The rapper-poets are choosing to avoid being placed into the category of 'high culture' and of 'popular culture', and showing that, like ethno-national identities, class/cultural distinctions can be blurred; this is an expansive gesture that goes beyond their own ethnic origins and immigrant nature, it is also part of a uniquely French network of languages and references, that reveals how today metropolitan

¹⁰ Boukhedenna, Sakinna, *Journal 'Nationalité : Immigré(e)'*. L'Harmattan, 2000.

¹¹ Belghoul, Farida, *Georgette !* Barrault, 1986.

France, its culture, literature, music and population, indeed its very being is immigrant-inflected and constantly evolving.

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