Citing, Siting, and Sighting French Cultural Patrimony in Abd Al Malik’s *Gibraltar* and *Dante*

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France’s colorblind universalism, unlike the United States’ color-conscious model, would seem to offer the optimal conditions to carry out Darby English’s provocative proposal to analyze works of art on their own aesthetic terms, without recourse to racialized taxonomies (such as “black art”).¹ Yet, as ample scholarship has shown, even if the explicit vocabulary of “race” is officially eschewed in France’s political sphere, it nevertheless implicitly both informs interpersonal interactions and structures its cultural marketplace. Authors’ and artists’ racial positionalities, based on their personal biographies, determine how they are marketed (“Francophone,” *banlieue*, *beur*, and “immigrant” literature), what they can say in their art and on what terms (see, for instance the “Marie NDiaye Affair”), and how they are read.² As Clarissa Behar illustrates, these qualified taxonomies applied to racial and ethnic minority authors reinforces the relationship between “French literature” and whiteness, and, consequently, “cette réduction de ‘la France’ à la formation raciale des Blancs.”³ Behar’s conclusions about the implicit (white) racialization of “French” literature substantiates those Mireille Rosello and Tyler Stovall proposed of French republican universalism itself: that despite its claims to universality, it is, in fact, but one racial particularism masquerading as such.⁴

Additionally, this “French”-other divide in cultural marketplaces both depends on and reinforces certain problematic—principally (auto)biographical, ethnographic, and sociological—ways of reading that marginalize the works’ aesthetic value.⁵ Taken together, these studies suggest that Nicole R. Fleetwood’s assertion that “the process of deciphering itself is a
performative act of registering blackness”⁶ is no less true in the French colorblind universalist context as it is in the color-conscious United States model.

As English contends, authors, filmmakers, and musicians that are hard to situate within established artistic taxonomies can reveal the implicit racialized contours of the taxonomies themselves.⁷ In the French-language realm, one particular subset of authors and filmmakers—those who draw from and rework French canonical literature and films—reveal not only the sinister machinations of racialized reading practices, but also the fierce racial policing French cultural patrimony. For instance, Sicard-Cowan illustrates how, ironically, while these authors use canonical references precisely to subvert the racialized (autobiographical, sociological) reading strategies to which their work is often subjected and to foreground their own “statut de créateur à part entière,”⁸ critics read these moves differently: as “une reproduction purement mécanique censée pallier le manque de talent ou la malhonnêteté des artistes en question.”⁹ These ways of reading minority works that engage French cultural patrimony depend on and strengthen latent ideas that (white) French cultural patrimony falls outside of the legitimized cultural corpus from which minority authors and artists can draw. As a result, these racialized reading strategies also police the (white) French canon, further protecting its universalist claims by shielding its racial particularism from scrutiny.

In this article, I extend the above inquiries into the musical realm, focusing on one particular rapper, Abd Al Malik, whose message of love, tolerance, and mutual understanding; celebration of French republican universalism; and chanson and jazz aesthetics have made him hard to place within existing musical categories. Throughout his five solo albums and five literary works to date, Abd Al Malik straightforwardly and matter-of-factly claims many identities that he considers in no way conflictual: he is French, black, Muslim, a former
banlieusard, a degree holder in philosophy and literature, a poet, an admirer of chanson, and a rapper.¹⁰ In what has made for some strange bedfellows, both the liberal, elite, mainstream news media and misogynist, anti-feminist, anti-immigrant, ultraconservative journalist Eric Zemmour have lauded Abd Al Malik, citing precisely his tolerant tone—often characterized as departing from mainstream French rap’s oppositional positioning—as refreshing and timely.¹¹ Rap connoisseurs, philosophers, and cultural critics, on the other hand, tend to characterize these same attributes negatively, suggesting that Abd Al Malik “panders” to white audiences.

In this essay, I examine his most controversial albums, Gibraltar (2006) and Dante (2008), as well as the critical responses to them, which reveal racialized assumptions about French cultural patrimony, and about rap as an aesthetic practice. For critics, Abd Al Malik is hard to place aesthetically. Though he straightforwardly identified himself as a “rapper” at the time, these albums marry what Adam Krims calls a “speech-effusive” vocal delivery with jazz and French chanson-style musical aesthetics.¹² In addition to his not-quite-rap tone (tolerance and understanding instead of oppositionality), and his not-quite-rap aesthetics, he also deploys two rap practices—“sampling” and “shout outs”—in ways that depart significantly from rap norms. As Russel A. Potter has outlined, “sampling” has been an integral practice of African-American rappers, and refers to incorporating source audio—be it a recording of a political speech, a reading, or a musical track—into a different musical work.¹³ Far from plagiarism, resituating a sample within a different musical context creates an entirely new work that erects a dialogic relationship with the original, much like Genette’s conclusions of intertextual borrowings in hypertexts.¹⁴

In the traditional rap practice, samples serve two complementary purposes, according to Potter. First, they “cite” other thinkers and artists (originally R&B, soul, and funk tracks and
late other rap songs), which, in turn, situate the artist within larger intellectual, cultural, political, and ideological genealogies. The tone with which the sample is incorporated into the rap song matters: rappers frequently sample racist or xenophobic discourse (such a speech by Hitler) ironically in order to critique it, while they cite artists and thinkers with which they position themselves as in dialog sincerely. Second, the samples “site” the artists geographically, as African-Americans, as New Yorkers, as West Coast rappers, as black French artists, as Marseillais, or as interlocutors in larger lineages of transnational black thought. As is evident in this brief description, race becomes an implicit feature of sampling as a rap aesthetic practice. Though rappers are not required to only sample black or minority artists, thinkers, and politicians, established practices mean that the majority of non-ironic samples engage and construct a racial minority canon.

On Gibraltar and Dante, Abd Al Malik “samples” canonical French culture to highlight its existing racial particularism and the implicit associations between rap aesthetics and race in order to subvert both from within. Though rap, as Karim Hammou shows, is not a racially homogeneous practice in France, it is nevertheless imagined to be a racial or ethnic minority art form, even if there is nothing aesthetically “évident” about this classification. Extending Potter’s formulation, I contend that Abd Al Malik’s “samples” of French cultural patrimony “cite” white French popular culture—but rarely other rappers or black musicians—to “site” himself and rap more generally in a color conscious universalist France. Simultaneously, he “sights” (makes visible) race—including whiteness—as a lived experience that undergirds notions of national identity and of foreignness. In this way, then, he puts forth his musical project itself as an antidote to the way whiteness passes for universal in France. Ironically, however, the racialized responses to Abd Al Malik’s innovative rap musical aesthetic—including his non-
traditional “sampling” practices—provoke the very same racial policing of the canon that he attempts to subvert through his work.

Before turning to my analysis, I must point out that I am by no means suggesting that Abd Al Malik’s work is unproblematic, nor do I universally celebrate his songs thematically, representationally, or aesthetically. In my view, he often does not go far enough in critiquing structural racism, which causes him at times to preach a reductive bootstrap mentality akin to the one Azouz Begag promotes in *Ethnicity and Equality: France in the Balance.* Moreover, what he proposes as *universal universalism*—or at least an alternative to France’s current *particular* (white) *universalism*—effectively reproduces the very same normative whiteness and racial and ethnic stereotypes he seeks to subvert in subtle but significant ways. Specifically, the canon he constructs through sampling fails to give racial and ethnic minority characters—whether real-life or fictional—much dimensionality. Aside from himself, most other racialized characters in his artistic world are “stock” characters: *banlieue* drug dealers; oppositional rappers; petty thieves and criminals; prisoners (or future prisoners); victims of police violence; an older generation of good, hardworking, integrated immigrants; and those whose “victim” mentality prevents them from bootstrapping themselves out of poverty and exclusion. Despite these shortcomings *Gibraltar* and *Dante* and the way they have been read to date in scholarly and popular criticism nevertheless warrant another look, both for the way they aesthetically engage race in contemporary France, and for the racialized reading strategies to which they have been subjected.

**Citing, Siting, and Sighting race in France on *Gibraltar* and *Dante***
Gibraltar and Dante mark an important period in Abd Al Malik’s musical career because they depart radically in musical aesthetics, lyrical delivery, sampling practices, and authorial voice from his first or subsequent albums. In his first solo album, *Le face à face des coeurs* (2004), for instance, Abd Al Malik engaged in much more normative rap lyrical delivery, and also heavily engaged in the “featuring” model that brought other voices alongside his on many songs. Gibraltar and Dante, by contrast, engage in a much more chanson and jazz aesthetic. In fact, Abd Al Malik collaborated with chanson artists such as singer Juliette Gréco (Dante) and Jacques Brel’s former pianist, Gérard Jouannest (Gibraltar). These albums, too, as I explore more in-depth below, mark the pinnacle of his sampling practices; not only does one find passing lyrical references (“shout outs”) to a variety of French cultural references, but musically, he engages in what I will call “sustained sampling” of a variety of musical works, most of which come from the French chanson tradition.

Abd Al Malik’s “sampling” practices as a means to construct (“cite”) his own canon that, in turn, “sites” itself in France while simultaneously “sighting” (making visible) race take three principal forms. First, he engages in passing references (“shout outs”) to French, and, more broadly Western cultural works in his rap lyrics. Even the most cursory glimpse at his song and album titles (Dante, “Roméo et Juliette,” “Céline”) already indicates the sheer volume and range of references that Abd Al Malik makes in passing in the song lyrics. Second, he lyrically reworks French chansons; notable examples include “Les Autres” (Jacques Brel’s “Ces gens-là”), “Fleurs de lune” (Françoise Hardy’s “Fleur de lune”), “Paris mais…” (Claude Nougaro’s “Paris mai”) and “Circule petit, circule” (Jacques Brel’s “Regarde bien, petit”). Finally, he uses “sustained sampling,” discussed in my analysis of “Saigne” below, to rework French chansons both lyrically and musically.
Unlike traditional rap “sampling,” which often constructs a national or transnational racial minority canon, references to works by racial and ethnic minority authors and artists are conspicuously absent in Abd Al Malik’s canon. Not only does he rarely, if ever, draw from the established rap “sampling” canon (R&B, soul, funk, or other rap music), but he rarely “shouts out” to international black political figures, or ideological leaders. A notable exception comes when Abd Al Malik dedicates an entire song on Dante, “Césaire [Brazzaville via Oudja],” to the seminal négritude poet, Aimé Césaire, in the weeks following Césaire’s death in 2008. Yet closer analysis of this song reveals that Abd Al Malik carefully positions any lineage between himself and the Martinican poet as aesthetic and linguistic, rather than ideological or racial, especially when he conspicuously references Césaire’s last published collection of poetry entitled “Moi, laminaire”: “Moi, laminaire, je reprends le flambeau avec mes flows, avec mon coeur, avec ma bande.” Elsewhere in the same song, Abd Al Malik distances himself from Césaire’s (and the other négritude poets’) ideological project, and, in so doing, also categorically rejects any notion that race, ideology, or thematics would serve as the basis for a “legitimized” canon from which contemporary French artists of color (such as himself) would naturally draw: “Quelle image avions-nous de nous-mêmes au temps de Senghor et de Diop au fait / Tout cela est tellement loin pour ma génération comment voulez-vous qu’on s’en souvienne / De ceux qu’ont fait que bien qu’ayant grandi dans le ghetto notre esprit n’y vive pas / Lorsqu’on trouve normal d’être libre et debout eux se sont battus pour la fierté d’être soi.” In this way, Abd Al Malik reinforces his assertion articulated in interviews—that Césaire should always be canonized alongside other seminal French-language poets such as Baudelaire and Rimbaud not for his race or ideologies, but for his innovative aesthetics. He also exposes and contests prevailing notions that shared
anticolonial and antiracist ideologies inherently make Francophone (but not French) authors
“natural” canonical references for contemporary racial and ethnic minorities in France.

Though the way Abd Al Malik samples existing French cultural patrimony in order to
critique its racial particularism can be found throughout Gibraltar and Dante, one song in
particular, “Saigne” (Gibraltar), best illustrates its force. Musically, Abd Al Malik’s “Saigne”
seems at first listen a straightforward musical imitation of “Robert le Diable” by Jean Ferrat—
itsel, a musical adaptation of Louis Aragon’s canonical poem “Complainte de Robert le Diable,”
that laments the premature death of surrealist poet Robert Desnos. Yet after their respective
first verses, both diverge musically in significant ways that complement the very different stories
their lyrics tell. While Ferrat’s first verse is musically sparse, the second through fourth verses
progressively build to a celebratory musical climax by shifting from a minor to a major key, and
by adding fuller instrumentation including sweeping strings and plucked guitar arpeggios. This
fuller, triumphant tone, however, instantly and completely evaporates at the end of the chorus
when Ferrat delivers the word “saigne”—the lyrical reminder of Desnos’s death. This musical
aesthetic reinforces the lyrics’ (and original poem’s) main purpose: honoring a great French poet,
gone before his time. Abd Al Malik’s version, on the other hand, never musically builds toward a
triumphant or celebratory tone. This musical aesthetic serves as the perfect backdrop for the
lyrics, which expose and condemn the racist police violence that culminates in another untimely
death. Unlike Desnos’s life and work, however, that of the black man in “Saigne” will never be
monumentalized.

Abd Al Malik deftly deploys the first person (“je”) as signifier of both universal
experiences and as the most intimate of racially inflected particularisms. In the chorus which
opens the song, Abd Al Malik, if a bit tritely, explicitly mentions race (“la couleur de peau”),
while simultaneously appealing to a universal humanity, articulated through individual existential questioning: “Derrière le statut, le vêtement, la couleur de peau / N’est-ce pas qu’on est tous semblables? / Les mêmes préoccupations / Qui suis-je, où vais-je, que n’ai-je, m’aime-t-il, m’aime-t-elle?” The full force of Abd Al Malik’s use of the first-person, however, comes with the interplay between this universal “je” in the chorus, and the three particular “je”s that structure the song’s three other verses—each corresponding to a different point-of-view: that of the dead man himself, that of the racist mechanic who might have been the last person to speak to him, and that of the police officer who, though he believes himself to not be racist (though he could not convincingly claim to be anti-racist), shot the protagonist. Through each man’s reflections on his own part in the crime and the explicit and implicit ways race defines their lives and actions, the song deftly presents French universalism’s claims of colorblindness as illusion at best, and fatal delusion at worst.

The story begins with an undeniably dead narrator (“C’est pas exagéré, de dire que je suis mort”), which recalls other musical works that call into question the inability of victims (especially those of racialized violence) to narrate their own story in the official archive. The lyrics to this section resist announcing his racial identity until near the end, when he suggests that his (“tête de noir”) was responsible for his ultimate demise. To end this section, though, he affirms his own Frenchness, significantly articulated through an association with the French language (“Je pense, je parle, je rêve, je respire en français / En français je pleure, je ris, je crie, je saigne”). Here, though, he also speculates on what the police officers will say to justify his murder, thereby preemptively calling into question narrative authority: “Les policiers diront que le coup est parti tout seul, que je me débattais quoi / C’était censé être un simple contrôle parce que / sur la route je roulais un peu trop vite mais.” Ending the line with a conjunction (“mais”)
that is never resolved leaves the man’s narrative in suspense, casting doubt upon any “official” narrative and implicitly indicting racism as the reason for his demise.

Whereas the victim’s perspective gradually builds toward examining the relationship between his race and his tragic murder, the mechanic’s story, by contrast, highlights the irony of how race operates in the French colorblind universalist context. The lyrics underscore how race is a troubling, scopic phenomenon that immediately catalyzes racist thoughts for the mechanic: upon first seeing the black client, he cannot help but think, “encore un de ces nègres qui va me prendre la tête.” These latent racist expectations, however, bear little resemblance to how the interaction plays out; to the mechanic’s great surprise, he discovers that the young man is “plutôt courtois / Même franchement carrément sympa.” The use of “même” and the doubling of the adverbs “franchement” “carrément,” however, emphasizes the way in which the mechanic’s latent racist stereotypes continue to structure how he understands racial and ethnic minorities. In the mechanic’s surprise, one hears echoes of Frantz Fanon’s discussions of how recognizing and celebrating racial exceptionalism—however well-intended—only fuel the racist norms from which they supposedly depart.25

Yet, as the lyrics highlight, even if racial stereotypes structure every dimension of the mechanic’s interpersonal interaction with the client, he nevertheless vehemently believes in his, and larger French society’s, complete colorblindness. When the black client expresses extreme reluctance to drive without license plates, the mechanic categorically denies that race would ever play a role in traffic stops: “Vous êtes parano m’sieur, je vous arrangerai ça demain, y aura plus de problème.” As the murdered black driver underscores, the stakes for believing in the myth of French colorblindness are unevenly distributed and prove fatal for racial minorities: “et moi, et moi je l’ai cru avec ma tête de noir.” Between these two perspectives, then, the song deftly
critiques what passes as colorblind universalism as both illusion and delusion. Even if the lyrics resist definitively indicating whether the mechanic is truly conscious of the extent of his own racist thoughts, the song suggests that, regardless, his belief in colorblind universalism is profoundly illusory, if not deluded. The black driver, on the other hand, so wants to believe in the illusion of colorblindness, that he deludes himself into believing the racist mechanic’s illusion. In the end, the illusion and delusion prove fatal, but only for the man who, ironically, already suspected it was illusory.

Similarly, the song’s final section in which the police officer tells his side of the story, examines a character who believed himself to not be racist coming to terms with evidence that this was, in fact, nothing more than a proudly developed and fiercely guarded personal illusion. More explicitly than the mechanic, the police officer acknowledges the racism of others around him—albeit, through couched terms—and simultaneously distances himself from these ideologies, positioning himself as exceptional. For instance, he admits that: “Bon, c’est vrai qu’il y a des collègues qui sont pas cool / Mais c’est comme partout, t’as des gens biens et des fous,” and later he reaffirms that he is not like his partner, who “arrêtait pas de me dire qu’il voulait se faire du bougnoule.” These lines present the illusion of French colorblindness differently than above: it is clear that the police officer acknowledges that race consciousness and racism exist in France, yet he vehemently deludes himself into believing that he is somehow immune from implicit bias and racial prejudice.

The lyrical structure and Abd Al Malik’s vocal delivery at the point when the officer recounts the vehicle stop and subsequent shooting—the narrative that will, unlike the murdered driver’s account, enter into the official archive—foreground a racist subtext that seeks at all costs to overwrite itself. The police officer’s account differs drastically from the one the black victim
offered in the first verse. Whereas the black driver admits that he was likely exceeding the speed limit, the police officer’s description amplifies the driver’s speed and deploys adverbs implying erratic and unpredictable behavior on the part of the driver: “[un gars] qui roule comme un dingue parce que, parce qu’il doit l’avoir volé en plus / Il s’est arrête brusquement, bizarrement.”

The doubling of “parce que” and the audible hesitation as Abd Al Malik delivers the line suggests the force with which the police officer’s delusion of racial tolerance attempts to shield itself from scrutiny. In the end, though, he becomes unable to protect this self-image any longer: “Je me suis dit que j’avais jamais tiré en vrai quand / Saigne.”

By sampling—both lyrically and musically—Ferrat’s “Robert le diable,” Abd Al Malik’s “Saigne” deftly “cites” French cultural patrimony and “sites” itself squarely within French universalism in order to “sight” how a profound color-consciousness underpins what passes for color blindness. If, in Ferrat’s version, traces of Desnos’s legacy can be found throughout Paris (“la ville un peu partout garde de ton passage”), no such visibility is afforded the murdered black driver in “Saigne.” By illustrating the profound inequities between how these two deaths are memorialized and simultaneously drawing from and reworking the French musical canon, Abd Al Malik’s song highlights some of the canon’s existing lacunae and fills them in in the same stroke.

Though some might accuse this race consciousness of violating French republican values, Abd Al Malik’s “Saigne” in particular, and his musical and literary oeuvre more generally, frame the relationship between race and universalism in France differently. They suggest that despite its affirmation to the contrary, French republican universalism is profoundly color conscious, both in terms of individual interpersonal interactions, and in the types of stories it canonizes. In fact, as he puts it in an interview: “There’s really a lag between how France sees itself and what
France really is […] So long as we haven’t realized that diversity is part of French identity, at a certain point we’re telling ourselves that a Frenchman, after all, is a white man, Christian, who’s between 25 and 45. And everything that doesn’t fit that description is tossed aside.” Abd Al Malik’s rap sampling aesthetic, then, becomes a means to reveal the illusion of what is heralded as “universalism” as but one racial particularism masquerading as such. As I now examine, however, the very same sampling project by which Abd Al Malik proposes to de-particularize French universalism incites racially-inflected responses and readings that, ironically, serve to reinforce the racially particular status quo.

**Si(gh)ting Abd Al Malik: Racialization, Aesthetics, and Cultural Patrimony in the Criticism**

As I alluded to in this article’s outset, the very same qualities that characterize Abd Al Malik’s musical project—particularly the one he develops in *Gibraltar* and *Dante*—have inspired diametrically opposed reactions. The mainstream French media reacted with raving reviews, citing his “intellectual” lyrics, jazz aesthetic, and messages of love and mutual understanding, while philosophers (Pierre Tévanian), rap enthusiasts (the *NoFun Show* podcast, for instance), and cultural critics see these qualities as lacking: he is not oppositional enough, not aesthetically “rap” enough, and trying too hard to placate a white majority.

As a self-identified (Sufi) Muslim rapper, Abd Al Malik is frequently compared to another prominent Muslim rapper, Médine in academic and popular criticism. Comparing two episodes of the *NoFun Show* podcast—one on Médine and the other on Abd Al Malik—illustrate implicit racialized reading strategies (at the level of thematics, representation, and aesthetics) applied to rappers and their works. For instance, on the Médine episode, the guests analyze the quality of Médine’s vocal timbre and the tone of his lyrical delivery while perpetuating the myth
of authenticity often imputed onto minority authors’ works. They read his work through autobiographical and ethnographic lenses and suggest that in his later albums, Médine toned down his “demagogue” and “polemical” and “provocative” tone to settle in to a much more productive, and, importantly, autobiographical, rhythm: “je vous propose ça, et ça c’est moi.”

The NoFun Podcast discussion of Abd Al Malik’s oeuvre, on the other hand, illustrates how the same racialized preconceptions characterize readings of artists who stray too far away from the “oppositional” rap norm. Whereas the show guests critiqued Médine for being too adversarial and not “authentic” enough early in his career, they critique Abd Al Malik for not being provocative enough, calling his work “assez inaudible” and him a “robot super républicain.” Not only does this phrasing strategically deny Abd Al Malik agency (likening him to a machine), but it also implies that republican values fall outside of the artist’s natural cultural norms, even though he is French. Worse still, the remainder of the episode, recorded immediately after the release of Abd Al Malik’s fifth solo album, Scarifications (2015), completely eschews discussions of Abd Al Malik’s own artistic talent and instead celebrates the impact Laurent Garnier, the French popular music producer he hired for the album, had on the rapper’s aesthetic. The guests liken the pre-Garnier Abd Al Malik to raw materials that had the good sense to “se laisse modeler par son réalisateur.” Furthermore, they unequivocally praise his new Electronic Dance Music/rap fusion aesthetic using terms that recall the discourse of authenticity often applied to minority artists: “Ça lui donne une vraie identité.” Ultimately, these two episodes reveal Sicard-Cowan’s conclusions about minority authors who cite or rework the established French literary canon to be alive and well in the musical sphere. Clearly convinced that Abd Al Malik is a potentially talented musician, the podcast guests nevertheless reveal implicit racialized notions about how this talent can be expressed and developed. Without
the help of a white, French producer to shape and mold him, Abd Al Malik can only resort to robotic imitations of a culture that is not his own.

Another main point of critique is the way Abd Al Malik deploys “shout outs” and passing “samples” in his works. As I analyzed above, his sustained sampling practices (such as in “Saigne”) carefully engage French cultural patrimony to highlight its racial blind spots. Yet elsewhere, his samples and shout outs are made in passing; for instance, on “Initiales CC” (Dante), he references rap group NTM, American celebrities Britney Spears and Robert DeNiro, canonical literary works The Art of War (Sun Tzu), War and Peace (Leo Tolstoy), and the Rougon-Macquart series (Émile Zola), among others. While some critics have read these “shout outs” as impressive demonstrations of Abd Al Malik’s literary and philosophical knowledge—calling him one of the most impressive “intello” rappers—others have read it as a deplorable practice that reduces canonical literature and nuanced thought to mere sound bites. The NoFun podcast guests, for instance, liken this practice to nothing more than a “culture Wikipédia.”

Nowhere has this practice generated more controversy than in one song in particular: “Gilles écoute un disque de rap et fond en larmes…” (Dante), which tells the story of an older recluse with few friends (“son pote Félix,” and “son gars Michel”) named “Gilles,” who “se pose beaucoup de questions,” and “sait toujours reconnaître le beau dans le langage.” Even though Gilles generally finds mainstream rap “consternant, égotripé, bourré de clichés victimaires, de lieux-communs et d’attitudes pseudo-gangster,” he decides to purchase a rap album, and, after listening to it, immediately bursts into tears at the album’s poetic genius. Of course, the “Gilles” in question is the canonical philosopher Gilles Deleuze, yet the reference can potentially evade those without much philosophical knowledge.
The reactions to this song range from benign attempts to explain Abd Al Malik’s decision to couch the reference to overtly hostile attacks. At issue are two main questions: first, why, if Abd Al Malik purports to honor Deleuze, does he choose to carefully conceal this reference? Second, why does he, in certain critics’ opinions, reduce Deleuze’s complex philosophies to trivial banalities? In his scathing article provocatively titled “Pierre écoute un disque de slam et vomit,” philosopher and tireless opponent of racial discrimination, Pierre Tévanian, condemns this practice, which he labels “name-dropping,” as self-serving. He accuses Abd Al Malik of deploying philosophical references he has in no way mastered to prove he is “un bon immigré, un bon noir, un bon banlieusard, civilisé, ‘évolué’ comme on disait dans les colonies. Pas comme ‘tous les autres’…” After rightly pointing out that Tévanian’s reductive reading effectively “confin[es] rappers to predetermined discourse in form and content,” Olivier Bourderionnet explains what Tévanian sees as egregious name-dropping as “Malik’s choice to keep the reference indirect and accessible only to people with a vague familiarity with elements of Deleuze’s bibliography or biography.”

In my view, however, both interpretations ignore a third option more consistent with the “sampling” practices I have analyzed above. Far from conspicuously demonstrating his philosophical knowledge to those already familiar with Western canonical philosophers—whether for self-serving purposes or not—Abd Al Malik instead uses these “shout outs” to democratize exegetical and analytical access to the French cultural canon. Throughout his musical and literary oeuvre, Abd Al Malik explores the relationship between education, the French canon, and implicitly racialized notions of identity, suggesting that a mutually reinforcing cycle systematically denies racial and ethnic minorities access to and discounts their engagements with French cultural patrimony. In La guerre des banlieues n’aura pas lieu (2010),
for instance, the main character’s son, Mokhtar, encounters difficulties in the first two weeks of his first school year. When Suleyman, Mokhtar’s father, meets with instructors and administrators, he is shocked and outraged to find that they already have lower expectations for his son—the only black student in the school: “il a vraiment, vraiment beaucoup de mal à suivre […] Vous savez, la lecture, c’est important, hein? Même si plus tard il faut autre chose…”

Whereas the principal, blind to her own implicit bias, presents such a comment as an objective assessment of one student’s inferior academic preparedness, Suleyman rightly points out its highly racist connotations. Worse still, as he highlights, such disparate expectations for students at such an early point in their academic career has the potential to become a self-fulfilling prophecy, not only for Mokhtar, but for other racial and ethnic minority students as well. Told—either explicitly or implicitly through his teacher’s different behavior toward him—that he cannot read like his (white) peers, Mokhtar will likely steer himself away (if he is not actively steered away first) from academic trajectories and careers involving substantial amounts of reading. In turn, Mokhtar’s path will be read as a series of individual choices (rather than racist environmental pressures) that retroactively affirm school administrators’ initial assessment. Like in the police officer’s narrative discussed above, the delusion of French colorblindness will fiercely shield itself from scrutiny.

From within this scene emerges the full danger of Tévanian’s critique of Abd Al Malik’s engagement with Deleuze. Namely, by accusing Abd Al Malik of promoting a philosophy he only superficially understands, Tévanian implies that only certain philosophical ways of knowing are legitimate. Specifically, he presumes that an “authentic homage” to a philosopher can only take one of a few forms: either an accurate, sustained, and nuanced engagement with the intricacies of his thought or another, equally valuable philosophical line of inquiry building on,
extending, or calling into question the original. By fiercely attacking Abd Al Malik’s perhaps superficial, at times, engagement with Deleuze, Tévanian’s critique dangerously reinforces existing systems of knowledge production, access to which are held by an elite and relatively racially homogeneous few. Worse still, Ténavian’s critique, in my view, misses Abd Al Malik’s entire point: to invite those who have already convinced themselves (or have been convinced, like Mokhtar in La guerre des banlieues n’aura pas lieu) that they have no authority to engage the French literary and philosophical canon to boldly cross this internalized border. Specifically, Abd Al Malik’s choice of familiar vocabulary humanizes Deleuze, presenting him and other Western philosophical thinkers as “normal guys,” and their philosophical inquiries as accessible and relatable to all. Far from a vicious circle that continues to marginalize racial and ethnic minority voices and perspectives, Abd Al Malik’s song, then, sets in motion a virtuous circle that invites a variety of marginalized voices and perspectives to engage even the most seemingly elite, and therefore least welcoming works in the French canon. Ironically, then, Ténanian’s critique illustrates both the urgency of and the racially inflected difficulties inherent in carrying out such a project.

One final song from Gibraltar, “Circule petit, circule,” neatly ties up the way Abd Al Malik’s sampling practices seek to de-particularize the French canon in content and access. One of the three songs on Gibraltar on which Jacques Brel’s former pianist, Gérard Jouannest, played, “Circule petit, circule” is also a lyrical reworking of Brel’s famous chanson “Regarde bien, petit.”38 Both the original and Abd Al Malik’s reworking turn around themes of visibility, recognition, familiarity, and welcoming but from opposite directions. Brel’s version stages a conversation between an adult man and a young boy as they watch a vaguely discernable man on horseback in the distance. Over the course of the song, the man speculates on the other’s identity
to answer one main question: is he friend or foe? This question, however, remains unanswered because the stranger rides off into the distance. Coupled with the adverb “bien” that orders the young boy not just to gaze, but to carefully scrutinize others, the song’s final line, when the man reassures the boy that the potential danger has passed (“tu peux ranger les armes”) chillingly insists upon a default stance of hostility toward strangers.

Abd Al Malik’s “Circule petit, circule,” by contrast, adopts the perspective of those the old man would likely treat as “strangers,” inverting the dynamics of Brel’s original and recasting the dialog as one taking place between an older male figure and a young banlieusard. The older man implores the banlieusard to not only leave the toxic neighborhood, but also to do what the man on horseback in Brel’s version did not: actively make himself visible in a place he is not imagined to belong. The older male figure admits that because (white) society expects the banlieusard to remain in the banlieue, making himself visible in spaces where he is not expected will likely initially be read as a transgressive act, and consequently met with hostility. Yet, as he suggests, not moving into spaces where his racialized presence might be “troubling,” to reprise Fleetwood, only strengthens ignorance and its associated default stance of hostility. Ultimately, then, “Circule petit, circule” challenges racialized individuals to bravely approach the old man and boy in Brel’s song to allow them to definitively answer the unresolved question (“friend or foe”) for themselves.

Beyond its invitation to minority populations to cross existing, fiercely policed and highly racialized literal (geographical) boundaries in France, I also read “Circule petit, circule” as an appeal for these same groups to do the same for the figurative, but, as I have suggested above, no less policed or racialized, borders around (white) French cultural patrimony. Calling for this figurative transgression complements Abd Al Malik’s larger sampling and shout out
practices I investigated above, that seek to de-particularize the canon by “sighting” race within French colorblind universalism, and democratizing whose voices and which ways of knowing are legitimized. Ironically, then, if “Circule petit, circule” is Abd Al Malik’s invitation for minoritized voices to engage the French canon, the highly racialized reactions to Abd Al Malik’s vast “shout outs” and sampling of the French canon illustrate more than ever the very need for this project: critics have yet to heed the call the old man’s call in Brel’s “Regarde bien, petit” to “ranger les armes.”

My goal in this article has not been to rehabilitate Abd Al Malik’s image, nor has it been to decry his work; rather, it has been to reveal how the ways he, an artist not easily classified according to musical or cultural interpretive grids, reveals the racialized assumptions on which the grids themselves rest. Alternatively critiqued as “not rap enough” and trying too hard to “pander to white audiences,” Abd Al Malik’s oeuvre reveals the racial lines along which certain art forms (“rap”) and canons (French) are conformed in contemporary France. As I have illustrated above, Abd Al Malik’s “sampling” practices seek to “sight” race in contemporary colorblind universalist France by “citing” French cultural patrimony, and “siting” himself and his oeuvre squarely within French republican values. Yet the fierce criticisms that these sampling practices provoke reveal sinister, racially-inflected assumptions about legitimate canons or corpuses from which artists and authors with different racial positionalities can draw.

Of course, his oeuvre is not without its faults. For instance, while it outwardly proclaims to engage discrimination and attempt to break down stereotypes about minorities in France, it nevertheless reveals Abd Al Malik’s own deeply-held stereotypes about mainstream rap. It also, as my analysis of “Circule petit, circule” illustrates, at times unevenly places the burden of breaking down racial stereotypes on those who suffer its consequences most directly. What is
more, for all the work he does to illustrate how French cultural patrimony belongs to all its citizens—regardless of race—and to pluralize the voices who have access to reworking and interpreting the French canon, his own canon, constructed through the “sampling” practices discussed above, is relatively racially homogeneous, celebrating few racial or ethnic minority French-language thinkers and artists. In the end, though, it is precisely because he is hard to place—musically, thematically, or racially—in any one interpretive grid, that he serves as an ideal case study to reveal the implicit racial assumptions and their associated reading strategies that permeate contemporary cultural criticism.

5 These reading strategies also depend on and simultaneously reinforce the notion that there exist certain “authentic” modes of expression for racial and ethnic minority authors, be they from Africa or elsewhere. For but four of the most useful studies examining and critiquing these problematic reading strategies applied to sub-Saharan African, North African, immigrant, and beur writers, respectively, see F. Abiola Irele, “In Search of Camara Laye,” *Research in African Literatures* 37, no. 1 (2006); Lia Nicole Brozgal, *Against Autobiography* (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 2013); Nicki Hitchcott, “Calixthe Beyala: Prizes, Plagiarism, and ‘Authenticity’,” *Research in African Literatures* 37, no. 1 (2006); Kathryn Kleppinger, *Branding the ‘Beur’ Author: Minority Writing and the Media in France* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2016).
7 English.
1. Zemmour declared his deep admiration for Abd Al Malik on the talk show On n’est pas couchés in 2008, after the release of Dante.
5. Potter, 44.
8. In the lyrics, one finds references to authors such as Ronsard, Céline, Baudelaire, Rimbaud, Sartre, Camus, Malraux, and Pagnol and literary theorists and philosophers such as Derrida, Deleuze, Guattari, among many others.
10. Abd Al Malik, Dante.
11. Ibid.
14. Here, for instance, I am thinking of Médine’s “17 octobre,” or “Boulevard Vincent Auriol,” (Table d’écoute, 2006) which both employ the first person pronoun (“je”) to recount a racially-infected event—either the October 17, 1961 massacre of Algerian protesters in the former, or the death of many racial and ethnic minority families living in substandard housing conditions when a fire broke out in 2005—from the perspective of a person who perishes within the song’s diegesis. For my sustained analysis of “17 octobre,” see “Rapping Postmemory, Sampling the Archive: Reimagining 17 October 1961,” Modern & Contemporary France 22, no. 3 (2014).
15. Frantz Fanon, Black Skin, White Masks, trans. Richard Philcox (New York: Grove Press, 2008). In Declining the Stereotype (Hanover, NH: University Press of New England, 1998), Mireille Rosello comes to a similar conclusion about racial stereotypes, more generally: that attempts to combat them by proving them “false” erroneously assumes that the “truth” of a stereotype lies in its correspondence, or not, with some objective reality, when, in fact, “the ‘truth’ of a stereotype—its identity—cannot be found in what is said about the ethnic group but in the specific features of the statement itself” (37).
19. Médine, le grand retour du ‘rap conscient’.
20. Faut-il réhabiliter Abd Al Malik?
21. Ibid.
22. Ibid.
24. Maizi, Faut-il réhabiliter Abd Al Malik?
27. Abd Al Malik, La guerre des banlieues n’aura pas lieu, 153.
38 {Abd Al Malik, 2006 #1064; Brel, 1968 #2002}