Beyond Stereotypes: Imagining Other Histories, Politics, and Identities in Contemporary Francophone Immigrant Comedy of Stage and Screen

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Abstract

This dissertation project investigates the ways in which ethnic minority comedy functions as a space where historically marginalized humorists talk and laugh back at dominant discourses, stereotypes, and status quos regarding immigrant and visible ethnic minority populations in contemporary France. Through analyses of themes of history, politics, and identities, this work demonstrates not only how these comedians subvert racist and xenophobic preconceived notions and rhetoric that have been deeply engrained in the French collective consciousness, but also how they negotiate and imagine alternative narratives. Consideration of a wide range of mainstream comedic genres including stand-up, one-person shows, television sitcom, film comedy, and sketch comedy, traces the career paths of these increasingly popular performers and explores how they establish relationships with audiences and fan bases in order to communicate their messages. The first chapter is a history of ethnic minority comedy in France and is driven by the question of how a complete lack of mainstream representation for visible ethnic minority comedians in the 1970s evolved to the point today where some of the most popular and influential French humorists are of immigrant background. The following chapters of the dissertation focus on the comedic performers, Fellag and Jamel Debbouze, who respectively represent first- and second-generation immigrants in France. The second chapter presents and probes the work of the Franco-Algerian humorist, Fellag in his one-man shows, *Djurdjurassique Bled* (2000) and *Le dernier chameau* (2005) in order to show how he imagines a more inclusive concept of Algerian identity on both sides of the Mediterranean. The third chapter examines Jamel Debbouze's political and social engagement in the film *Le ciel, les oiseaux et…ta mère!* (1999); the television sitcom, *H* (Canal +, 1998-2002); a collection of sketches entitled *Made in Jamel* (2010); and his one-man show, *Tout sur Jamel* (2011); and highlights Debbouze's promotion of a multicultural France as well as his defense of marginalized populations in colonial and post-colonial contexts.

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Introduction

The topics of humor, laughter, and comedy have long remained peripheral in the fields of French and Francophone Studies. This could appear to be odd as comedy has shaped the French language and culture for centuries. Is French not known as the language of Molière? Are Molière's plays not a staple of French theatrical repertory to this day? Is the popular idiomatic expression « Revenons à nos moutons, » or "Let's get back on track" (literally, "Let's return to our sheep") a direct quote from the 15th-century comedic play, *La Farce de maître Pathelin*? All of these questions can be answered affirmatively, yet the vast majority of scholars of French and Francophone Studies have traditionally relegated comedy to the sidelines of their research. When it comes to questions of immigrant and ethnic minority comedy, scholarly attention is even more scarce. One can hypothesize that comedic genres are considered to be too "popular" and not sufficiently infused with gravitas for serious academic consideration. This dearth of published material on these subjects has presented many obstacles to my research and has often made my dissertation project feel like a work of *bricolage*, or piecing together bits of whatever can be found. However, this has also been an aspect of my research for which I have been most grateful as it has shown me the lacunae in my academic field and has provided me with a relatively unexplored mine of primary source material into which to tap.

It has also made finding published research on the topic of French comedy as well as immigrant and/or visible ethnic minority comedians in France an exhilarating experience for me, like finding rare and priceless nuggets of gold. I am deeply indebted to the scholars before me who have recognized the critical value of comedic performance and who have dedicated their time, energy, and intellectual labor to shedding light on these topics and making their work available to those interested in these questions. While I may or may not have directly quoted

from the following works in my dissertation, I have been greatly inspired and aided by the following material and their authors. Rae Beth Gordon's *Why the French Love Jerry Lewis: From Cabaret to Early Cinema* (2002) provides fascinating insight on the history of the *café-théâtre* and music hall traditions in France as well as *belle époque* comedic tastes. *Éclats de rire: variations sur le corps comique* (2002) and *De quoi rions-nous? : notre société et ses comiques* (2007) by the philosopher, Olivier Mongin, include profound reflections on some of the most influential French (and international) comedians. While not exclusively centered on comedy, Mireille Rosello's *Declining the Stereotype: Ethnicity and Representation in French Cultures* (1998) explores in-depth the crucial question of stereotypes and features a section on humoristic treatments of the issue. Nelly Quemener's *Le pouvoir de l'humour : politiques des représentations dans les médias en France* (2014); Jonathan Ervine's *Humour in Contemporary France: Controversy, Consensus and Contradictions* (2019); Judith Siboni's historical documentary about black comedians in France, *Chocolat : une histoire du rire* (2016); and the historian of immigration, Yvan Gastaut's articles on the humorists Pierre Péchin (2017) and Smaïn (2016), all include more recent contributions to the topic, and my dissertation would not have been able to take shape in its current form without them.

This partial list of critical works on the topics of humor and ethnic humor in France indicates that these subjects—particularly that of ethnic minority comedians—are, fortunately, beginning to receive more scholarly attention among French- and English-speaking researchers. We can speculate as to the causes of this phenomenon. I would attribute it principally to three main reasons: the unfortunate attacks on the Parisian office of the satirical magazine, *Charlie Hebdo*, that occurred in 2015; the popularity of race comedies in French cinema of the 2010s; and the meteoric rise of a number of solo and ensemble comedians of ethnic minority origin in

French media since the early 2000s. The January 7, 2015 attacks on the offices of the established, popular, satirical magazine, *Charlie Hebdo* by two French Islamist gunmen, Saïd and Chérif Kouachi, resulted in the deaths of twelve individuals and sent shock waves throughout the entire country. The terrorist attack was cited as revenge for the magazine's published cartoon depictions of the Prophet Mohammed. The media attention that followed this event focused primarily on questions of free speech, with supporters of the magazine's long-established no holds barred tradition of lampooning, boldly proclaiming the phrase "Je suis Charlie." No matter which side of the debate surrounding questions of free speech and expression one found themself on, the tragic event and its subsequent media attention highlighted the fact that comedic representations hold great meaning and consequence. The meaning and consequence might—and often do—differ for various individuals and segments of the population, but the *Charlie Hebdo* attack strongly suggested to all that comedy is much more than "light fluff." The rising popularity of race comedies in French cinema of the 2010s constitutes the second reason for increased scholarly attention on humor, especially among scholars of Film Studies. Directed by Philippe de Chauveron, *Qu'est-ce qu'on a fait au Bon Dieu?* (2014) is not the first French film comedy to bring up questions of race, however, it is perhaps the first film of its kind to have received enormous box office success. The film's plot of a conservative, Catholic, Franco-French couple whose three adult daughters all marry men of a different race, is rather innovative in that it broaches the topic of race in a country whose republican ideology promotes a color-blind approach to the subject. This approach means that race in France has traditionally been a taboo subject that has often been swept under the rug. However, the commercial success of this film encouraged more open talk about questions of race, and has inspired other directors to emulate the film's themes and comedic tone. Finally, the

rise of a multitude of comedians of ethnic minority background since the early 2000s has meant that the topic of ethnic minority comedy in France can no longer be ignored in the field of French Media and Cultural Studies. As I will demonstrate in my first chapter, a small handful of visible ethnic minority comedians was present in the mainstream beginning in the early 1980s. Their number—as well as popularity and visibility—increased in the decade of the 1990s and moving into the first years of the 21st century. With the founding of the Canal+ television program, *Jamel Comedy Club* (2006-present), as a platform for the promotion of new stand-up talent (generally of ethnic minority background), these comedians are receiving visibility on a level that had never previously been imagined.

While I see the above reasons as the direct, practical causes of increased scholarship on comedy, and in particular ethnic comedy, in France over the past several years, one can still question the import of a dissertation project on the topic. At the heart of my project lies the question of subaltern voice and agency. I posit that the comic stage and screen are privileged spaces from which traditionally marginalized peoples can speak their opinions and worldviews relatively openly to large audiences who under such circumstances are more inclined to receive their messages. When seen through the lens of the Bakhtinian carnivalesque, and in particular its element of hierarchical role reversals (Bakhtin 81), marginalized peoples are in that moment placed in a position of power and are able to use that power to speak more openly and freely than under normal circumstances. While carnivalesque role reversals as theorized by Bakhtin must necessarily come to an end and the usual social structures must be reimposed, I believe that these topsy-turvy moments do hold more potentially enduring results for they allow performer and audience to see that societal status quos regarding what is perceived to be individuals' given roles and functions—as well as common attitudes to these roles and functions—are constructs

and that with a commitment to change, they could be constructed differently. Furthermore, the ironic and playful elements of comedy make it so that marginalized comedians' messages and truths—which could run counter to dominant majority beliefs, discourses, and views—might fall upon more receptive ears when the message is "sugarcoated" with humor or slyly inserted when affective barriers are down due to laughter. As Bambi Haggins writes regarding general experiences of African-American comedians performing to mainstream audiences in the United States, "Historically, the black comic has retained the ability to get the audience laughing while slipping in sociocultural truths." (6) At times, this tricky method is, in fact, an ideal way to advocate for minority causes amongst the majority. More direct approaches that involve telling the majority what or what not to do, say, or think, can often result in pushback, not because the majority is necessarily resistant to the message (although that can quite possibly be the case), but because it is part of human nature to not appreciate being told how to think or what to say and do in a direct or even aggressive manner. In such cases, resistance from segments of the majority population can result simply because of how the message is communicated and not always perforce because of the content of said message. Speaking one's truth through humoristic means can serve to bypass these potential difficulties. Finally, considering that comedic genres tend to be extremely popular in every sense of the word, immigrant, ethnic minority, or any otherwise marginalized comedians who have the opportunity to achieve success in their career, are given a platform to reach large audiences and have their messages be diffused widely. These potential benefits that comedic space offers minority comedians must be considered alongside any possible pitfalls as well. Performers who wish to achieve or maintain popular mainstream status must cater to certain horizons of expectations to a certain extent and avoid offending spectators. Oftentimes this includes conforming to stereotypes or preconceived notions that the majority

might hold of the marginalized group to which the performer belongs or to which is seen as belonging, even if the performer is not comfortable in doing so.

This brings us to one of the most critical aspects of many comedic genres, and especially of ethnic minority humor: the representation and effects of stereotypes. Comedy is unique in that it is one of the few narrative and performance genres to openly make seemingly unabashed use of stereotyping. In fact, some would say that stereotypes are comedy's bread and butter, although this is to a certain extent denying the many genres, registers, and styles that can full under the umbrella term of "comedy." Nonetheless, while other more "respectable" and "serious" genres and segments of society politely refrain from open use of and reference to stereotypes, comedy is at times ostensibly driven by them. This phenomenon takes on heightened dimensions when considering ethnic minority humor for a number of reasons. Ethnic minority comedians, as members of minority groups, must contend with preconceived notions of this aspect of their identity in their day to day lives and in interactions with members of the dominant majority. For a large part of the majority population, interactions with minority group members are limited, therefore when meeting an individual from a minority group they are often seen as representative of that group of people and/or are likely to have stereotypes of that group imposed on them. This is most likely simply because members of the dominant group have a much more restricted frame of reference when it comes to experiences with people of the minority group in question. However, this also limits individual agency and the likelihood that these people will be recognized for the traits that make them unique individuals. This experience is elevated when ethnic minority performers appear in front of mainstream audiences which can be presumed to be comprised of a variety of diverse peoples but where the majority group dominates. As token representatives of their respective minority groups, the burden of representation lies

disproportionately heavily on their shoulders. To complicate the situation even more, ethnic minority comedians must not only contend with the stereotypes associated with them from daily life, but they are entering into an arena where stereotypes are explicitly emphasized. Therefore, they are expected to "address the elephant in the room" continually, all the while making audiences laugh and finding a way to express themselves as individuals and artists. The task is monumental and involves a balancing act where they also play with fire[1]. This situation brings up some critical questions. One of the most important questions which has also become the subject of much debate is whether the presentation of stereotypes in comedy results in a negative reinforcement of said stereotypes or rather in a positive dismissal and/or deflation of them.[2]

In her work, *Declining the Stereotype: Ethnicity and Representation in French Cultures*, Mireille Rosello highlights the fact that stereotypes are powerful constructs that have long lives.[3]

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[1] It must be noted that different contexts and comedic genres pose specific challenges to minority comedians. For example, in the domain of stand-up comedy or one-person show, the performer has much more artistic license. This can often be liberating for the minority comedian as they are relatively free to present themselves and their material as they see fit, although they must always negotiate the presentation of their identities or stage personas with audience tastes and expectations. Sketch comedy and ensemble comedy generally prove to be much trickier genres to navigate for the minority comedian. Oftentimes they are the token representative of their minority group (or group that they are seen to represent) in an ensemble cast and are therefore typecast in certain (stereotypical) roles and are given texts that they may or (more usually) may not have written themselves. As will be discussed in Chapter One, this was a particular challenge for the Franco-Maghrebi comedian, Smaïn, as he made his debut television performance in 1983 on the sketch comedy show, *Le petit théâtre de Bouvard*.

[2] Another interesting question that the situation brings up is to what extent comedians, especially minority comedians, are actually in control of how their performances, messages, and personas/images are received by audiences. The question is complex and will be alluded to in this dissertation project, but will ultimately need to be addressed in a more direct manner in future works.

[3] On the long lives of racial and ethnic stereotypes in the French context, the sociologist, Marie-France Malonga, writes, « Les stéréotypes issus de la période coloniale et la perception de l'altérité selon l'imaginaire des zoos humains persistent symboliquement dans nos esprits et se traduisent encore aujourd'hui sur nos supports de représentation parce qu'ils n'ont jamais été déconstruits. Il existe effectivement en France une volonté d'oubli de cette histoire, « une absence de réflexion collective sur le sujet », comme si le pays n'assumait pas le fardeau d'un passé colonial qui reposait effectivement sur une terrible contradiction : l'alliance des droits de l'homme avec le principe de l'inégalité des races et le

(Rosello 29) She even goes so far as to suggest that they cannot necessarily be destroyed as some might believe. (Rosello 33) Often in our attempts to put an end to stereotypes we simply denounce them as being untrue. Rosello highlights the danger and misguided nature of this practice, as denouncing them as untrue is to confirm that they do in fact function on the level of truth, instead of functioning as constructed narrative, like so many other narratives. Are we therefore powerless in our confrontations with stereotypes? Despite the fact that they most likely can never be destroyed, work can be done to dismantle the power that they have in their supposed truth claims and to undermine their authority. Generally, this involves clever and sly practices that expose the constructed nature of the stereotype in question and therefore weaken the grip that they hold on the way in which we see certain groups of people. Some of the methods in effectuating this work might include presenting stereotypes in an ironic light, placing them in ridiculous situations or juxtapositions to expose their limitations, and in general mocking them to provoke laughter in ways that show that it is the stereotype itself that is the object of mockery and not the group of people that the stereotype is purported to represent. It is clear that this type of work is ideally suited for comedians, and perhaps in particular comedians who identify as members of minority groups seeing that the enormous weight of stereotypes falls more heavily on them.

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rejet de l'*Autre*. (229-230) / "Stereotypes coming from the colonial period and the perception of alterity in accordance with the fantasies of human zoos remain symbolically in our minds and manifest themselves even today in our mediums of representation because they were never deconstructed. Indeed, there exists in France a willingness to forget this history, "an absence of collective reflection on the subject," as if the country did not accept the burden of a colonial past that was actually based on a terrible contradiction: the union of human rights with the principle of the inequality of the races and of the rejection of the *Other*. (Translation is mine.)

However, this work of undermining stereotypes' authority and truth claims in comedic realms is a delicate and risky business precisely because comedians never know exactly how their work will be received and interpreted by audiences. Comedic genres are often characterized as slippery and ambiguous. Therefore, when minority representations and stereotypes—many of which have long lives in the collective consciousness of any given society—appear on the comic stage and screen, it would seem clear that their reception and interpretation could go one of two ways: these presentations could reinforce stereotypes and be used as an example of their alleged "truth value," or they could be understood as highly ironic and consequently destabilize the meaning and validity of the stereotype(s) in question. This has traditionally been what constitutes the debate surrounding the presentation of stereotypes in comedy, however this debate is much more complicated than it appears as many factors play into their performance and reception. Does the performer presenting the stereotype(s) identify with the minority group that it targets? Does the audience see the performer as being associated with the minority group targeted by the stereotype(s)? Is the performer presenting the stereotype a member of a different group than what the stereotype supposedly represents? If so, what are the relationships and power dynamics between these two groups? What is the composition of the audience—a heterogenous group, predominantly a minority group, predominantly the dominant majority group, etc.? What is the social climate like regarding attitudes toward and treatment of the minority group in question, historically and at the moment of the performance? These are just some of the factors that can influence how audiences receive minority stereotypes that are given comic treatment.

While the issue at hand is indeed complex, it will be useful to explore how the two positions have traditionally presented their arguments, as well as what blind spots the different arguments possess. Here, I choose to look at the sociologist, Raúl Pérez's article, "Learning to

make racism funny in the 'color-blind' era: Stand-up comedy students, performance strategies, and the (re)production of racist jokes in public," as an example of the view that the comedic presentations of stereotypes tend to reinforce said stereotypes. As a sociologist, Pérez's research for this publication involved enrolling in a stand-up comedy school in Los Angeles and observing how the various students were taught to deal with racial and ethnic stereotypes in crafting their stand-up acts differently based on their own racial and ethnic backgrounds. He noted that students of ethnic or racial minority background were often advised to "play up" stereotypes pertaining to their own minority groups in their routines, whereas white, male students were generally advised to broach similar stereotypes in very cautious, somewhat insidious ways. Pérez states his arguments by writing:

> In this article, I argue that comics make racist discourse palatable by learning to employ certain strategies of talk which are intended to circumvent the current 'constraints' on racial discourse in public (Apte, 1987). These strategies, however, are different from those used for public racetalk in which racist discourse is coded or hidden rather than expressed directly, as others have documented (Bonilla-Silva, 2002; Bonilla-Silva and Forman, 2000; Jackman and Crane, 1986; Van Dijk, 1987). If color-blind racism tends to be concealed, racism in comedy is hidden in plain sight. The strategies that comics learn suggest another possible answer to the question of how racism is communicated in a society that disavows racist speech: racism is expressed in public and overtly, but its offensiveness is deflected, in part, by the use of strategies that make the performers seem 'not racist,' even as they say racist things. (479)

Pérez sees the stand-up comedy stage as a space that, through reiterations of stereotypes and racist discourse, renders presented racist stereotypes as acceptable to audiences through comedic techniques that make them appear entertaining and innocuous. The suggested result would be a reinforcement of these stereotypes and quite possibly a revitalization of racist thought that lies dormant or hidden in the current 'color-blind' society that he describes.

Pérez's work is crucial and highlights the very real dangers that the presentation of racist stereotypes given comedic treatment pose. In his work he highlights the ethnic and racial

backgrounds of stand-up students, the power dynamics involved between these students and their instructors, the thought processes that go behind the crafting of jokes for public consumption, several students' attitudes and feelings toward the advising that they have been given and their own on-stage personas, the question of offensive humor, and many other topics. Despite the large number of angles from which Pérez approaches this work, there still remain blind spots. Seeing that comedy is by nature multi-faceted, multi-layered, and much more complex than it appears on the surface level, this is natural. Firstly, although racial stereotypes are at the heart of his research, he refrains from giving any definition of the term or description of how they work. He rather assumes that he and the reader have an implicit agreement of what a stereotype is, how it functions, and what its negative connotations and implications are. Secondly, at times he focuses too much on the thought processes of the comedian in preparing their material and not enough on audience reception of the material. Every now and then he references audience laughter or questions why a joke succeeded or failed, but in general, his emphasis rests primarily on the comedian's craft. This being said, he does not always delve very deeply into the construction of a joke and *how* stereotypes are used in them and for what purpose. Perhaps his hypothesis that comedic treatment of racial/racist stereotypes serves to make racist discourse and stereotypes acceptable to audiences, does not allow him to consider other possibilities. For example, Pérez includes an anecdote about the teacher at the stand-up school encouraging Dave, a white male student and former ESL teacher, to include a racist joke in his set because he is capable of imitating a convincing stereotypical Asian accent. Dave expresses concern about appearing racist in front of an audience, but the teacher encourages him to do the joke anyway by saying that he is "not being racist," but is rather "explaining his cultural ignorance." (493) Pérez explains that this reasoning is a way to create distance between the performer and the audience

and to therefore "sell" the racist joke to them. Dave harkens back to his experiences as an ESL teacher to tell the following joke about an Asian student which relies heavily on racial/racist stereotypes: "(In a stereotypical Asian accent) Teachah…ahhh…I soo soly bout homework…ahhh my dog ate my homework…and ahhh…I ate my dog (audience laughs)." (Pérez 493) Pérez is correct to highlight the racist nature of the joke and the way it is performed. It features a stereotype (that Asians eat dogs) and is told by a white man who feigns a stereotypical Asian accent. He is also correct to highlight that the teacher most likely saw in Dave's impersonation skills, a way to pass the racist joke off to the audience and render it acceptable to them. However, Pérez does not look closely at the construction of the joke, nor does he consider the possibility that Dave is deconstructing this common stereotype in his material. By placing the racist stereotype of Asians eating dogs directly after the common excuse of "the dog ate my homework," Dave is creating a parallel between the two statements. In American culture, "the dog ate my homework," is universally recognized as a common, made-up, fictitious lie used as an excuse. Therefore, to juxtapose this with the stereotype that Asians eat dogs, is to suggest that the stereotype has been falsely constructed just as the flimsy excuse was. While Pérez suggests that the audience laughter was a result of Dave's impersonation skills selling the racist joke to the audience and distance being created between the performer and his ostensibly racist material (which is a valid argument), I would suggest another possible explanation. Perhaps the audience laughed because they recognized that the stereotype was being cleverly deconstructed and undermined within the space of a very brief and seemingly simple joke structure. In this interpretation, it is the stereotype itself that is the butt of the joke, rather than the group of people that the stereotype purportedly represents. This is only an interpretation

and a possible cause for audience laughter, but I feel that it is important to consider it alongside Perez's own interpretation.

To represent the opposing viewpoint in this debate, I look to the psychologist, Leon Rappoport's views as expressed in his work, *Punchlines: The Case for Racial, Ethnic, and Gender Humor* (2005). While not completely unaware of the complexities and dangers that ethnic humor and its presentations of racial and ethnic stereotypes pose, he judges the benefits to greatly outweigh the disadvantages, and highlights the positive work that can be achieved. Primarily investigating racial and ethnic comedians in the American context, Rappoport cites the Jewish comedian, Lenny Bruce, and the African-American comic, Richard Pryor, as some of the first of their kind to acquire a general, mainstream fan base, which he cites as a contributing factor to increased empathy for and identification with the struggles of ethnic minorities in American society of the 1960s and 1970s. He views the inclusion of racial and ethnic stereotypes in humor as a way to dispel prejudice and persisting negative images of minorities in the collective consciousness. He states in his introduction, "…prejudice has no greater enemy than irony and satire. It is this increasingly prevalent ironic worldview […] that has shifted the weight of most racial, ethnic, and gender comedy in our society from prejudice toward pride[4]. When held up to ridicule in the context of irony, slurs and stereotypes testify to the strength of those who defy them." (xiv) While Rappoport's overall judgment of stereotypes in racial and ethnic comedy is positive, it is important to highlight that he sees the phenomenon as closely associated

[4] Rappoport notes that stereotypical jokes concerning minorities can sometimes, given the right context, even become sources of pride for members of the group that the stereotype targets. He writes, "Lois Leveen, for example, claimed that when doing research for an article on multiethnic literature, it came to her as a "shocking discovery" that jokes may be an effective way for people to demonstrate pride in their group identity." (1)

to societal trends and social climates. He suggests that these comedians have the power to influence societal attitudes toward ethnic and racial minorities (usually for the better), all the while highlighting the fact that the general social climate must be ripe for these comedians to effectuate such work and have any kind of influence on social change. Rappoport very correctly outlines how this comedic material's content can vary and be interpreted diversely according to different stages of the development of societal attitudes toward certain minority groups and of the development of ethnic humor itself as a genre[5]. In other words, the terrain must be prepared in order for such humor and its use of stereotypes to have any positive societal effects. At the same time, this humor can also help to prepare the terrain. Rappoport therefore describes a sort of symbiotic relationship between the two.

Rappoport does much to promote the benefits of ethnic and racial humor as well as their inclusion of stereotypes, especially when seen diachronically. However, he can at times appear to be almost naïve in his laudatory approach to the subject, despite the fact that he explores his material in-depth in this work. Some of the points that he fails to mention are undoubtedly related to the complex subject of reception of this material. Just because a society is in an overall position to be receptive to the messages of marginalized comedians does not mean that *every* individual or *every* segment of the population shares the same outlook. In this case, the presentation of ethnic or racial stereotypes on the comic stage and screen could be interpreted by some as confirming (or in fact, reinforcing) the idea that these stereotypes hold some kind of truth. Especially if the comedian who performs these stereotypes is a member of the minority

[5] Here, Rappoport relies heavily on Lawrence Mintz's schema of the development of Jewish humor, while signaling that this schema also applies to ethnic or racial humor of any kind. I myself rely on this very schema and Rappoport's interpretations of it in the first chapter of this dissertation.

group targeted by them, then this could very possibly influence certain audiences to accept what is being stated or performed at face value and consider the performance to be "proof" of the stereotype's validity. Another unfortunate consequence is that it could appear to give audience members license to repeat the stereotypical material later on, but in a manner that is stripped of its ironic tone, context, and/or intent.

When considering the two sides of this debate, it is clear that both perspectives offer compelling arguments while at the same time presenting blind spots. It seems to me that when considering these two opposing viewpoints, one can only arrive at an impasse. Furthermore, dogged adherence to one or the other side would seem to convince students, researchers, and general consumers of comedy that the stereotypes presented in comedic genres should be either wholly accepted or wholly rejected, without much consideration for individual specificities. I therefore refrain from taking a strong position in this debate and prefer to see the situation through the lens of Raphaëlle Moine, a scholar of French cinema. In a chapter contribution on contemporary French film comedies entitled, "Contemporary French Comedy as Social Laboratory," she argues that contemporary French comedy—as well as non-French comedy—function as a space of experimentation, where stereotypes presented are to be studied and analyzed on an individual basis. She writes:

> […] I propose to examine the genre [of comedy] in its specific contemporary French context, as an immense laboratory: a laboratory, because, in contrast to the view generally expressed in the critical discourse, whether explicitly or implicitly, comedy is not a fossilized form that keeps on trotting out the same recipes, but a genre that, at a formal and thematic level, updates formulas inherited from the past in the sociocultural context of the present, creates new stories, and acclimatizes forms that were hitherto foreign to French comedy […] (235)

While she makes specific reference to her own domain of research, that of French cinema, her consideration of comedy as a unique genre can and should be used across disciplines and be

applied to comedic genres in broader contexts. She continues to elaborate on her idea of "the comic laboratory" by stating:

> Finally, at the level of the representations themselves, comedy renders visible, more powerfully than other genres, the power relations affecting issues of gender, class, ethnicity, and their articulation. By using laughter to mitigate both reactionary stereotypes and also contestatory transgressions, comedy is able to express in an unequaled way social changes and resistances. "The comic laboratory" is therefore a field in which propositions are developed and formulated, sometimes stereotyped, sometimes progressive, and often ambivalent, in which social, gendered, and ethnic assignations are redistributed, confirmed, or contested. (235)

This model offers several benefits. Firstly, the metaphor of the laboratory encourages us all—producers of comedy as well as consumers—to engage in the work of a scientist, observing, studying, critically reflecting, and considering multiple points of view. Secondly, when following this model, we are encouraged to stay open to the possibilities that comedy and its presentations of stereotypes offer, instead of assuming a priori that all stereotypes presented in such a manner have either positive or negative results and jumping to the conclusion that certain types of comedy are therefore either "good" or "bad."

The model of "the comic laboratory" also allows us to envision comedy as a space not only where society is critiqued, old paradigms are rejected, and carnivalesque role reversals help us to question long-established power dynamics, but also where new possibilities are created or imagined. Through comedy's playful and oftentimes light-hearted approach to serious issues, rigid hierarchies and status quos are momentarily shaken up—as we ourselves are physically shaken through the act of laughing—, and established ways of seeing and thinking about the world can be viewed from multiple different perspectives, allowing us to imagine alternatives. On this link between humor and the ability to imagine, Jonathan P. Rossing writes,

> […] a sense of humor means possessing the ability to overcome fixed categories, to

> *imagine*[6] rather than foreclose new and multiple possibilities. Consciousness of social constructions yields an understanding that things could be constructed otherwise. This playful world-building activity creates instability, simultaneously shaping a momentary reality and marking reality as open to alternative constructions. Thus, a sense of humor also includes a sense of purposeful playfulness with an eye toward revisions and reconstructions. (16-17)

This "purposeful playfulness" that is linked to the idea of imagining can also be associated with the metaphor of "the comic laboratory," as the work done in a laboratory, while very serious, does involve an element of "playing" with the unknown and waiting to see what comes of it.

While questions involving stereotypes play a large role in every chapter of my project, I envision my dissertation on contemporary French comedians of immigrant and ethnic minority origin as partaking in the work detailed by Moine and Rossing. Through analyses of themes of history, politics, and identity, I investigate how ethnic comedy of stage and screen in France functions as a space where historically marginalized peoples not only talk (or laugh) back at dominant stereotypes, preconceived notions, status quos, and rhetoric concerning immigrant and visible ethnic minority communities, but also how they negotiate and imagine alternatives. The popular mainstream comedic genres of the one-person show, stand-up, television sitcom, sketch comedy, and film comedy that are all considered in this dissertation allow me to enquire as to how these performers transmit their messages to the general French public and beyond, endearing themselves to fans all the while expressing points of view and opinions that work to deconstruct dominant narratives and official discourses that have historically marginalized immigrant and visible ethnic minorities.

In my first chapter entitled "Stages of Laughter and Struggle: A History of Immigrant and Visible Ethnic Minority Comedians in France from the 1970s to the Present," I trace the

[6] Italics are mine.

development of ethnic minority humor in mainstream French media. The overarching question that guides this history is how ethnic minority comedians, like Jamel Debbouze and Omar Sy, came to be some of the most popular, recognized, and highest paid comedians in France in the current day when at the time of their births in the 1970s there were no comedians of color featured in French mainstream media. While there are certainly watershed moments in this history, such as the first appearance of a Franco-Maghrebi comedian on French television in 1983—Smaïn's debut performance on the sketch comedy television show, *Le petit théâtre de Bouvard*—, the history speaks rather of a progression that spans four decades and is in close relation to developments in French politics, social justice movements, media representation, popular comedic tastes, and general attitudes to immigrant communities. Lawrence Mintz's schema of the development of Jewish (or ethnic minority) humor and interventions from Leon Rappoport provide the theoretical framework for explaining the phenomenon. Summaries and mini analyses of representative comedic acts serve to illustrate comedic trends of each stage of development.

The second chapter, "Fellag: Imagining a More Inclusive Concept of Algerianness through Humor," relates the unique experiences and comedic narratives of Fellag, the popular Franco-Algerian humorist who is a first-generation immigrant to France. As someone who immigrated later in life, his experiences and much of his comedic material reflect strong ties to both Algeria, the country of his birth, and France, his adoptive country[7]. Therefore, in the two one-man shows that are analyzed in this chapter, *Djurdjurassique Bled* (1999) and *Le dernier chameau* (2004/2005), he responds to official Algerian and French narratives regarding the roles

[7] Thanks to his immense talent as a captivating comedic performer and storyteller, he has won large fan bases in both countries and beyond.

in history and the identities of different marginalized segments of the population, including Berbers, Pieds-noirs, and Algerian immigrants to France. Through analyses of these two one-man shows, I demonstrate how Fellag works to counter official nationalist discourses and public opinion, in order to give these minorities a rightful, dignified place in history. In doing so, he also imagines a more inclusive concept of Algerianness on both shores of the Mediterranean.

In contrast to my second chapter which focuses on the experiences and stories of a first-generation immigrant comedian, my third chapter focuses on a popular French second-generation immigrant humorist. Entitled "Jamel Debbouze and Company: More Than Just Fooling Around," Chapter Three analyzes solo and ensemble works by Jamel Debbouze. These include a diverse array of performances that reflect his successful and influential career that spans nearly thirty years. Analyses focus on four main works: the film comedy, *Le ciel, les oiseaux et…ta mère!* (1999), directed by Djamel Bensalah; the television sitcom, *H* (Canal+, 1998-2002); a sketch comedy piece entitled "Made in France" (2010); and the stand-up special, *Tout sur Jamel* (2011). Throughout my analyses of these pieces, I highlight the fact that, despite Debbouze's fool persona which may lead some to believe that he is a mere clown who does not participate in or produce socially and politically engaged comedy, his humoristic output indeed often centers around issues that are of great import to immigrant communities and visible ethnic minorities in contemporary France. Some of these subjects include negative media stereotyping of banlieue youth, official historiographical recognition of marginalized peoples of the colonial French empire and their descendants in the postcolonial world, questions of belonging and Frenchness for second- and third-generation immigrants, and the promotion and validation of a multicultural France.

Chapter 1: Stages of Laughter and Struggle: A History of Immigrant and Visible Ethnic Minority Comedians in France from the 1970s to the Present

In a 2016 interview published in the newspaper, *Le Monde*, the actor and comedian Omar Sy recounts his beginnings in the entertainment industry as a teenager and highlights the debt of gratitude that he owes to Jamel Debbouze for giving him his first opportunities to be discovered by casting agents as well as by French audiences. Sy, the popular French comedian/actor and son of Senegalese and Mauritanian parents, grew up with Debbouze, the celebrated French humorist of Moroccan descent, in a western suburb of Paris called Trappes. Being three years older, Debbouze was closer to Sy's older brothers. However, Omar states in the interview that Debbouze was always a reference point and role model for him in his youth. After a description and brief summary of his childhood, Sy answers the question of exactly how Debbouze introduced him to show business:

> On est au quartier, au bord d'un terrain de foot—parce que, tous les deux, on est de très mauvais joueurs. On déconne, je le fais rire… Un peu après, il a besoin d'un invité pour un pilote d'émission qu'il prépare pour Radio Nova. […] Et il m'invite moi, parce qu'il n'a personne d'autre. […] Mon premier rôle ! A Radio Nova, ils sont très contents du pilote. Jamel lâche le morceau, explique que je ne suis qu'un pote du quartier. Ils trouvent ça génial, et ils m'autorisent à venir quand je veux après les cours jouer les faux auditeurs. C'est la fin de l'année de première, je commence à sécher les cours. Quand Jamel passe de Nova à Canal+, pour « Le Cinéma de Jamel », il me fait venir aussi. (Krémer)

> We were in the neighborhood, on the sidelines of a soccer field—because we were both really bad players. We were messing around; I was making him laugh… A little later, he needed a guest for a pilot of a show he was preparing for Radio Nova. […] And he invited me because he didn't have anyone else. […] My first role! At Radio Nova they were very happy with the pilot. Jamel spit it out and explained that I was just a friend from the neighborhood. They thought that was great, and they let me come whenever I wanted to play fake listeners/callers after my classes. It was the end of year one [penultimate year of high school in the French system], and I started to skip classes. When Jamel went from Radio Nova to Canal+, for "Le Cinéma de Jamel," he had me come also[8].

[8] Unless otherwise noted, all translations from the French in this chapter are my own.

This anecdote explains the humble beginnings in the mid-1990s of not just one, but two great comics who would later both establish themselves as indomitable presences on French and international screens and stages.

In light of the fact that both Debbouze and Sy come from socio-economically disadvantaged positions—visible ethnic minority children of immigrant families hailing from the same underprivileged banlieue—their accomplishments and rise to fame can be viewed as exceptionally noteworthy. However, what is perhaps even more remarkable is the development of ethnic comedy and comedians in mainstream French media within the lifespans of these influential young actors, as well as the roles that they play in this development. At the time of their births in the 1970s—Debbouze was born in 1975 and Sy in 1978—visible ethnic minority comedians of immigrant background[9] were completely absent from the French televisual landscape. The aspiring comedians as well as the rest of the French population would have to wait until 1983 before witnessing on the small screen the first appearance of an ethnic minority comedian. A handful of groundbreaking French humorists of color in the 1980s worked hard to break through the glass ceiling, inspire and mentor a new generation, and then pass the torch on to Debbouze, Sy, and their colleagues, who would take their craft in new directions and to new heights in the 1990s and 2000s.

How do we explain these rapid developments in such a short timeframe? How did we begin with a complete lack of mainstream representation in the field of French ethnic humor in

[9] The late Pied-Noir (North African of French/European origin) comedian, Guy Bedos who was born in colonial Algeria and later moved with his family to metropolitan France, was quite successful in the 1970s. However, he cannot be considered to be a member of any visible ethnic minority. The Pieds-Noirs were never victims of racism in France and their struggles to be accepted by the general French public were quite different than those of immigrants of Arab or African origin and their children.

the 1970s to arrive at the point in the early decades of the 2000s where Jamel Debbouze and Omar Sy are two of the most recognizable, lauded, and influential representatives of French comedy? These are the questions that this chapter attempts to answer by tracing a history of immigrant and visible ethnic minority comedy and comedians in France from the late 20th century to the present day. In this particular history, emphasis will be placed not only on developments in minority representation on the comic stage and screen as well as evolving trends in comedy, but also key moments in the history and politics of immigration, and social movements for equal rights and anti-racism. I posit that it is the nexus of three events—the presidential campaign of the comedian, Coluche, in 1981; the eventual victory of François Mitterrand and the Socialist party during this same presidential election; and increased social activism and awareness for matters that particularly affect minorities and immigrant communities, such as, Rock Against Police (1980-1983) and the *Marche pour l'égalité et contre le racisme* (1983)—that paved the way for these comedians to finally make their debut performances on national platforms in the early 1980s.

In addition, Lawrence Mintz's schema of the development of Jewish humor will serve as the organizational framework and underlying theoretical apparatus for the writing of this history. On Mintz's work and its applicability to other types of ethnic humor, Leon Rappoport states:

> Writing about the history of Jewish humor in 1977, Mintz suggested a four-stage scheme that fits the African American experience, as well as that of other ethnic groups. In the first stage, Jews and blacks were simply the targets of heavy-handed ridicule by those in power over them. During the second stage, this ridicule was to some extent internalized, and their humor became self-critical. Mintz describes the third stage as "realism." This refers to the period when Jews and blacks used deception and covertly made fun of their oppressors among themselves. The fourth stage is more or less where we are now, when Jews, blacks, Hispanics, Asians, and others have come full circle and can use humor to directly confront and ridicule those who formerly ridiculed them. (Rappoport 99-100)

While both Mintz and Rappoport also speak of the necessity of considering these stages to be flexible and the importance of taking into account specificities of different cultural and societal contexts, Mintz's work can allow us to conceptualize broad developments and major tendencies in humor as it relates to racialized and ethnicized Others. In this model, the period of the 1970s to early 1980s corresponds to the first stage, the 1980s constitute the second stage as well as an important watershed moment in this history, the 1990s to the early 2000s represent the third stage, and finally the early 2000s to the present make up the fourth stage. This is not to say that there cannot be overlaps or comedic outliers that do not correspond precisely to the paradigm just described. Nevertheless, this framework along with analysis of key social, political, and cultural events of the time periods in question can provide us with a greater overall understanding of this history, which has unfortunately been left largely neglected until quite recently.

The 1970s to the Early 1980s: Insults and Invisibility

It might seem peculiar to begin this history with the decade of the 1970s, a time period in which visible ethnic minority comedians in France were, in fact, invisible. Despite the complete lack of representation for these comedians in mainstream media and live theatre venues, ethnic minorities were actually very present in popular comedy of the time period. They were regularly featured as the targets of insensitive and racist jokes told by white comedians. In addition, grotesque, offensive, stereotypical, and all too often seemingly gratuitous imitations of ethnic minorities were staples of several prominent comics, some of whom built their reputations and careers on such material. As the historian of immigration, Yvan Gastaut, points out,

« Vraisemblable garantie de succès, imiter l'accent arabe devient une véritable mode chez les

humoristes dans les années 1970 […]. » (Gastaut, "La cèggal è la fôormi" 37) / "A likely guarantee of success, imitating the Arab accent became a real trend with comedians in the 1970s […]." Gastaut then continues to list several comedic acts of the period that were constructed around or featured this stereotypical comedic device, listing the humorists, Guy Bedos, Pierre and Marc Jolivet, Coluche, and Michel Leeb (Gastaut, "La cèggal è la fôormi" 37-38). Without a doubt, the period of the 1970s and continuing into the early 1980s constitutes what Lawrence Mintz qualifies as the first stage in the development of Jewish humor—or for our purposes, and as Leon Rappoport suggests, ethnic minority humor. Of this first stage, Mintz writes:

> Anti-semitic [racist] humor illustrates negative character-traits stereotypically assigned to Jews [ethnic minorities] by their detractors (eg. dirty, greedy), and while it can be used to generate, to express, and to intensify hostility, it may also function to transfer hostility from active to passive postures, to signal a transcendence of prejudice (ironically), and to serve an anachronistic, ritualized purpose in the process of group identity formation. (Mintz 4)

As we will see later on in this section, this style of comedy, featuring racist jokes and stereotypical imitations, was actually more diverse than what might initially be imagined, and served many of the varied purposes listed by Mintz in his description. However, what all the examples of this comedy from the 1970s to early 1980s have in common—besides their highly questionable content—is the fact that they were imagined and performed by Franco-French (white) comedians and intended for a similarly homogenous audience. While members of ethnic minority and immigrant communities served as the subjects of this humor, they were not present to defend themselves or to respond to these humoristic assaults, at least not in the public sphere. The lack of representation for visible ethnic minorities on comic stages and screens silenced them and stripped them of any agency.

Before looking at examples of select comedians and their work, it shall be useful to situate them vis-à-vis the political and social climate for immigrants and their children in France during this period. By the 1970s, France had long been a *terre d'accueil*, or adoptive country and in certain cases a land of refuge, for multiple waves of immigration. In the 19th century, Italian immigrants regularly crossed the border looking for employment and a better life. In the 20th century Belgian, Polish, Hungarian, Spanish, and Portuguese immigrants came to France, fleeing economic and political crises in their own countries. By the end of the century, the children of these waves of immigration had for the most part integrated themselves into French society and no longer identified or were seen by the majority of the French population as "foreign" or "of foreign origin." A shared Judeo-Christian and European background had facilitated the integration of these immigrants and their progeny into French society. Starting in the mid-20th century, new waves of immigration to France from diverse parts of the world and under different circumstances began to take place. At the end of World War II, the country was in great need of help to reconstruct, and due in large part to demographic deficiencies, native French men and women were either unavailable in sufficient numbers or unwilling to take on the jobs in the construction and manufacturing industries that were needed to rebuild the country's infrastructure and economy. Therefore, recruiters sent by the government and large companies—for instance, the automobile producers, Citroën and Renault—went to the countries of France's former (or soon to be former) colonial empire in North and Sub-Saharan Africa looking for a physically able, hardworking, male workforce to go to the Hexagon and temporarily help out in the previously mentioned sectors. This was a particularly common practice in Algeria before and after the war of independence (1954-1962) and in postcolonial Morocco. From the end of the second world war to the mid-1970s, a period of reconstruction and economic prosperity known

as *les trente glorieuses* (the thirty glorious years), these workers who came principally from the Maghreb revitalized France through their labor and their cultural diversity.

While the presence of these foreign workers was never completely without difficulty, the 1970s, which saw the end of the economic boom of *les trente glorieuses* as well as an international oil crisis, marked a period of increased tensions between the native-born French population and foreign workers from the Maghreb, many of whom had by this time been joined by their spouses and children thanks to official policies of *regroupement familial*, or family reunification. As is often the case in similar situations across the world, the sudden economic decline and accompanying high unemployment rates of the mid-1970s were seen in the French collective conscience as somehow attributable to or aggravated by the presence of African (in particular, North African) immigrants. The sociologist, Azouz Begag, sums up the situation in the following passage:

> Then suddenly, in the mid-1970s, "their" presence among "us" became an issue with the first waves of the international economic slowdown brought on by the spectacular rise in oil prices driven by OPEC's major oil-producing Arab countries. Now their presence was seen as a problem in the schools of residential neighborhoods, in public spaces, and, in due course, in prisons. Simultaneously the labor market became inhospitable for "immigrant youths," to whom at one time employers had looked to replace their aging parents in insecure jobs that nobody else wanted to do. Anti-Arab racism and social exclusion became the norm. In the public imagination oil was associated at one and the same time with Arabs and with unemployment. These lines of thought became so intertwined that Maghrebis [North Africans] ended up being blamed for unemployment and scapegoated for the economic downturn. Anti-Arab racism took on alarming proportions[10]. (Begag 11-12)

As Begag points out, these attitudes, while not necessarily developing out of thin air[11], did escalate rapidly after France started to feel the shock and consequences of the economic

[10] Translation by Alec G. Hargreaves.

[11] Unresolved (and often repressed) tensions and questions dating from the colonial period and especially the Algerian War (1954-1962) also had an enormous impact on how these foreign workers

recession and the oil crisis. Not only were foreign workers from the Maghreb turned into scapegoats for economic problems—despite having contributed substantially to France's reconstruction and prosperity—and unfairly and inaccurately associated with the oil crisis due to shared linguistic and cultural ties to Arab countries of the Middle East, but by the end of the decade the situation had worsened with public opinion increasingly conflating religious tensions and fears of Islamic fundamentalism with the figure of the Maghrebi foreign worker[12].

It is clear that immigrants, especially immigrant workers from the Maghreb and their families, carried much weight on their shoulders during the 1970s. Their work and situation in France were never easy, but this period brought added stress and real threats to their daily existence. The ways in which immigrant workers and their families were depicted in the media and the subsequent general opinion of them had real, oftentimes tangible, consequences that were manifested primarily through anti-immigrant and anti-Arab violence as well as harsh government mandates regarding immigration. Even slightly before the economic crisis at the midpoint of the decade had officially arrived, the situation—in particular for Algerian immigrant workers and their families—was characterized by media misrepresentation and racial/xenophobic violence. Tahar Ben Jelloun writes:

L'été et l'automne 1973 furent particulièrement meurtriers pour les Maghrébins des

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from the Maghreb were viewed by the general French population and depicted in the French media and press.

[12] As the Franco-Moroccan writer, Tahar Ben Jelloun, states, « À partir des extravagances iraniennes, l'islam, surtout dans la grande presse, a été rejeté en bloc, assimilé à la barbarie du fanatisme. On a tout confondu dans une vision réductrice : la religion et la culture, les Arabes émirs et les travailleurs immigrés, l'intégrisme iranien et appel à la guerre sainte, etc. L'immigré maghrébin a été la cible et le catalyseur de tous ces projets, de toutes ces craintes. » (Ben Jelloun 159) / "Beginning with the unreasonable decisions of Iran, Islam, especially in the mainstream press, was altogether rejected, lumped together with the barbarism of fanaticism. Everything was conflated in a reductive vision: religion and culture, Arab emirs and immigrant workers, Iranian fundamentalism and calls to holy war, etc. The Maghrebi immigrant was the target and the catalyst of all these projects, of all these fears."

> Bouches-du-Rhône. Le 25 août, M. Émile Guerlache est tué à son travail par un déséquilibré algérien, M. Salah Bougrine. Exploité de manière scandaleuse par la presse, ce drame fut suivi d'une trentaine d'actes de vengeance, une revanche qui aura coûté la vie à quinze travailleurs immigrés maghrébins dans Marseille et les environs. Réagissant contre cette escalade de haine, le gouvernement algérien décida, le 20 septembre, de suspendre l'émigration de ses ressortissants vers la France. Riposte politique d'État à État. Les Algériens ne se sentaient pas pour autant en sécurité. La même presse qui incita à la vengeance mena une campagne quasi quotidienne contre la présence des immigrés en France et omit souvent de rendre compte des ratonnades et autres règlements de compte qu'elle avait encouragés. (112)
>
> The summer and fall of 1973 were particularly deadly for the Maghrebis of the Bouches-du-Rhône department. On August 25, Mr. Émile Guerlache was killed at his work by a mentally unstable Algerian man, Mr. Salah Bougrine. Scandalously exploited by the press, this tragic event was followed by around thirty acts of vengeance, a revenge that cost the lives of fifteen Maghrebi immigrant workers in Marseille and surrounding areas. Reacting to this escalation of hatred, the Algerian government decided, on September 20, to suspend emigration of its nationals to France. A political response from one State to another. Notwithstanding, Algerians did not feel safe. The same press that incited vengeance led an almost daily campaign against the presence of immigrants in France and often neglected to report on the racist attacks and other retaliations that it had encouraged.

Perhaps the French government was following up on Algeria's response to this problem, or maybe they were genuinely hoping to curtail these racially motivated attacks, or yet perhaps they were just responding to the economic slowdown, but the following year the French government, under the presidency of Valéry Giscard d'Estaing, made the official decision to temporarily halt all labor immigration coming from outside the European Community[13]. Whether it was through media influenced public opinion, physical violence, or government decrees, strong messages were being sent that the foreign workers who had made *les trente glorieuses* possible, were now at best barely tolerated in this new social climate.

[13] Ben Jelloun writes, « Le 3 juillet 1974, le gouvernement français prit la décision de « mettre temporairement fin aux introductions de main-d'œuvre ». Le Conseil des ministres du 9 octobre 1974 l'entérina. » (113) / "On July 3, 1974, the French government made the decision to "temporarily put an end to the bringing in of new (foreign) labor forces." The Council of ministers ratified it on October 9, 1974."

Furthermore, it was not only adult male foreign workers who were targeted during this period, but their families as well. By the second half of the 1970s much tension had emerged between French police and the teenage or young adult offspring of foreign workers[14]. This segment of France's immigrant population—despite the fact that many of these young people were born in France they were still considered by law and public opinion to be immigrants—was particularly vulnerable because of their citizenship status. At the time, the French-born progeny of foreign workers in France did not gain the possibility of choosing French nationality until they turned 18 years old. Therefore, in theory and practice, for minors of foreign citizenship who were convicted even of petty misdemeanors, deportation to their parents' home country, even if they had little or no firsthand knowledge and experience with this country of familial origins, was an option. This precarious situation, the laws that kept it in place, and the antagonistic relationship between immigrant youth and the police remained until at least the early 1980s. As Begag notes, "For the youngsters [by the year 1980], the situation had gotten steadily tougher with heavy prison sentences, prison suicides, systematic deportations, and repeated attacks and murders in the hoods[15]." (15) If these extreme and unfair punishments sent a covert message that immigrant populations were not seen as integral and integrable components of French society, but rather as an expendable and temporary workforce that could be sent back whenever it was felt that they

[14] Of the situation, Begag (translated by Hargreaves) writes, "Beginning in 1976 young people in the ZUPs tried to organize themselves with the help of social workers, the growing number of clashes with the authorities having strengthened their collective consciousness. Relations with law enforcement officers worsened. This degradation was further aggravated by the racism of policemen "repatriated" from Algeria after independence in 1962, many of whom had been recruited into the law enforcement services of metropolitan France, where they set about settling old scores with the Arabs who had launched a war to gain their independence and had then come and installed themselves in France! Numerous incidents bear witness to the almost war-like atmosphere of this period." (13)

[15] Translated from the original French by Alec G. Hargreaves.

were no longer desired or of use, these sentiments were made explicit in 1977 with the French government's *aide au retour* (repatriation assistance) program. Of this program, Alec G. Hargreaves writes:

> By 1977, the government had reached the view not only that the temporary suspension of immigration announced three years earlier should become permanent[16], but also that the existing immigrant population should, if possible, be reduced. This task was entrusted to Lionel Stoléru, Minister of State for Immigrant Workers from 1977 to 1981, who focused his efforts on inducing non-EC, essentially Maghrebi, immigrants to return home. Financial incentives designed to encourage voluntary repatriation under a system known as *l'aide au retour* (repatriation assistance) launched in 1977 met with little success. Most of those who took up the offer were Spanish or Portuguese immigrants who had probably decided to return home in any case, partly because the political climate there had recently improved with the end of the Franco and Salazar dictatorships; very few Maghrebis, at whom the program was primarily aimed, took advantage of it. (26)

It was with this general failure of the *aide au retour* program to successfully convince Maghrebi and other African immigrants to return to their countries of origin, that the French government, French society, and even many immigrants themselves, began to realize that the foreign work force and their families were not as temporary as one had once thought, or perhaps hoped. Indeed, for years it had been the *mythe du retour* (myth of return), or the idea that foreign workers were only in France on a provisional basis and would return where they came from once they had made enough money to continue their lives comfortably and support their families in their homelands, that helped foreign workers to endure difficult working and living conditions in France. It was this same expectation of and desire for transience of immigrant workers that allowed certain racist/xenophobic segments of the French population to finitely tolerate the

[16] The suspension of labor immigration dating from 1974 was not made permanent. In fact, it was in 1977 that labor immigration to France resumed while the immigration of families was once again permitted beginning in 1975. See the article "Les dates-clés de l'immigration en France" which appeared in *Le Monde* on 6 December 2002 for a thorough timeline of events regarding immigration. (My footnote.)

presence of foreigners. However, economic conditions in the countries of the Maghreb and of Sub-Saharan Africa were not favorable for the return of these workers, and they were realizing that it would be difficult to bring their offspring back to live in a country of which many of these children had limited to no familiarity.

At the end of the 1970s and beginning of the 1980s, many people were coming to terms with the permanent presence of Maghrebi and Sub-Saharan immigrants and their families in the Hexagon. During the first few years of the 1980s, resistance to accepting this fact increased many of the same political and social tensions concerning immigration and immigrant communities that had been seen throughout the 1970s. In fact, despite political changes early on in the decade—primarily the coming to power of François Mitterrand and the Socialist party in 1981—many sociologists describe the very early 1980s as the pinnacle of the media misrepresentation, racial violence, and police brutality that has been described in the preceding paragraphs. Tahar Ben Jelloun describes the summer of 1983 as just as violent and deadly (if not more so) for Maghrebis in France as the summer and fall of 1973. (Ben Jelloun 85) Not surprisingly, this tense social and political climate for immigrants and their families can be seen reflected in various ways in the major trends of French popular comedy of the time period. The almost obsessional scapegoating and misrepresentation of Maghrebi and African immigrant workers as well as the accompanying racism that were found in many news sources and in large segments of society were echoed in popular comedic sketches that played on exaggerated imitations of questionable racial stereotypes. In addition, the fact that there was no media representation for professional comedians of visible ethnic minority background during this time period not only meant that there was no one present to respond to or counterattack these comedic acts of violence, but the lack of visibility could also be seen to reflect the desire of some in

positions of authority to make immigrants disappear, through the *aide au retour* program and deportations of immigrant youth.

At the time, two of the most popular practitioners of racial stereotype comedy were Pierre Péchin and Michel Leeb. Both comedians made names for themselves on stages and the small screen thanks primarily to their well-received imitations of ethnic minorities. Pierre Péchin (1947-2018) was not known solely for this type of humor, however, it is his "La cèggal et la foôrmi" sketch for which he is best known and that catapulted him to national attention in the mid-1970s. In this routine, which he performed repeatedly and almost exclusively at the height of its popularity from 1975 to 1977 (Gastaut, "La cèggal è la fôormi" 43), Péchin gives a rendering of the famous Jean de la Fontaine fable, "La cigale et la fourmi" as retold by a Maghrebi immigrant worker, complete with exaggerated Arab accent, French grammatical errors, cultural references specific to North African cuisine, and an altered moral of the story at the conclusion[17]. This sketch was so popular that it not only won him a large, French fan base, but also many accolades. As Yvan Gastaut notes, « En 1975, Pierre Péchin avait obtenu le prix de l'humour de la SACEM, en 1976, il est sacré l'humoriste de l'année. » (43) / In 1975, Pierre Péchin had won the humor prize of the SACEM[18], in 1976, he was named humorist of the year." The French public seemed to be in a frenzy over this quite simple comedic imitation. However, most likely because the sketch had been over performed, its popularity declined dramatically by 1977. Péchin, refusing to let it die out gracefully, continued to perform the sketch whenever the

[17] Television and radio performances of this sketch varied minimally and were repeated each time almost word for word. For a televised performance from September 1975 that has been archived by L'institut national de l'audiovisuel (the French national audiovisual archives), see the YouTube video "Pierre Péchin "La cèggal et la foôrmi" / Archive INA" (www.youtube.com/watch/v=GWgutoFwK9k).
[18] SACEM stands for "Société des auteurs, compositeurs et éditeurs de musique," or the Society of Authors, Composers and Publishers of Music.

opportunity arose but by 1979 and the early 1980s the reception had turned somewhat sour and some were publicly suggesting that the sketch was racist in nature (Gastaut 43-44). Péchin denied accusations of racism, proclaimed his respect for Maghrebi immigrant workers, and stated that there was no malicious intent behind the imitation. Nonetheless, comedic tastes evolve with changing times and the early 1980s was a watershed moment for representation of ethnic minorities in France. Gastaut notes, « D'autant que le ressort de son humour perd de sa force, il est même considéré comme une forme de discrimination à l'heure de l'émergence d'un débat sur la France multiculturelle qui se développe notamment à partir de 1983 autour de la notion d'intégration. » (43) / "Especially as the energy of his humor lost its strength, it was even considered as a form of discrimination at the time of the emergence of a debate on a multicultural France that developed notably starting in 1983 around the notion of integration."

Despite slowly evolving attitudes toward immigrant communities in France and issues of racism and social inequalities being brought to public attention in the early 1980s, racial stereotypes offered by Franco-French comedians were far from dead[19]. Perhaps the French public had tired of Péchin's "La cèggal et la foôrmi" sketch, but other humorists would step in to propagate new acts in a similar vein. Michel Leeb (1947-) began his career in the 1970s alongside Péchin, but the pinnacle of his success did not arrive until the early to mid-1980s. His

[19] In fact, Gastaut cites Vincent Lagaf in the television show, *La Classe* (1987-1994), as the last French comedian to specialize in this sort of humor (39). Gastaut writes, "Les codes de l'humour évoluant au gré des tendances de la société, le sketch d'artistes "bien" français consistant à caricaturer les Arabes—et les minorités plus généralement—se raréfient au cours des années 1990 avant de disparaître complètement en raison d'accusations de racisme qui se développent autour de cet humour qui ne fait plus rire." (39) / "Codes of humor evolving according to societal trends, sketches of Franco-French artists consisting of turning Arabs—and more generally speaking, minorities—into caricatures, became more and more rare throughout the 1990s before completely disappearing because of accusations of racism that developed around this humor that no longer made anyone laugh."

comic sketches revolved almost entirely around imitations of famous singers and actors, but also of racial and ethnic stereotypes. One of his most popular imitations was that of a generalized stereotypical Sub-Saharan African accent, as can be seen in a televised performance of his "L'Africain"[20] sketch which dates from June 25, 1983. However, unlike Péchin's imitation of the Arab accent, Leeb's imitation not only includes an exaggerated manner of speaking, but also disconcerting gestures and body language, and more overtly racialized (if not racist) jokes. At the beginning of the sketch, Leeb in character and using the accent in question, states that he is the son of Bokassa (Jean-Bédel Bokassa, former dictator of the Central African Republic from 1966 to 1979) and is in France with his father so that he can "faire ses études de Président de la République[21]" (Ina Chansons 0:25-0:30) / "study to become President of the Republic." During the rest of the sketch, he talks about various encounters and exchanges that he has had on the flight and in France, but racialized comments and racist jokes abound. There are jokes about cannibalism, skin color, and physical features. For example, he states that the flight attendant told him that he could take off his sunglasses to which he responded « Ce ne sont pas mes lunettes. Ce sont mes narines.[22] » (Ina Chansons 1 :55-1 :59) / "They aren't my glasses. They're my nostrils." Perhaps what is even more unsettling than the verbal jokes are the body language and gestures that Leeb adopts to portray this character. On this topic, Nelly Quemener writes, « Dans cette version, l'entame suffit à appréhender le propos : Michel Leeb tend les lèvres comme pour créer l'image de lèvres pulpeuses, il met les bras en l'air à la façon d'un orang-outan, fait des yeux ronds, qu'il déroule de droite à gauche. Tout dans la gestuelle renvoie à la

[20] See "Michel Leeb "L'Africain" / Archive INA." *YouTube*, uploaded by Ina Chansons, 9 July 2012, www.youtube.com/watch?v=c_W21vh1Ds0.
[21] Transcription mine.
[22] Transcription mine.

corporalité du singe. » (Quemener 88) / "In this version, one does not need much to get the gist : Michel Leeb sticks out his lips as if to give the impression of full lips, he raises his arms in the air like an orangutang, makes his eyes big and rolls them from right to left. Everything about his gestures hints to the body language of a monkey." This body language that Quemener highlights corresponds to stereotypes of Africans being compared to primates that date back to the colonial period and also make one think of the *zoos humains*, or "human zoos" that were features of colonial expositions of the early 20th century where representatives of native populations of various regions of the French colonial empire were brought to Paris and put on display for French audiences. It is easily understandable how Michel Leeb's "L'Africain" sketch could upset and offend. In fact, in Judith Siboni's documentary entitled, *Chocolat: une histoire du rire*, several comedians and scholars denounce this sketch. Patson, a contempoarary French stand-up comedian of Ivoirian origin states, « Moi, je n'ai pas aimé Michel Leeb. Quand j'étais jeune à l'école le lundi, sincèrement, des gens me rabâchaient ça. Et c'est…ouais…dis donc, Banania[23], machin. Des mots, euh, tes narines, machin. La manière de parler. […] Ça m'a blessé.[24] » (TV Histoire 18 :35-18 :50) / "I didn't like Michel Leeb. When I was young at school on Mondays, honestly, people would go on and on to me about it. And it's…yeah…hey, Banania, or whatever. Words, umm, your nostrils, or whatever. The way of talking. […] It hurt me." While mainstream audiences of the time might not have thought of the possible repercussions of Péchin's and Leeb's imitations, as this quote from Patson illustrates, they most certainly resonated differently with those who identify as members of the groups being mimicked.

[23] The name of a powdered chocolate drink in France that used a cartoon image of a Senegalese soldier (*tirailleur sénégalais*) on its label.
[24] Transcription mine.

The stereotypical imitations and racial humor as demonstrated here by Péchin and Leeb, however, were not the only types of comedy of the time period to explore the topics of race and immigration in France. There were also comic acts that echoed or imitated racist attitudes, behaviors, and discourse in an ironic manner in order to denounce racism and discrimination. These anti-racist sketches that began to appear in mainstream venues also around the mid-1970s could be considered to be precursors to social activism that publicly campaigned for social equality for immigrants and their families in the early 1980s. They could also be seen as comedic responses to the humor of Péchin, Leeb, and similar comedians. One example[25] of this type of comic act is Guy Bedos' and Sophie Daumier's "Les vacances à Marrakech" sketch which was featured on several television programs and helped to promote tolerance and acceptance of ethnic minorities by exposing the absurdities of racism. Yet, one of the problems of parodying racist or xenophobic discourse in order to denounce such rhetoric, especially at times when this same discourse is commonplace in the news and media, is that the irony might elude some audience members and the sketch could actually run the risk of validating and reinforcing what it intends to discredit. It is for this reason that a 1975 televised performance of the "Vacances à Marrakech" sketch is preceded by an announcement to the audience from a young woman who imitates the smooth and sultry voice of a flight attendant of the era. She says, « Votre attention, s'il vous plaît. Les passagers du vol Air France numéro 320 à destination de Marrakech sont informés, et ceci afin d'éviter désormais tout malentendu, que le texte qui va leur être présenté maintenant est d'inspiration anti-raciste. Merci. » (INA Humour, "Les vacances à Marrakech" 0 :08-0 :27) / "Your attention, please. The passengers of Air France flight number 320 flying to

[25] Quemener cites sketches by Coluche and Pierre Desproges as other examples of anti-racist comedy of the time period. (36-40)

Marrakesh are informed, in order to avoid any misunderstanding, that the text that is going to be presented to them right now is inspired by anti-racist thinking. Thank you." The act that follows features Daumier and Bedos as a Franco-French couple who have just returned from their vacation to Morocco and recount their astonishment and displeasure at finding that everywhere they went they were surrounded by Arabs. From the moment the disapproving wife and irate husband board their flight to Marrakesh, they are aghast to discover that the airplane pilot, customs officials, police, and even the king of Morocco are all Arabs. Bedos clamors, « Et alors, partout des Arabes, des Arabes, des Arabes. Que ça, que ça. Les porteurs…arabes. Bon, ça normal. Mais, les douaniers…arabes. Les policiers…arabes. Tous. » (INA Humour, "Les vacances à Marrakech" 5 :01-5 :19) / "So, everywhere there were Arabs, Arabs, Arabs. Nothing but, nothing but. The bellboys…Arabs. OK, that's normal. But the customs officers…Arabs. The police... Arabs. All of them." In order to further highlight the couple's prejudices and ignorance of Moroccan culture, Bedos' character reveals that he was formerly unaware of what Ramadan is or that the Arabic language is written from right to left. He also states « C'est la dernière fois qu'on met les pieds aux colonies. » (INA Humour, "Les vacances à Marrakech" 5 :46-5 :49) / "That's the last time we step foot in the colonies." This last comment not only demonstrates the character's lack of knowledge, seeing that Morocco obtained its independence from France almost two decades earlier in 1956, but also places his attitudes and belief systems in a bygone era, no longer compatible with the realities of a postcolonial world. The laughter that is elicited throughout the entirety of the sketch is intended to expose the ignorant, irrational, and antiquated aspects of the racism of the time period.

Clearly, while there were definite major comedic trends in the 1970s and early 1980s when it came to material addressing racialized/ethnicized Others and France's immigrant

populations and communities, there was also a fair amount of diversity in approaches and quite possibly in intended messages. Comic sketches that exploited stereotypical accents of immigrants and foreigners and that at times featured racialized/racist jokes coexisted with other acts that turned the tables and parodied and ridiculed racist attitudes, behavior, and discourse. While it is difficult to gauge with any kind of accuracy or certainty the precise effects that the work of the comedians discussed in this section had on audiences and consequently on larger segments of French society, we can see how these comedic trends were responding to and commenting on the prevalent ideas, fears, preconceived notions, and general social climate regarding immigrants and visible ethnic minorities in France during this period of economic and social instability. As Lawrence Mintz indicates in his schema of the stages of development of Jewish or ethnic humor, the humor of this first stage (characterized primarily by humor originating from a dominant group that can be seen as insulting or denigrating to the minority group(s) that are targeted) can have several effects or consequences, including increased hostility towards or ostracism of the minority group(s), or on the other hand, it could contribute to overcoming prejudice and racism through its ironic presentation of these topics. (Mintz 4) Despite the ambiguity of the effects of this comedy, the fact remains that in mainstream venues in France during this time period, comic acts taking up the subject of immigrants and ethnic minorities—whether such acts could be considered to be racist or anti-racist in nature—were performed exclusively by white humorists. As Nelly Quemener states in reference to the antiracist sketches of the time period,

> Or, à l'époque, la dénonciation du racisme est principalement conduite par des humoristes blancs. En s'imposant comme le mode d'évocation privilégié des rapports sociaux de race, elle occupe l'espace au détriment d'autres formes d'expression, notamment de la parole des groupes subalternes directement concernés, qui n'ont alors qu'un accès limité à l'arène médiatique et à la scène du café-théâtre. (39)

> Yet, at the time, the denunciation of racism was undertaken primarily by white comedians. By establishing itself as the privileged mode of evocation of social relations of race, it occupied that space to the detriment of other forms of expression, notably the voice of directly concerned subaltern groups, who only had limited access to the media arena and to the stages of café-theatres.

However, this situation described by Quemener would soon change almost overnight, ushering in much needed diversity in terms of representation in the field of French ethnic humor, but paradoxically doing ostensibly little in many respects to revolutionize prevalent comedic styles of the previous decade.

The 1980s: Socialist Politics, Social Activism, and a Guy Named Coluche Help to Set the Stage

The year 1983 has been described as a watershed moment in several areas of French society. It marked the « tournant de la rigueur » or the "turning point of rigor" in economic politics (Quemener 57) and has been described as the « tournant médiatique de l'immigration » in France[26], or "immigration's media turning point." 1983 also saw the first appearance on French television of a comedian of Maghrebi origin, Smaïn Faïrouze, better known simply as Smaïn. The television program in question is *Le petit théâtre de Bouvard*, which was broadcast on Antenne 2 from 1982 to 1985, and Smaïn's first appearance on the show on February 26, 1983 (Gastaut, "Deux "Arabes" en vedette" 92) marked a critical turning point in mainstream representation for not only French comedians of North African background, but for all visible ethnic minority comedians in France. It would appear that from this moment on these humorists would finally have a privileged platform from which to speak freely, voice their opinions and viewpoints concerning relevant social issues, and make audiences laugh. Unfortunately, as a look

[26] See Gastaut's article "1983, tournant médiatique de l'immigration en France."

into Smaïn's early career will demonstrate, this was not completely the case. Of Smaïn's debut television performance in which he played the role of an Arab street sweeper in Paris named Ali la France, Gastaut writes:

> Singeant de manière outrancière l'accent arabe, son apparition s'avère convaincante. Elle se situe dans le sillage du succès des sketches de Pierre Péchin […] Imiter les travailleurs immigrés maghrébins continue à faire rire en ce début des années 1980 et le jeune Smaïn, à la différence de Pierre Péchin, décide de s'y employer en jouant sur son physique, ce qui plaît au public. (Gastaut, "Deux "Arabes" en vedette" 92)
>
> Mimicking the Arab accent in an outrageous way, his first appearance proved to be convincing. It followed in the wake of the success of Pierre Péchin's sketches […] Imitating Maghrebi immigrant workers continued to provoke laughter at the beginning of the 1980s and the young Smaïn, unlike Pierre Péchin, decided to go about it by playing on his physique, which the public enjoyed.

This description of Smaïn's first appearance on *Le petit théâtre de Bouvard* is in many ways illustrative of a large part of Smaïn's ensemble work on this television program as well as the situation that many visible ethnic minority comedians found themselves in as they began to achieve mainstream success in the early 1980s. Seeing that they were most often the token person of color or sole representative of their respective ethnicity in this and similar comedy sketch shows, they felt pressure to conform to and perpetuate certain racialized/ethnicized stereotypes that had been in circulation for many years and with which audiences were familiar and comfortable. By placing Smaïn's debut television performance and Pierre Péchin's earlier work in a continuum, Gastaut, with his previous quote, alludes to the fact that many comedic styles remained more or less unaltered as new ethnic minority talent felt the need or pressure to follow in the vein of previous French traditions of racial/ethnic humor in order to achieve success with television audiences, despite their recent promotion and newfound visibility on comic stages and screens. The result was a type of self-deprecating humor that Lawrence Mintz qualifies as the second stage in the development of Jewish or ethnic humor and a defining

characteristic of much of the ethnic comedy in France from the early 1980s until the end of that decade. Mintz writes of this self-deprecating ethnic humor:

> Self-critical humor has been viewed as an indication of self-hatred resulting from long oppression, but it has also been analyzed and explained as "pseudo-masochism" (Grotjahn) serving to deflect or to deflate hostility, as internal corrective directed against inferior or deviate group-members and as ironic reversal (victory through defeat, virtues out of supposed vices). (Mintz 4)

Before looking in-depth at the ways in which Mintz's second self-deprecatory stage in the development of ethnic humor applies to the early work of Smaïn in the early 1980s, it shall be beneficial to examine the nexus of factors that, I believe, paved the way for and accompanied the breakthrough arrival of these comedians of immigrant origin on the scene in the early 1980s. These factors include the 1980-1981 presidential campaign of the popular humorist, Coluche; the subsequent 1981 election of François Mitterrand and the Socialist Party; and the increase of and media spotlight on social movements denouncing racial violence and inequality throughout the entire first half of the 1980s.

Michel Colucci (1944-1986), better known as Coluche, remains to this day a celebrated comedian and cultural reference for older as well as younger generations in France. He is remembered by many for a sense of humor that on a surface level frequently appeared ridiculously juvenile, but upon closer inspection, often fearlessly attacked societal injustices and championed underdogs. During his lifetime and posthumously, Coluche even gained the respect of large numbers of mainly working-class French people thanks to his non-conformist attitudes,

unassuming style[27], great capacity for empathy, and humanitarianism[28]. While not of visible ethnic minority background himself, he is considered by many as having been sympathetic to the plights of newer waves of immigrants in France and much of his work, including his famous *C'est l'histoire d'un mec* sketch, is qualified by Nelly Quemener as anti-racist in nature (Quemener 37-38). It has been speculated that his compassion towards immigrant communities stems from the fact that his father, who passed away when his son was only three years old, was from Italy. Discrimination against Italian immigrants was strong in certain areas of France in the 19th and early 20th centuries (Hargreaves 16), and being of Italian origin still carried a stigma with it well into the 1950s, during Coluche's formative youth and young adult years.

In 1980, Coluche, despite having no qualifications and having not previously expressed any serious political ambitions, started his own presidential campaign for elections that were to be held the following year. Perhaps this decision was motivated by his genuine interest and concern for marginalized segments of the French population coupled with his distaste for politics and politicians of the day, or as has been suggested, maybe it was all a joke and publicity stunt. It is quite conceivable that the truth lies somewhere in between those two possibilities. Whatever it was that propelled Coluche to entertain undertaking this lofty political pursuit, it is certain that this was comedy's first real encroachment into the sacrosanct domain of politics in French history, at least the first event of its kind to receive any significant media attention. Certainly, politics and comedy have been uneasy bedfellows for centuries, with satire of all sorts running a

[27] This unassuming style was characterized by the overalls (*salopette*, in French) that were his signature on-stage look and highlighted his modest, blue-collar origins and affiliations.
[28] In 1985, a year before his death in a motorcycle accident, Coluche founded *Les restos du coeur*, a charity organization in France that continues to provide meals for the homeless and needy free of charge.

never-ending commentary on political activity, and the court jester providing what has been considered an alternative political voice in the courts of French kings until the rise of absolutism under Louis XIV[29]. However, in an audacious and revolutionary move, the humorist Coluche dared to step outside comedy's designated roles when it came to its relationship with politics—that is, as commentator or alternative (but inferior) voice—and to consider himself to be on par with some of the most elite of France's political figures[30]. While traditionalists, conservatives, and political rivals were aghast at his candidacy, to many people's surprise—including Coluche's—it appeared that he was gaining real support, doing well in straw polls, and would obtain the required number of signatures to run in the first round. This support could be explained by the widespread unhappiness with politics per usual felt by the average French citizen. William Dowell of *The Christian Science Monitor* writes of the other presidential candidates:

> But whatever drawbacks Giscard may have as president, the other candidates are even less appealing. French Communist leader Georges Marchais remains a hardened Stalinist, with an outdated approach that even convinced communists outside France find hard to stomach. Mr. Mitterrand seems incapable to winning, imbued with fuzzy economic

[29] On the final blows dealt to the court jester tradition in France, Arnaud Mercier writes, « À une autre époque, lorsque le pouvoir royal est devenu absolu, que le Roi de France se mettait en scène incarnant la nation toute entière, et que sa légitimité ne pouvait donc plus être mise en cause, Louis XIV fit progressivement disparaître les bouffons de sa cour. La montée de l'absolutisme rendait impossible la cohabitation ancestrale roi/bouffon, le souverain se voulant omniscient, seul centre d'intérêt au cœur de la société de cour. » (182) / "During another time period, when royal power became absolute, and the King of France put on performances embodying the entire nation, and his legitimacy could therefore no longer be questioned, Louis XIV gradually banished fools from his court. The rise of absolutism made the ancestral cohabitation of king and fool impossible, the sovereign wanting to be omniscient, the only focus of attention within court society."

[30] Today it is not completely unheard of for a comedian or former comedian to hold high political office. One can think of Italy's Beppe Grillo who founded the Cinque Stelle movement and political party, or the Ukrainian president, Volodymyr Zelensky. However, in the early 1980s it was a veritable shock to see a comedian run for political office. At the same time that Coluche was running for office, the former actor, Ronald Reagan, was mounting his own campaign for presidency in the United States. Nonetheless, Reagan was not, nor had ever been, a professional comedian per se.

> theories, and a patrician aloofness that leaves him little in common with the average French voter. (Dowell)

This general discontent felt by many French citizens with the political system under Valéry Giscard d'Estaing as well as with any viable alternatives was also expressed by Coluche himself, whose candidacy announcement had a double agenda: to appeal to a wide range of underrepresented, marginalized peoples while exposing the hypocrisy and buffoonery of established politicians and political parties. Of this candidacy announcement, Arnaud Mercier writes:

> Son appel solennel paru dans *Charlie Hebdo* annonçant sa candidature, témoigne de son intention de rassembler tous ceux qui s'estiment mal représentés ou négligés par les pouvoirs en place : « J'appelle les fainéants, les crasseux, les drogués, les alcooliques, les pédés, les femmes, les parasites, les jeunes, les vieux, les artistes, les taulards, les gouines, les apprentis, les Noirs, les piétons, les Arabes, les Français, les chevelus, les fous, les travestis, les anciens communistes, les abstentionnistes convaincus, tous ceux qui ne comptent pas pour les hommes politiques à voter pour moi, à s'inscrire dans leur mairie et à colporter la nouvelle. Tous ensemble pour leur foutre au cul avec Coluche ! » Il ne s'agit plus alors de désacralisation, mais d'agression, d'attaque frontale, de déstabilisation, avec pour seul objectif une dépréciation totale du pouvoir. (Mercier 175-176)
>
> His formal call announcing his candidacy, having appeared in *Charlie Hebdo*, was a testament to his intention to gather together all who considered themselves to be poorly represented or neglected by the government in power: "I call on lazy people, dirty people, junkies, alcoholics, faggots, women, parasites, young people, old people, artists, convicts, dykes, trainees, black people, pedestrians, Arabs, the French, long-haired people, crazy people, cross-dressers, former communists, fervent non-voters, all who don't count for politicians, to vote for me, to register to vote at their town hall, and to spread the word. Let's all join forces to give them the big "fuck you" with Coluche!" It was no longer a question of desecration, but rather of aggression, of a head-on attack, of destabilization, with the sole objective of a complete depreciation of the government."

To the relief of Coluche's detractors and especially of François Mitterrand, the socialist candidate for presidency who was losing supporters and potential votes to this wild card candidate, the comedian's campaign began to suffer after René Gorlin, his campaign manager, was found murdered. Coluche interpreted this as a warning and threat. Even though it was later

discovered that the man had been shot to death by his wife, Coluche's confidence and momentum had suffered immeasurably from this blow (Mercier 180). As Mercier notes, « L'action qu'il a entreprise finit par le dépasser. De nombreux groupes comptent sur lui et, de l'autre côté, il subit des attaques de plus en plus sévères et son discours commence à s'essouffler. Donc le 15 mars 1981, il se retire de la campagne. » (180-181) / "The feat that he undertook ended up being more than he could handle. Numerous groups were counting on him, but on the other hand, he was suffering more and more serious attacks and his discourse was beginning to run out of steam. Therefore, on March 15, 1981, he withdrew from the campaign." Despite Coluche's aborted attempt to become France's first officially self-proclaimed clown president, his campaign and the media attention that it garnered brought comedy, politics, and marginalized segments of the French population together in ways that had previously been unimaginable. Largely thanks to Coluche, in the near future, politicians would be seen as slightly more human, minorities would struggle a little less to find their political voices, and comedians would increasingly test boundaries and inspire others with their brazen lack of inhibition.

On May 10, 1981, the Socialist Party's candidate, François Mitterrand won the election and officially replaced Valéry Giscard d'Estaing as president on May 21 (Tiersky 129). The results of this election were momentous primarily for the reason that it marked the first time that the Socialist Party would be in control of the government of the French Republic, ushering in more liberal rhetoric and a major shake-up of long-held political roles. Ronald Tiersky writes:

> François Mitterrand's election as president overthrew the quarter-century cozy arrangement of a French Right permanently in power and a French Left permanently in opposition. Or, as French political intellectuals defined it, the Right was in charge of the government and economy, while the Left dominated the culture, marked by ideology and literary-political fashions. Mitterrand's arrival in office with the Union of the Left in 1981 therefore posed questions not just of a change in government but more fundamental ones of legitimacy, of institutions, and of reconciliation and mutual acceptance (or not)

between the Right and the Left. (Tiersky 216)

During the election campaign and approximately the first two years of François Mitterrand's presidency, members of France's immigrant communities—especially the offspring of immigrant workers who were weary due to racial violence and blatant social injustices at school, work, and within the legal system—were finally hopeful that real change was on the horizon thanks to Mitterrand's and the Socialist Party's liberal discourses on the need for improved conditions for immigrant populations established in the Hexagon and more open and welcoming policies regarding incoming immigrants and foreign laborers. After a marked increase in xenophobic, intolerant rhetoric concerning Arab and African descended populations and tougher stances on immigration after the end of the *Trente glorieuses* in the mid-1970s, the early 1980s finally saw a group of politicians voicing concern and preaching tolerance and justice for immigrants. It is understandable that these people would place their faith in the new president and his political party. Unfortunately, it soon become obvious that Mitterrand's discourse concerning social equality and ethnic minorities would remain in large part not much more than empty words and unfulfilled promises. If anything, the economic and social conditions that had rendered day to day existence increasingly difficult for many immigrants and their children in France in the 1970s, only increased during the early years of the 1980s. Tiersky writes, "His [Mitterrand's] greatest single *policy* failure, among several, was a record of punitive rates (finally at 12-13 percent) of unemployment. This unemployment aggravated a sense of dislocation, resentment, and demoralization in a French society pressured economically, socially, and culturally." (Tiersky 377) Despite many accomplishments[31], the president's failures in terms of economic

[31] Ronald Tiersky mentions some of these accomplishments when writing, "For certain of his actions Mitterrand claimed credit: first of all, for abolishing the death penalty, the decentralization of the

policy and high unemployment rates undermined any efforts to improve social conditions for the less fortunate. In fact, socioeconomic inequalities increased (Tiersky 394), leaving many members of immigrant communities feeling bitterly disappointed and disillusioned. The sociologist, Saïd Bouamama, summarizes the situation by stating, « Les espoirs mis en l'élection de François Mitterrand, le 10 mai 1981, ont été tellement forts que la non-tenue des promesses de son programme électoral a créé un sentiment d'apathie chez les uns, de révolte chez les autres. » (Bouamama 42) / "The hopes placed in the election of François Mitterrand, May 10, 1981, were so strong that the failure to keep his campaign promises created a feeling of apathy among some, and of revolt among others." Many of those who had not completely lost hope would use their disappointment in the situation around them and in the Socialist Party, and take matters into their own hands, launching a series of grassroots movements of social activism during the first half of the 1980s.

This social activism which centered around the promotion of justice and social equality while denouncing racism and racially motivated acts of violence was a way for the children of immigrant workers to distinguish themselves from the generation of their parents, to give voice to their hopes and concerns, and to forge their own paths in French society. This is particularly true for *Beurs*[32], a term that came to be used for the children of Maghrebi immigrant workers

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French state, his defense, at least rhetorically, of oppressed peoples and minorities, and, finally, his great role in advancing European integration." (386)

[32] This term (as well as the similar term "*rebeu*"), a verlan (French slang which is formed by reversing syllables of words) form of "*arabe*" which became popular in the 1980s is today sometimes considered to be pejorative by certain segments of the population and in certain situations. While I often opt for the term "Franco-Maghrebi," I use the term "beur" with no pejorative connotations. It was a widespread appellation in the 1980s and came to refer to the specific culture and lived experiences of the children of the Maghrebi diaspora in France, and recognized that their culture and experiences were different from those of their parents. As Saïd Bouamama states, « Plus précisément il [le terme « beur »] exprime l'émergence d'une nouvelle réalité identitaire française : l'existence d'Arabes *de* France. Jusqu'alors, la

settled in France, many of whom were born and raised in the Hexagon, and were beginning to reach young adulthood in the late 1970s/early 1980s. While Saïd Bouamama notes that Maghrebi foreign workers did, in fact, have a strong tradition of protesting injustices and advocating for their own rights back in their countries of origin during the colonial period and struggles for independence as well as in French workplaces (Bouamama 24, 28-30), the commonly held view of Maghrebi foreign workers is that they often attempted to keep a low profile in order to avoid unwanted attention and for fear of racist attacks[33]. By the early 1980s, many Beur youth wanted to make a clean break from the ways in which they witnessed their parents passively deal with xenophobia and related adversity in France. They therefore deliberately called attention to themselves by taking to the streets and open spaces to peacefully protest violence and injustices done to themselves and members of their communities, as well as to voice their frustrations with social and political structures that did little to nothing to advocate for them. Unfortunately, in hindsight, much of this social activism has been deemed a failure as it achieved very little concrete results and improvements. However, thanks to the media attention that it attracted, it did much to increase visibility and improve media images of Franco-Maghrebis and other visible ethnic minorities.

One of these first instances of grassroots, organized social activism occurred in 1980 and was a reaction to police brutality against visible ethnic minorities and unjust sentences—often deportation to their parents' home country—for young adults of immigrant origin who were

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France ne connaissait que des Arabes *en* France. » (Bouamama 69) / "More precisely, it [the term "beur"] expresses the emergence of a new French reality concerning identity : the existence of Arabs *of* France. Until then, France had only known Arabs *in* France."

[33] See, for example, discussions and interviews in the third part, entitled "Les enfants," of Yamina Benguigui's documentary, *Mémoires d'immigrés: l'héritage maghrébin* (1997).

convicted of petty crimes. These deportations had been on the rise since the late 1970s and had reached their pinnacle right before Mitterrand came to power in 1981. In response, the "Rock against Police" movement was started, of which Azouz Begag writes:

> That year [1980] the "Rock against Police" movement was created in Paris, modeling itself on concerts organized by young West Indians in Great Britain. On April 19, a thousand young people from the banlieues of Paris assembled without official authorization on some spare land in the twentieth arrondissement to dance to the sound of music giving vent to their tough living conditions and their hatred of the police. It was a kind of forerunner of what would later become known as rave parties. (Begag 15)

While the "Rock against Police" concerts perhaps did little to immediately and directly put an end to the abuses of power often employed by police and government, they made it publicly known that these issues existed. Once socialist politicians who had lent an empathetic ear were finally elected to power in 1981, they went about abolishing the practice of unfair deportations of youth of immigrant background who were found guilty of small misdemeanors (Begag 18). However, as socio-economic conditions in France continued to deteriorate, racially motivated violence against members of immigrant communities was sadly increasing just as it had been during the most difficult years of the mid to late 1970s. In particular, the fall of 1982 and the summer of 1983 have been described as "*meurtrier"* ("deadly") and "*sanglant*" ("bloody") (Bouamama 48-49, 54-55). In the Minguettes neighborhood of Vénissieux, a socio-economically disadvantaged banlieue of Lyon, violent confrontations between police and ethnic minority youth were particularly intense during the summer of 1983. In response to this violence, the young president of the organization, SOS Minguettes, Toumi Djaïdja; a young, empathetic Catholic priest named Christian Delorme; and a similarly inclined Protestant pastor by the name of Jean Costil, joined forces and came up with the idea of a peaceful march across France, from Marseille to the Élysée Palace in Paris, in order to promote equality and denounce racism.

According to Bouamama, « L'idée sera donc importé des USA et des marches pacifiques des Noirs pour les droits civiques, initiées par Martin Luther King. » (56). / "The idea was thus imported from the USA and from the peaceful marches of African Americans for civil rights, begun by Martin Luther King." The result was *La marche pour l'égalité et contre le racisme*, sometimes also known as *La marche des Beurs*, and as it made its way from Marseille to Paris it gathered more and more people, support, and media attention. Bouamama writes:

> Le succès de chacune [des étapes] prépare les suivantes. La presse nationale suit quotidiennement la Marche, renforçant ainsi les mobilisations locales. Chaque étape est l'occasion de mobilisations publiques, de débats et de fêtes. Chaque comité local innove en initiatives symboliques. Les maires, toutes tendances confondues, ne laissent pas passer l'occasion. Très vite, l'habitude se prend d'une réception à l'hôtel de ville, à l'occasion de laquelle tous les partis font des professions de foi antiracistes. […] Le 3 décembre 1983, une véritable marée humaine, joyeuse et colorée, accompagne les marcheurs lors de leur entrée à Paris. Plus de cent mille citoyens occupent les rues parisiennes. Des jeunes, et particulièrement des jeunes issus de l'immigration, donneront, vingt-quatre heures durant, un air de fête populaire à la capitale. (Bouamama 66-67)
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> The success of each [stop-off] prepared the next ones. The national press followed the March daily, thus reinforcing local rallies. Each stop-off was the occasion for public rallies, debates, and parties. Each local committee broke new ground with symbolic initiatives. Mayors of all political persuasions did not let the opportunity pass them by. Very quickly, a habit was formed of having a reception at the city hall, at which all parties made antiracist policy statements. […] On December 3, 1983, a veritable flood of joyous and colorful people accompanied the marchers during their entry into Paris. More than one hundred thousand citizens were in the Parisian streets. Young people, and especially young people of immigrant background would, for twenty-four hours, give the capital a festival-like atmosphere.

Upon their arrival in Paris, eight of the original marchers for equality and against racism met with President Mitterrand at the Élysée Palace where they spoke of their experiences and made suggestions on how the government could improve the conditions of the country's immigrant population. While the press was present, Mitterrand listened to his guests cordially and interacted professionally. However, what the marchers accomplished during this meeting in terms of actual political reform was minimal. Bouamama states, « Les résultats concrets et précis sont pourtant

faibles. Le président François Mitterrand ne s'engage que sur très peu de choses. Il annonce l'octroi de la carte de séjour de dix ans, vieille revendication de l'immigration. Ce sera le seul acquis tangible de la marche. » (Bouamama 67) / "However, precise and concrete results were weak. President François Mitterrand committed to doing just a very few things. He announced the granting of the ten-year residence permit, an old demand of those requesting immigration policy reform. It would be the march's only tangible gain." Despite these disappointments, the energy associated with the *Marche pour l'égalité et contre le racism*e would last for the next couple of years and similar marches on a smaller scale would be organized and a sort of convention called Convergence 84 also took place in Paris (Bouamama 118). The year 1984 also saw the creation by the French Socialist Party of an anti-racist organization called SOS Racisme. With its slogan, "Touche pas à mon pote" ("Don't touch my friend"), this organization became very popular among teenagers and young adults eager to identify as allies of visible ethnic minorities, and the group became the official mouthpiece of French anti-racist movements (Bouamama 118-119). However, as Bouamama states[34]:

> Si SOS séduit une partie de la jeunesse lycéenne et collégienne par son discours général à connotation morale, il est vécu par les jeunes des cités comme une usurpation. Le nom rappelle l'association SOS Avenir Minguettes, à l'origine de la première marche. La forme d'action publique, les concerts, sont empruntés à *Rock against Police*, une des premières formes d'expression autonome des jeunes des cités à la fin des années 70. (Bouamama 119-120)
>
> If SOS seduced a part of middle and high school aged youth with its general discourse

[34] Sophie Gebeil echoes a similar sentiment when she writes, « Les témoins [de la Marche pour l'égalité et contre le racisme] racontent leur investissement dans la Marche et les espoirs qui sont nés de son succès. L'enthousiasme des récits est bien souvent associé à la dénonciation de la récupération politique par le Parti socialiste à travers la création, en 1984, de l'association SOS Racisme perçue comme une pion du PS. » (Gebeil 120-121) / "The witnesses [of the March for Equality and Against Racism] recount their investment in the March and the hopes that were born from its success. The enthusiasm of the stories is often tied to the denunciation of the Socialist Party's political appropriation through the creation, in 1984, of the association SOS Racisme, seen as a pawn of the Socialist Party."

> with moral overtones, it was experienced by inner-city youth as a sort of usurpation. The name harkens back to the association SOS Avenir Minguettes, which was behind the creation of the first march. The type of public action, concerts, was taken from Rock against Police, one of the first autonomous forms of expression of inner-city youth at the end of the 1970s.

While general messages of tolerance, anti-racism, and social equality were beginning to spread across France quickly thanks to the grassroots work and energy mainly of youth of immigrant origin who organized and participated in "Rock against Police" and the *Marche pour l'égalité et contre le racisme*, after 1984 and the creation of SOS Racisme, many of the originators of these social movements felt that their messages were appropriated (and sometimes slightly twisted) by a Socialist Party that was perhaps eager to give the appearance of being more invested in the struggle for immigrant rights and social equality than it actually was.

Interestingly, these three historical moments that paved the way for and accompanied the *entrée sur scène* of ethnic minority comedians onto the French televisual landscape—the presidential campaign of Coluche, the 1981 election of François Mitterrand and the Socialist Party, and a marked and highly mediatized upswing in the early 1980s of social movements advocating equality and denouncing racism—have all been described in some ways as failures. Coluche terminated his political career before it even started. François Mitterrand left most of his promises to France's immigrant communities unfulfilled and socioeconomic inequality actually increased during his presidency. Finally, the grassroots movements, "Rock against Police" and the *Marche pour l'égalité et contre le racisme,* did little to concretely affect policy change that would improve living conditions for ethnic minorities, and in the end, they found their messages usurped by the group, SOS Racisme. However, on a positive note, each of these moments brought increased visibility to underrepresented peoples and some of the issues that were most pressing for them. Coluche talked about and attempted to appeal to minorities during his

announcement for candidacy. Mitterrand at least made rhetorical gestures toward improving conditions for immigrant communities. Lastly, social activism of the early 80s was groundbreaking in that for the first time it put a positive media spotlight on young people of immigrant background[35]. In many respects, this dichotomy of increased visibility and great breakthroughs in ethnic minority representation on the one hand, and failure in large part to achieve any real, tangible positive change for immigrant communities on the other, was echoed on the comic stage and screen of the 1980s. Ethnic minority comedians, like Smaïn, Pascal Légitimus[36], and Éric Blanc[37], were featured for the first time on popular television shows. Yet, the constraints and pressures placed on their comic expression were numerous, often resulting in

[35] As Bouamama states, « Avant la marche de 1983, les jeunes issus de l'immigration n'existent pas pour la société française. Plus précisément, leur sortie de l'invisibilité sociale a connu deux périodes contrastées : la première, connotée négativement, s'enclenche avec les rodéos de l'été 81. La seconde, connotée positivement, démarre avec la Marche. Entre-temps, les méchants casseurs et délinquants se sont transformés en « gentils Beurs ». » (Bouamama 68) / "Before the march of 1983, young people of immigrant background did not exist for French society. More precisely, their coming out of social invisibility knew two contrasting periods: the first, having negative connotations, began with the rodeos of the summer of 81. The second, having positive connotations, started with the March. Meanwhile, the nasty troublemakers and delinquents were transformed into "nice Beurs"."

[36] Pascal Légitimus came from a show business family. He is the grandson of the Martinican actress, Darling Légitimus, who is probably best known for playing the role of Ma Tine in Euzhan Palzy's 1983 cinematic adaptation of Joseph Zobel's novel, *La Rue Cases-Nègres*. Pascal Légitimus, himself of mixed Antillean and Armenian descent, was a member for many years of the comic troupe, *Les Inconnus*, which was formed in 1984 and went on to achieve great popularity. Légitimus' comedic career has spanned the decades from the 1980s to the present and he has performed on television, film, and one-man shows.

[37] Éric Blanc, a French comedic performer originally hailing from Benin, gained success in France in the 1980s thanks primarily to his theatre and television performances where he specialized in comedic impressions of French celebrities. His career suffered an enormous blow in 1988 after the film critic, Henry Chapier, pursued legal action against him for impressions that he had made of him publicly in 1987. This situation can be contrasted with that of the impressionist Michel Leeb who regularly imitated African and African-descended people in the 1980s and who never faced legal action. For more information about both Éric Blanc and Michel Leeb, see Judith Siboni's 2015 documentary, *Chocolat: une histoire du rire*.

the perpetuation of racial stereotypes and older traditions of racist, or at best, questionable humor.

The details and trajectory of Smaïn's early career can be seen as representative of the situation of his ethnic minority comedian colleagues of the 1980s as well as the general situation of French ethnic comedy of the time period. After spending the initial years of the 80s honing his craft in the *cafés-théâtres* of Paris, as mentioned earlier, Smaïn received his first real break with performances on the sketch comedy television show, *Le petit théâtre de Bouvard*, making him the first French comedian of Maghrebi origin to be seen on television. It was also his appearances on this show that catapulted him to fame. Despite this, his run on the program did not last long, as he decided at the beginning of 1984 to leave in order to pursue a solo career (Gastaut, "Deux "Arabes" en vedette" 93). Of his time on *Le petit théâtre de Bouvard*, Gastaut notes that while he played many stereotypical Arab or beur roles, Smaïn took on a wider range of non-ethnicized roles as well ("Deux "Arabes" en vedette" 93). However, thirty years later when asked about why he left the program that launched his career, he gave the following response, [38] « Alors, je vais être brutal. C'est que je n'avais pas envie de faire l'Arabe de service. J'avais envie que l'Arabe…bah…me rende service. Mais ce n'est pas de leur faute. Où est-ce qu'on pouvait me mettre ? On ne pouvait me mettre que dans ce style de personnage. Je voulais aller plus loin.[39] » (La parenthèse inattendue 59 :19-59 :34) / "So, I'm going to be frank. It's that I didn't want to play the token Arab [the Arab who helps out]. I wanted the Arab…uhh…to help me out. But it's not their fault. Where could they put me? They could only put me in this type of

[38] This occurred on an episode of the France 2 television program, *La parenthèse inattendue* (2012-present) that aired for the first time on April 16, 2014. The question was asked by the program's host, Frédéric Lopez.
[39] Transcription mine.

character. I wanted to go further." The fact that he felt pigeonholed into playing stereotypical ethnic roles led him to leave the television program after less than a year, opting for film roles as well as solo work on a one-man show, entitled *A Star is Beur* (1986), where he would have more creative freedom[40]. While moving away from the sketch comedy television show genre in order to pursue solo work would certainly allow Smaïn more artistic autonomy, he would still find that in order to achieve success among mainstream audiences of the time period, he would be obliged to cater to certain tastes and at times embody stereotypical Maghrebi roles. The difference, however, would be that he could now have more control over the subtle nuances that went into these performances, which could change the approach to the stereotype and possibly its reception and interpretation by audiences.

An example of Smaïn's comedic treatment of these stereotypes, as well as one of his most popular sketches, *Le beur président*, was originally part of his first one-man show, the above-mentioned *A Star is Beur* (1986), and was consequently performed on several television shows. In fact, the sketch gained so much attention and praise that he has continued to perform different iterations of it on stage and television well into the 2000s[41]. The following description of the sketch is based on an excerpt of a performance that appeared on French television in 1986[42]. In this excerpt a young, well-dressed, and bespectacled Smaïn plays the first Franco-

[40] Gastaut writes, « À côté de son succès au cinéma, Smaïn excelle au même moment dans le one man show. En 1986 notamment, sa première expérience en la matière, le spectacle *A Star is Beur* attire un large public sur la scène du café-théâtre le Tintamarre à Paris. » ("Deux "Arabes" en vedette" 94) / "Alongside his film success, Smaïn excelled at the same time in the one-man show. In 1986 notably, his first venture into the genre, the show, *A Star is Beur*, attracted a large audience on the stage of the *café-théâtre* le Tintamarre, in Paris."

[41] For a description and analysis of a performance of this sketch from the 1990s, see Mireille Rosello's *Declining the Stereotype: Ethnicity and Representation in French Cultures*, pp. 61-64.

[42] See "Smaïn Présidant." *YouTube*, uploaded by Mac Kenzie Warner Bros, 26 Sept 2015, www.youtube.com/watch?v=VMJTtjyDSW0.

Maghrebi president of the French Republic. He addresses the audience—his constituents—in a thick, feigned Arab accent, making numerous linguistic blunders, confusing French terms, inserting Maghrebi and Franco-Maghrebi cultural references at unexpected and often inappropriate times, and constantly mixing high (French presidential-sounding) and low (Franco-Maghrebi colloquial) registers. One joke follows another in rapid succession, leaving the audience in an almost continual state of hilarity. There is very little logic or natural flow that connects each joke. The only ostensible goal is to provoke laughter by making France's first Franco-Maghrebi president appear as incompetent and out of place as possible. An example of one of these quickly delivered puns includes the one-liner, « Il faut augmenter le pouvoir d'Aïcha. » (Mac Kenzie Warner Bros 1:28-1:32) / "We have to increase Aïcha's power [Here he is confusing the expression "*pouvoir d'achat*" or "purchasing power" with the Arabic female name, Aïcha.]." Another quip from this set occurs when he says in reference to the credit rate, « La hausse…non. La baisse…Ça va, merci. Toi ? » (Mac Kenzie Warner Bros 1 :45-1 :49) / "Rise…no. Fall…I'm fine, thanks. And you?" [Here he is confusing the French "*la baisse*" meaning "fall" with the Maghrebi Arabic expression "La bess?" meaning "Are you o.k.?".]." On a surface level, it is apparent that the character represented in the sketch is being ridiculed and that the humor is found in the presumed unlikeliness that such a person could become president of France. It is therefore clear that Smaïn is continuing the older French comic tradition, popularized by Pierre Péchin, of playing on Arab stereotypes and mocking North African immigrants. However, given Smaïn's ethnic origins, it becomes difficult to qualify this sketch as an example of racist humor[43], as much of Péchin's work had been described in the latter part of

[43] As Gastaut notes, « Dans ce spectacle [*A Star is Beur* de Smaïn], l'un des temps forts se situe lorsque l'humoriste incarne un candidat à l'élection présidentielle de 1988 avec un fort accent arabe ce qui

his career. Instead, it can be seen as an example of the self-deprecatory mode of comedy that constitutes Mintz's second phase of the development of ethnic humor. Nonetheless, to consider comedy on only a superficial level or to take it at face value is always a grave error. Self-deprecatory humor, in particular, functions on multiple levels and can have a plurality of (often ambivalent) meanings. As Joanne R. Gilbert states, "Comics who assume this posture [of self-deprecation] often send a double message: (1) they put themselves […] down, often delineating their inadequacies […]; and (2) by performing the above in a comedic context, they subvert the status quo by calling cultural values into question." (Gilbert 114) Similarly to Coluche's presidential campaign, Smaïn's *Le beur président* sketch highlights the need for change within the established political system, and just as importantly, exposes prejudice and racialized notions of the "proper" place of ethnic minorities in French society. Nelly Quemener offers the following interpretation of the sketch:

> Cette contradiction entre l'idéal de francité et le marquage ethnique du président « beur » constitue un ressort du rire ambivalent. Par ce procédé, Smaïn enferme la représentation de l'Arabe dans un nombre restreint de caractéristiques qui, par leur apparence figée, contredisent la possibilité d'intégration. Pourtant, son sketch est aussi un acte de réappropriation du stéréotype au service d'une utopie, celle d'un Arabe devenant président de tous, situation difficilement envisageable dans la France des années 1980. (Quemener 89)
>
> This contradiction between the ideal of Frenchness and the ethnic markers of the "beur" president constitutes a burst of ambivalent laughter. In this manner, Smaïn contains the representation of the Arab to a limited number of characteristics that, through their fixed appearance, refute the possibility of integration. Yet, his sketch is also an act of reappropriation of the stereotype in the service of a utopia, that of an Arab becoming president of everyone, a situation difficult to envision in 1980s France.

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préfigure le principe que lorsque les « Arabes » se moquent d'eux-mêmes, le ressort de l'humour fonctionne mieux à partir des années 1980. Et, surtout, il n'est pas soupçonnable de racisme. » (Gastaut, « La cèggal è la fôormi » 39) / "In this show [Smaïn's *A Star is Beur*], one of the key moments is when the comedian plays a candidate in the presidential election of 1988 with a thick Arab accent, which heralds the principle that when "Arabs" make fun of themselves, the energy of the humor works better from the 1980s on. And, above all, it is not suspected of racism."

As Quemener's interpretation demonstrates, Smaïn—as well as many other French comedians of immigrant background in the 1980s—did often perpetuate ethnic minority stereotypes through self-deprecating humor while trying to find his place on French comic stages and screens. However, unlike the impressions of ethnic minorities presented by Franco-French comedians of the 70s and early 80s, these self-deprecating impressions were imbued with an ambiguity that allowed the possibility for audiences capable of recognizing irony to question these stereotypes as well as other preconceived notions they might have held about members of the minority in question. During this "Beur is Beautiful" period situated roughly between 1983 and 1989 (Gastaut, "Deux "Arabes" en vedette" 94), Smaïn contributed greatly to the development of ethnic comedy in France by breaking down barriers, gaining a large fan base, and influencing aspiring, young comics of immigrant background.

The 1990s to the Early 2000s: A New Generation Takes the Comedy Scene by Storm

By the 1990s, Smaïn and a handful of other ethnic minority comedians had not only paved the way for, but had mentored[44] a new generation of young comedians of immigrant background who would hit the ground running and go on to make a lasting impact. This is the decade in which some of the most successful and established French comics of the current day made their debut performances primarily on radio, television, and stage. Jamel Debbouze first came to national attention on radio programs and then through television appearances. It is also during this time period that some very illustrious partnerships were established that would launch

[44] Smaïn is known to have been a mentor to a young Jamel Debbouze starting out in television in the mid-1990s. Pascal Légitimus produced the early stage shows of Élie and Dieudonné (Ervine 57-58).

enduring careers: examples include the comic duos of Fred et Omar (Fred Testot and Omar Sy), Élie et Dieudonné (Élie Semoun and Dieudonné M'bala M'bala), and Éric et Ramzy (Éric Judor and Ramzy Bedia). Thanks in large part to the efforts and successes of the pioneering comedians of the 1980s, the 1990s provided a fertile environment for cultivating new, young ethnic minority comedians. However, the "Beur is Beautiful" years were sadly over and these humorists' early careers were marked by the need to contend with an almost constant media barrage of negative and disconcerting images of banlieue youth of immigrant background. This section will explore some of the principal factors behind the negative media attention that banlieues and immigrant communities—in particular, the youth of these communities—were receiving in the 1990s and very early 2000s, as well as how this bad press played a formative role in comic careers and styles of the era.

Of all the time periods under consideration in this chapter, it is this period of the 1990s and early 2000s that to a certain extent, resists fitting nicely into Mintz's schema of the development of Jewish or ethnic humor. This is due to certain specificities of French political history of the time as well as to French Republican ideas regarding the integration of immigrant populations. Nonetheless, connections can still be made between the French situation and Mintz's third phase that he refers to as "realistic" humor and of which he writes:

> "Realistic" or self-analytic humor is more closely related to incongruity-theory than to tendentious theory; humor searches for the "truth" in experience rather than serving as a weapon or a psychological outlet. […] This type of humor also scrutinizes the paradoxes, hypocrisies, problems, and issues of the mundane life of the Jew [or member of ethnic minority group] in the modern world. (Mintz 4)

This search for the "truth" in their own experiences is certainly characteristic of major trends among French ethnic minority comedians of the time period. However, this search often involved challenging blatant untruths and exaggerated stereotypes propagated by the media and

certain political factions. Therefore, it did, in fact, serve also as a weapon to combat negative media depictions of banlieues and of youth of immigrant origin, as well as a psychological outlet or technique to counter the internalization of these media images. Another characteristic of this third phase is revealed by Leon Rappoport when he writes, "Mintz describes the third stage as "realism." This refers to the period when Jews and blacks used deception and covertly made fun of their oppressors among themselves." (Rappoport 99) While it is perfectly conceivable that minority groups would have mocked the Franco-French with one another in informal settings or perhaps in semi-underground performance venues during the 1990s and early 2000s—or during any time period, for that matter—this would have been next to impossible in mainstream venues and especially on television. This is due to French Republican ideology's staunch view of *communautarisme*, or "communitarianism," as not only an impediment to the integration of immigrant groups into French society, but even as a potential threat to the unity of the French Republic itself. As Jonathan Ervine states, "This adjective *communautaire* tends to be used in France to be dismissive of something that is perceived as being specific to an individual community rather than society as a whole." (Ervine 110) For example, the existence of a French equivalent of BET—Black Entertainment Television, an American cable channel founded in 1980 whose programming is geared toward the African-American community—would be utterly unimaginable, as it would be in direct violation of deeply-rooted principles and ideals of what it means to coexist with others within the space of the French Republic. Even today, after the influence of comedic styles and genres from the United States (where communitarianism is generally not seen as an issue) have infiltrated French culture, French ethnic minority comedians are still often accused of *communautarisme* and are made to be aware of the "dangers" of

speaking about "too narrow of a range of cultural experiences" to an audience that is "too ethnically homogenous."[45]

If it was impossible for ethnic comedians to intentionally play to specific ethnic audiences in mainstream venues and channels—and ethnic minority comedians were increasingly becoming mainstream staples in the 1990s and early 2000s—then according to Rappoport's interpretation of the third stage of Mintz's schema, there would have to be a substitute target audience to serve as an "in-group" with whom ethnic minority humorists could covertly share jokes about the Franco-French and critique commonly accepted depictions of minorities. This "in-group" substitute would be French youth at large; children, adolescents, and young adults who had been indoctrinated into anti-racist ideology in the 1980s thanks largely to the efforts of SOS Racisme, and who would possibly be more open than previous generations to visions of a multicultural France. As Quemener states:

> L'humour tient un rôle particulier dans cette nouvelle donne : au cœur du divertissement, il est l'instrument d'une irrévérence prisée par certaines chaînes. Canal+, par exemple, promeut un ton décalé par rapport à une télévision traditionnelle jugée trop conformiste. L'humour sera au cœur de sa stratégie de désacralisation des grand-messes télévisuels et d'attraction d'une audience jeune et urbaine, présentée comme délaissée par les autres chaînes. (Quemener 61-62)
>
> Humor held a distinctive role in this new order: at the heart of entertainment, it was the instrument of an irreverence prized by certain channels. Canal+, for example, promoted an off-the-wall tone compared to traditional television judged to be too conformist. Humor would be at the heart of its strategy to deconsecrate the televisual "High Mass" and to attract a young and urban audience, presented as abandoned by other channels.

Indeed, Canal+, France's first pay-TV channel, aimed to break with several French media traditions and, especially in the 1990s, targeted a youth audience with sketch comedy

[45] Interestingly, it is almost solely minority comedians, performers, and artists who are made to bare the brunt of this communitarian preoccupation. It is extremely rare for a Franco-French (white), heterosexual, male comedian to be accused of *communautarisme* in France.

programming that would gradually become more and more diversified. In 1990, the television channel gave scheduled programming to the comedy troupe, Les Nuls. Their television show, *Les Nuls* (Canal+, 1990-1992), was the first French television program to be based on the model of the popular American show, *Saturday Night Live* (NBC, 1975-present). A similar sketch comedy group, Les Robins des Bois, received regular air time from Canal+ and its subsidiary channel, Comédie+, from 1997 until the troupe's dissolution in 2005.

While these groups and their respective television shows targeted new, younger audiences and broke with certain previous models of French humor, the composition of their casts lacked ethnic and racial diversity. At the onset of the 1990s this general lack of diversity present not only in the above-mentioned programs but in the overall French televisual landscape, was being highlighted in intellectual and media circles. As Marie-France Malonga notes:

> Pour la première fois, en 1991, un centre d'études, le CIEMI[46], s'intéressa à la « présence et [à] la représentation des immigrés et des minorités ethniques à la télévision française ». […] On remarque donc le caractère pionnier de cette étude qui a mis en avant la question de la visibilité et de l'image des Français issus de minorités ethniques au sein du petit écran. Il n'est plus question ici de rester sur le terrain de l'intégration et de l'immigration mais d'aborder la question cruciale du problème de reconnaissance sociale des populations françaises minoritaires au sein de l'espace public et médiatique. Après avoir visionné et analysé quinze jours de programmes diffusés sur les chaînes hertziennes françaises, le Centre d'information et d'études sur les migrations internationales (CIEMI) démontrait que les minorités ethniques étaient sous-représentées à l'antenne et que le petit écran leur accordait très rarement le droit à la parole. (Malonga 219-220)
>
> For the first time, in 1991, a center for studies, the CIEMI, became interested in the "presence and representation of immigrants and ethnic minorities on French television." […] We therefore notice the groundbreaking aspect of this study that brings to the forefront the question of visibility and the image of French people of ethnic minority backgrounds on the small screen. It is no longer a question here of keeping to the subjects of integration and immigration but of taking up the crucial question of the problem of social acknowledgment of minority French populations in public and mediatized space. After having watched and analyzed two weeks of broadcasted programs on French

[46] "CIEMI" stands for *Le Centre d'information et d'études sur les migrations internationales*, or the "Center for Information and Studies on International Migrations."

> Hertzian channels, The Center for Information and Studies on International Migrations (CIEMI) showed that ethnic minorities were underrepresented on the air and that the small screen very rarely granted them the right to speak.

Once this lack of diversity on television was finally noticed, producers of comedy programming, especially from Canal+, seemed eager to answer the call for more ethnic minority representation[47]. As mentioned in the introduction of this chapter, it was during the mid-1990s that Jamel Debbouze was noticed by Canal+ agents thanks to his work on Radio Nova. This led to him becoming a regular on the program *Nulle part ailleurs* (1987-2001) with his recurring segment "Le cinéma de Jamel." The popularity of these appearances would later bring to Debbouze a starring role in the Canal+ sitcom entitled simply, *H* (1998-2002), in which he worked alongside fellow comedians Éric Judor and Ramzy Bedia. Omar Sy would appear alongside his childhood friend, Debbouze, in a number of his segments on *Nulle part ailleurs* while concurrently performing live and on radio with his comedy partner, Fred Testot. The duo of Fred et Omar would later land their own Canal+ program, *Service après-vente des émissions* (2005-2012), which catapulted both to national fame and success. These are just a few examples of the mainstream representation of the new generation of comedians of immigrant background that came to national attention, largely thanks to Canal+ programming and appearances. Vice versa, thanks to these young comedians, Canal+ could answer the CIEMI's call for increased representation of ethnic and racial minorities on television, as well as appeal to a young and urban fan base who could feel a certain affinity to and for the comedians that they were now regularly seeing on their television screens.

[47] The genre of comedy has long been avant-garde in its representation of minorities. This certainly does not imply that the comedic representation of minorities has always been positive. In fact, it is perhaps comedy's traditional reliance on stereotypes that invites depictions of minorities. Nonetheless, comedy is often ahead of other genres when it comes to minority representation.

Despite these advances in representation, Debbouze, Sy, Judor, Bedia, and many of their colleagues, faced other obstacles. Unlike the handful of ethnic minority comedians who knew mainstream success in the 1980s and who subsequently felt the weight of too often being the token representatives of the minority groups with which they were identified, the comedians who gained mainstream exposure in the 1990s did not necessarily have to break glass ceilings, but rather, had to contend with an era in which media representations of ethnic minority youth, the immigrant communities from which they came, and the banlieues in which many of them lived, were overwhelmingly negative, sensationalized, and intended to induce fear. Despite the brief "Beur is Beautiful" period (1983-1989) that Gastaut evokes as well as some positive media attention due to social activism and anti-racism movements, the 1980s also witnessed much bad press concerning immigrants and their offspring. However, a few key factors and events brought about a prolonged intensification of this negative press throughout the entire decade of the 1990s and into the early years of the 2000s. Firstly, the extreme right political party, the *Front national* (FN)[48], which has based much of its agenda as well as its *raison d'être* on a strong anti-immigration stance and had solidified its presence in the political arena during regional elections of 1983, had developed its anti-immigrant rhetoric to the point that by the 1990s this discourse had infiltrated in some form or another almost all public discussions and debates on immigration and ethnic minorities. Secondly, the *affaire du foulard*, or the "Headscarf Affair," a public debate that questions the compatibility of wearing the Islamic headscarf in public spaces with principles of French secularism, was triggered in 1989 and was mediatized all throughout the 1990s,

[48] In 2018, the *Front national* officially changed its name to the *Rassemblement national*. I will continue to refer to it as the *Front national* (FN) because it is still commonly known by this name outside of France and because during the time period under consideration this was still the political party's name.

reaching its apex in debates in 2003-2004. Lastly, representations of Muslims connected to Islamist terrorism in and outside of France were rampant in news stories of the 1990s and early 2000s. The mediatization of all this was so pervasive and unrelenting that public opinion of immigrant youth and of banlieues deteriorated rapidly. This caused young ethnic minority comedians, seen as representatives of these milieux, to feel pressure to discredit and counter these negative images through an ironic undermining of these damning media representations.

The influence of the *Front national* (FN) on French political life and public opinion of immigration has been greater than what is visible from the surface. The extreme right wing political party which was founded on a firm anti-immigrant platform in 1972 by Jean-Marie Le Pen[49] initially fared very poorly with French voters for more than the first decade of its existence, failing to obtain even one percent of all votes in national elections (Hargreaves 172). Then, almost overnight, in regional elections of 1983 and national elections of 1984, the FN began to obtain significant numbers of votes, making the party a viable contender with more traditionally influential parties. It can be hypothesized that the sudden success of the FN was due to frustration with the Socialist Party's failed economic policies and unkept promises as well as high unemployment rates in the early 1980s. However, it can also be attributable to a reform of the electoral process undertaken by the Socialist Party in the same time period, which had the unintended result of giving the FN more clout than it previously had[50]. While many French politicians had not previously paid much attention to the FN's anti-immigrant, xenophobic rhetoric, the unforeseen upturn in the party's fortunes in the 1983/1984 elections forced other

[49] Hargreaves writes, "Le Pen's party has long stood on a vigorously anti-immigrant platform, with the mass repatriation of non-Europeans, the restrictive reform of French nationality laws and the exclusion of non-nationals from social security benefits foremost among its aims." (Hargreaves 173)
[50] See Tiersky's work on François Mitterrand for more details.

more established parties to suddenly consider Le Pen's stance and respond to it. From this point on, all political parties would have to fully form and defend their opinions on immigration as to not appear unsure or soft on this issue when confronted by Le Pen and other members of the FN. This situation would come to have just as much—if not more—influence on political discourse and policy regarding immigration and ethnic minorities than the coming to power of the Socialist Party in 1981 and their more open, liberal views of these matters. By the 1990s, nearly all mediatization of issues involving immigration and immigrant communities carried, in some form or another, marks of the FN's rhetoric. This undoubtedly had consequent influence on public opinion. As Hargreaves notes:

> Two-thirds of French respondents questioned in a 1991 survey said there were too many immigrants in France; an almost identical proportion said that they had never had any significant personal dealings with immigrants (SOFRES 1991: 121-2). It is clear that the negative images associated with immigrants in general and with certain ethnicized groups in particular owe more to second-hand information and impressions than to direct personal experience. (Hargreaves 147)

The "second-hand information and impressions" to which Hargreaves refers came to a great extent from the press that portrayed immigrant communities, Muslims, and banlieues in an increasingly sensationalized manner largely due to the influence and political leverage of the FN. This influence would also wield much power in how the *Affaire du foulard* and Islamist terrorist attacks would be covered in the press.

The *affaire du foulard* is part of a seemingly never-ending political and media discourse, however it experienced its most intense moments throughout the decade of the 1990s and in the height of debates and policy making in 2003-2004. As Trica Danielle Keaton states, "[…] what spurred educational policy and present legislation was the infamous 1989 "veil affair" (*l'affaire du foulard*) , in which a middle school principal [in the city of Creil] expelled three girls who

refused to remove their head coverings on school grounds. His act triggered a media frenzy […].” (Keaton 181) What this principal based his decision on was his own strict interpretation of France’s 1905 law on secularism and the idea that signs that visibly denote religious affiliation should not be worn in Republican establishments. Seeing that public schools fall under the jurisdiction of the Ministry of National Education, an institution of the French Republic, schools would qualify as such establishments. The public debate and extreme amount of media coverage that ensued created bitter divisions in public opinion. Some believed that the Islamic headscarf truly had no place in a secular France whose citizens were to be seen as equals. Others saw the headscarf as freedom of expression and the right to difference. This latter group often tended to see “veiled” racism and xenophobia in the desire to banish the headscarf from public space, whereas the former group tended to see the object at the heart of the matter as a symbol of female submission to men and therefore inequality of the sexes. The arguments seemed to go around and around in vicious circles for the better part of the 1990s, aggravated by political factions seeking to profit from the matter and media coverage more often than not fanning the flames of fear and emotion rather than contributing to any greater understanding of either position. The debate became especially heated when it came time to pass legislation on the issue. On this, Thomas Deltombe and Mathieu Rigouste write:

> La nouvelle affaire du voile en 2003-2004, soutenue par une focalisation médiatique intense, a pu ainsi s’appuyer sur deux idées majeures : l’essor prétendument indiscutable des métastases d’un islamisme international dans les banlieues ; et la nécessité, si l’on veut éviter l’affrontement, de séparer désormais par une frontière légale les « métis » des « vrais républicains français »--comme au temps des colonies. Déjà présente depuis la première affaire de 1989, cette double conviction s’impose dans les représentations médiatiques. Elle présente la logique juridique (et éventuellement pénale) comme la seule solution, et débouche en février 2004 sur une loi visant à exclure des établissements d’enseignement public les figures métaphoriques de la menace que sont devenues les jeunes filles porteuses du voile islamique. (Deltombe and Rigouste 201-202)

> The new Headscarf Affair in 2003-2004, sustained by an intense media focalization, was thus able to rely on two major ideas: the supposedly indisputable rise of metastases of an international radical Islam in the banlieues; and the need, if one wanted to avoid confrontation, to henceforth separate the "half-breeds" from the "real French Republicans"—just like in the time of the colonies. Already present since the first affair of 1989, this double conviction was disseminated in media representations. It presented legal (and eventually criminal) logic as the only solution, and in February 2004 led to a law aiming at the exclusion from public education establishments of the metaphorical figures of the threat that young girls wearing the Islamic veil became.

In this passage Deltombe and Rigouste allude not only to the conflation of political projects, mediatized images of Muslims, and fears regarding national and international security that was present at the height of these debates, but also to the vilification of veiled Muslim girls and women. If, by chance, there existed French citizens who did not previously hold any strong opinions or images of the Islamic veil or of Muslim women, that surely changed during this time period due to the veritable inundation of biased rhetoric and imagery regarding these topics that was found in the French media.

According to Deltombe and Rigouste, during the 1990s, the Arab population of France was viewed by the media almost exclusively through the lens of the *affaire du voile* as well as through reports of acts of violence such as urban/banlieue riots and Islamist terrorist attacks (Deltombe and Rigouste 196-197). Indeed, Western media's focus on Islamist acts of terrorism during this decade and beyond have been largely sensationalized and have tended to make very little distinction between Islam and Muslims on one hand and Islamist extremism and terrorists on the other, leaving many viewers fearful and suspicious of anyone or anything that they associate with Islam[51]. The French media was no exception to this propensity in the 1990s and

[51] As Hargreaves states, "In the absence of a wider media presence, Muslims in particular suffer as a consequence of the high-profile coverage given to news stories such as the Islamic headscarf affair, for the deeply disturbing images generated by what in fact are exceptional events come to be perceived as the norm." (Hargreaves 147)

early 2000s. The 1995 Islamist terrorist attacks in Paris and Lyon that killed eight people and injured many more were widely reported on and once the identity of one of the assumed co-authors of these attacks, Khaled Kelkal, was revealed, the French media associated him with a variety of threats and implicitly suggested that his story was somehow typical of Algerian immigrants and of banlieue youth. Having been born in Mostaganem, Algeria but immigrating as a child with his family to the suburbs of Lyon where he would later have many encounters with law enforcement, Kelkal was depicted simultaneously as having Algerian terrorist (GIA, *groupes islamistes armés,* of Algeria's civil war of the 1990s) connections while also being a product of French banlieue delinquency. On the mediatization of Kelkal, Deltombe and Rigouste write,

> Le personnage de Khaled Kelkal, co-auteur présumé de l'attentat de la station RER de Saint-Michel, est décrit à la fois comme un « terroriste islamique né à Mostaganem en Algérie » et comme un « jeune délinquant originaire de Vaulx-en-Velin ». Les médias s'empressent de rappeler à leur public de ne pas céder aux « amalgames », pourtant généralisés par eux-mêmes. Pensé à la fois comme « jeune de banlieue », « issu de l'immigration », « musulman versé en islamiste », « délinquant versé en terroriste », Kelkal va catalyser un ensemble de messages et de techniques médiatiques visant à révéler les menaces qui se cacheraient dans cette figure hybride. (Deltombe and Rigouste 199)
>
> The character of Khaled Kelkal, presumed co-author of the attack on the Saint-Michel RER station, was described at the same time as an "Islamic terrorist born in Mostaganem in Algeria" and as a "young delinquent hailing from Vaulx-en-Velin." The media was quick to remind its public to not give in to "conflations," yet it widely diffused them itself. Thought of simultaneously as "banlieue youth," "of immigrant background," "Muslim versed in Islamic extremism," "delinquent versed in terrorism," Kelkal would act as a catalyst for an ensemble of messages and media techniques aiming to reveal the threats that hid within this hybrid figure.

Having used the figure of Kelkal in 1995 to propagate the idea that the banlieues of major French cities served as a breeding ground for young terrorists, the media would diffuse this concept and related fearmongering for years to come. This was especially common following the news of national and international terrorist attacks and the accompanying heightened levels of suspicion

and anxiety amongst the general population. These moments include the 2001 attacks on the World Trade Center in New York City, the 2015 attacks on *Charlie Hebdo*'s Paris offices, the 2015 Bataclan attack in Paris, and the 2016 terrorist assault in Nice. This media technique continues to this day but was honed by French news agencies in their depictions of Khaled Kelkal in 1995.

These negative—and sometimes borderline obsessive—media and political depictions of Islam, immigrant communities, banlieues, and ethnic minority youth were undoubtedly a heavy weight to bear for those who identified or were identified by others as belonging to one or more of these groups. *Front national* dominated discourse on immigration and immigrants, the highly mediatized debates and controversies surrounding the Islamic Headscarf Affair, and media depictions conflating Islamist terrorism with ethnic minority and banlieue youth could make one question whether social progress regarding France's immigrant and immigrant descended populations had actually been made or not since the *Marche pour l'égalité et contre le racisme* and similar social movements of the early and mid-1980s. Luckily, the blossoming of ethnic minority French comedians in the mainstream spotlight in the 1990s and early 2000s served to counteract some of these negative images spread by more "serious" media sources. This was achieved typically through one of two—or a combination of both—methods. Many comedians—Jamel Debbouze being a prime example—sought to refute negative media portrayals of ethnic minority and banlieue youth by presenting themselves and the comic characters that they played as loveable, non-threatening, and oftentimes incompetent goofballs who were the farthest things imaginable from the dangerous criminals that were too often seen on television screens. The second comedic technique consisted of presenting heightened, absurd caricatures of these

negative media representations. This acted to undermine the representations by highlighting the typically exaggerated, biased, generalized, and blatantly inaccurate nature of their construction.

An example of this second method can be seen in the work of the comic duo Élie et Dieudonné, comprised of Élie Semoun and Dieudonné M'bala M'bala. Their partnership, which lasted from 1990 to 1997, has been described as an example of anti-racist comedy, Élie Semoun being a white man of Moroccan Jewish descent while Dieudonné is of mixed French and Cameroonian heritage, both having stood in opposition to far right *Front national* politics. As Louis-Georges Tin, president of the *Conseil Représentatif des Associations Noires de France,* stated of the Élie et Dieudonné duo during an interview for the documentary, *Chocolat: une histoire du rire,* « Il y a là un dispositif qui permet de comprendre d'abord la symétrie de ces histoires, des crimes contre l'humanité, et de montrer qu'il est aussi bête finalement pour un noir d'être antisémite que pour un juif d'être anti-noir[52] » (TV Histoire 25 :05-25 :17). / "There within lies an apparatus that allows us to understand the symmetry of these histories, of crimes against humanity, and to show that in the end it is just as stupid for a black person to be an anti-Semite as it is for a Jew to be anti-black." Paradoxically, since 2002 Dieudonné has made a dramatic and baffling turn away from his former anti-racist position, making anti-Semitic hate speech a cornerstone of his one-man shows and solo comedic work.[53] However, in the 1990s, Élie and Dieudonné actively worked to counter anti-immigrant and xenophobic discourse, as can

[52] My transcription.

[53] Dieudonné is now best known for these controversial views which have shaped and come to define his contemporary comedic output. While he is a well-known French comedic performer of visible ethnic minority background, because of his anti-Semitic discourse I will not consider his solo career in this work as it does not fit into any mainstream French comedic trends, does not accomplish any of the positive work that I hope to highlight here in this work, and is a thinly veiled form of hate speech. For more information on the strange path that Dieudonné's career has taken since 2002, see the chapter on the topic in Jonathan Ervine's *Humour in Contemporary France: Controversy, Consensus, and Contradictions*.

be evidenced in their 1994 television special, *Une certaine idée de la France* (coproduced by Bonnie Productions and France 2). In this work, the duo presents different sketches that take the form of reports from a fake news show entitled, *L'avis des bêtes,* that aims to give viewers a sociological perspective of different segments of the French population. Élie and Dieudonné play the roles of all the main characters in each vignette, as well as two "specialists," Professor John Mistivic and Dr. Hermann von Chtoup, who have been invited on set to give their "expert" opinion but who appear to only speak gibberish of which even the simultaneous translations can make little to no sense. The first sketch in this fake news show is entitled "La Bonlieue" [pablo44300 2:38-11:52] and is a parody of typical French media reports of the 1990s that depicted banlieue youth in a dismal and threatening light. As the report begins Élie and Dieudonné are sitting with friends on the steps of an HLM (*habitation à loyer modéré*, the French equivalent of an American inner-city housing project) building. Élie presents himself as Jean-Philippe and states « Je suis de la 3ème génération comme ils disent » (pablo44300 2 :50-2 :56) / "I'm third generation as they say." This is followed by Dieudonné who presents himself by saying, « Moi, c'est Alex […], 8ème génération » (pablo44300 3 :14-3 :18) / "Me, I'm Alex […], eighth generation." With these introductions they are mocking the French tendency to habitually denote descendants of immigrants according to their immigrant lineage which suggests that they never become fully integrated French citizens. The report continues with the interviewer accompanying Jean-Philippe and Alex on a stroll through the HLM and asking the two exactly where they live. To give the journalist a visual depiction of where their apartment buildings are located, Jean-Philippe takes out a humongous knife from his oversized jacket and begins to carve out the roadmap of the locale on the hood of a nearby parked car. Jean-Philippe and Alex then place guns that they have pulled out of their pockets and place them on the

rudimentary map to indicate their respective apartments (pablo44300 3:43-4:15). This gag plays not only on the idea that all banlieue youth are armed and dangerous, but also references the burning and destruction of parked cars that became symbolic of banlieue riots of the 1990s and early 2000s. The interview then moves to the high school where Jean-Philippe and Alex "occasionally" attend classes (pablo44300 6:06-7:55). There they verbally and physically assault the school principal who explains to the interviewer that he has had his car burned twice, has a broken jaw, a perforated lung, and two missing ribs because of his work with students who are "*en difficulté"* (troubled). In order to highlight the misguided and hopeless fates of banlieue youth as depicted in the media, the sketch ends with the interviewer asking the two young men about their aspirations for the future and the two give confused rambling, unrealistic, answers that reveal that they, in fact, see no futures for themselves (pablo44300 8:21-10:06). Immediately afterwards, a voice-over states, that Alex was found shot dead two months after the report and that Jean-Philippe has ironically become a police officer in Neuilly-sur-Seine (pablo44300 10:07-10:32). The "dark comedy" nature of the dénouement of the sketch parodies the morbid and pessimistic view of banlieue youth as seen through the eyes of French journalism.

The Early 2000s to the Present Day: Breaking Down the Fourth Wall and Clichés with Laughter

There remain many connections between major trends in French minority ethnic humor of the 1990s/early 2000s and that of the early 2000s to the present day. New, young artists continue to enter popular venues and to target youth audiences as had been the case in the 1990s. Themes and social issues relevant to banlieue and urban day-to-day life have been retained as the principle subject matters. Humorists of immigrant or visible ethnic minority background continue to gain popularity, to the point that, as the introduction of this chapter states, many of

them are considered to be today's most successful and recognizable French comedians. However, the years 2005/2006 marked a turning point in how these comedians expressed themselves and the messages that they were conveying to the French public. As Nelly Quemener writes:

> L'analyse d'un corpus de sketches s'étendant sur dix années, des mini-séries *Le Cinéma de Jamel, Le Monde de Jamel* et *Les Mots* d'Éric et Ramzy entre 1996 et 1999 à l'émission de stand-up *Jamel Comedy Club* entre 2006 et 2009, montre l'existence d'une rupture sociohistorique. Alors que dans les années 1990, l'humour des minorités s'attache à réhabiliter la figure du « jeune de banlieue » en prenant le contre-pied du stéréotype négatif qui lui est associé, dix ans plus tard, il insiste bien davantage sur la multiplicité des constructions identitaires et des expériences subjectives. (Quemener 86-87)
>
> The analysis of a corpus of sketches stretching over ten years, from the miniseries *Le Cinéma de Jamel, Le monde de Jamel*, and Éric and Ramzy's *Les Mots* between 1996 and 1999, to the stand-up show *Jamel Comedy Club* between 2006 and 2009, shows the existence of a sociohistorical rupture. Whereas in the 1990s the humor of minorities strived to rehabilitate the figure of "banlieue youth" by taking the opposing view of the negative stereotype that was associated with it, ten years later, it [the humor of minorities] insisted much more on the multiplicity of identity constructions and of subjective experiences.

In other words, this rupture is marked by what could be considered a change in playing position and tactic. No longer would ethnic minority comedians continue to play a defensive position, constantly defending themselves and their communities from negative images proliferated by politicians and journalists. Instead, they would switch to an offense position where they themselves would take the lead in putting forth a plethora of images of their choosing that they felt to be representative of themselves and their milieux. This, in fact, corresponds to Mintz's description of his fourth and final stage in the development of Jewish (or ethnic minority) humor, of which he writes, "Aggressive, offensive humor permits the Jew [or member of an ethnic minority group] to attack the society in which he finds himself, other ethnic groups, and his oppressors." (Mintz 4) The words "aggressive," "offensive," and "attack" in this passage might

need to be taken with a grain of salt. Not all contemporary comedians' work can be qualified with such strong vocabulary. However, social events and developments in French ethnic comedy beginning in the years 2005/2006 have in large part allowed performers to much more boldly "talk back" to society, present worldviews of their own design, and proclaim their comedic messages openly. In this section I will detail the social event (the banlieue riots of 2005) and the comedic development (the creation of the television show, *Jamel Comedy Club*, in 2006[54]) that paved the way and accompanied these evolutions in comic style.

Commonly referred to as *l'année des émeutes*, or "the year of riots," 2005 marked a boiling point in tensions and frustrations experienced by banlieue and ethnic minority youth in France. While violent riots in the banlieues of major French cities were not a new occurrence[55]—as the 1994 sketch "La Bonlieue" by Élie and Semoun alludes to—, the riots of 2005 were unparalleled in number and in unbridled fury. The instigators of these riots were violently expressing their anger and discontentment with high levels of unemployment where they lived, racial discrimination, and lack of prospects for a better future (Hargreaves 137). However, the event that was the immediate cause of the widespread violence was a highly mediatized instance of police misconduct against youth of immigrant origin. Hargreaves states:

> Significantly, the spark that set the banlieues ablaze in the autumn of 2005 was a police identity check on a group of minority ethnic youths in Clichy-sous-Bois, on the

[54] Obviously, there have been many developments in the field of French minority ethnic comedy in the period of 2005/2006 to the present day. Some of these include the popularity of "race comedy" films in the 2010s as well as the creation of the annual Marrakech du rire comedy festival in 2011. However, I will only focus on the television show, *Jamel Comedy Club*, in this section as its importance in the promotion of up-and-coming comedians of immigrant background and in providing a platform for their work has been unparalleled. Furthermore, it is representative of major comic trends of its epoch.

[55] Hargreaves writes, "At a lower level of intensity, there had been similar disorders in the banlieues since the late 1970s. Periodic flare-ups occurred in Lyon, for example, in 1981, 1983 and 1990, and in Strasbourg, where in the 1990s it became customary for hundreds of automobiles to be burnt every New Year's Eve." (Hargreaves 136)

> north-eastern outskirts of Paris. Fearful of police harassment, the youths fled and three took refuge in an electricity substation. When two of them—of Mauritanian and Tunisian origin respectively—died there by accidental electrocution, many in the banlieues were quick to blame their deaths on aggressive policing and took to the streets to demonstrate their anger by torching cars and attacking police stations and other public buildings. To the extent that those committing these acts, like the youths who had fled the police in Clichy-sous-Bois, saw themselves as the victims of racial discrimination, there was an ethnic dimension to these events. (Hargreaves 136)

It was during these events that the then Minister of the Interior, Nicolas Sarkozy, famously referred to the banlieue youth who were rioting as *racaille*, or "scum." Naturally, this only added fuel to the raging fire of national unrest, as well as leading to distrust and resentment of government officials for quite some time seeing that Sarkozy would be elected President of the Republic in 2007. While the rioters of 2005 did not have any official agenda per se (Hargreaves 136), their violence served as a commentary on the state of affairs for (principally) ethnic minority youth who felt abandoned by and deeply disappointed with institutions and avenues of social mobility that were blocked to them.

There is no documented evidence of a direct correlation between the 2005 riots and the founding of the innovative stand-up comedy show, *Jamel Comedy Club* (Canal+, 2006-present) the following year by Jamel Debbouze. However, given that one of the major objectives of the television show is to provide young, talented ethnic minority comedians mainstream exposure and a platform for their work, it would seem that its creation was a direct response to the frustrations voiced and demonstrated during the 2005 riots. In this new venture, Jamel Debbouze, who himself had been mentored by the pioneering comedian Smaïn, serves as mentor to a new generation of comedians, giving them the tools and resources necessary to jumpstart their careers without having to face some of the hurdles that had been presented to their predecessors of the 1980s and 1990s. Broadcast weekly, the show presents four up-and-coming comics per episode

and is emceed by Debbouze—although in later seasons it is Alban Ivanov who performs this function. As Laurent Béru writes of the initial years of the show, « Derrière légèreté divertissante des sketches de Thomas Ngijol, Wahid Bouzidi ou Fabrice Éboué, il est exposé une sérieuse critique des dérives de la société française (ségrégation urbaine, discrimination raciale…) et fait entendre une voix 'socio-comique' dissonante » (Béru 163-164). / "Behind the entertaining lightness of the sketches of Thomas Ngijol, Wahid Bouzidi, or Fabrice Éboué [some of the first comedians to appear on the show], a serious critique of the shortfalls of French society (urban segregation, racial discrimination…) is exposed and a dissonant 'socio-comic' voice is heard." A large part of what makes *Jamel Comedy Club* an effective platform for such comedic social critique and "dissonant 'socio-comic' voices" is the genre of stand-up, which could be considered a novel import to France with the founding of the show. Previously, comedic genres which were firmly established in French culture were prevalent on stages and screens. These include the sketch comedy and one-person show genres, both of which had roots in the café-théâtre and music hall traditions. However, the Anglo-Saxon import of the stand-up genre provides French comics with new ways to perform and to communicate with audiences. Stand-up breaks down the fourth wall between performer and audience, allowing comedians to address themselves directly to the audience, which in turn provides the opportunity for real exchanges, a sense of naturalness, as well as moments of real (or feigned) improvisation. The reciprocal energy between performer and audience is much more open and fluid in the stand-up genre, making it so that the comedian is placed in a vulnerable position and must think on their feet and alter their performance if audience reactions do not go as expected. On the other hand, the performer is also in a position of great power as their content and messages potentially have much more impact, as they appear to be communicated *directly* to the audience. This seemingly

slight change in comedic genre influences how a comic performer communicates with their audience and conveys messages. The stand-up genre allows for greater directness as well as for the possibility of a more "aggressive, offensive humor" that characterizes Mintz's fourth stage.

The fact that *Jamel Comedy Club* brings an American import into the French televisual and comedic landscape must not be overlooked. At the beginning of every episode—at least the episodes that are hosted and emceed by Jamel Debbouze himself—Debbouze works up the live audience by yelling in a strongly accented English, "EVERYBODY, ARE YOU READY?". In this way, the American aspects of the stand-up genre are in no way subtle and connections with urban, American culture are felt viscerally. Even on a visual level, the links to American stand-up comedy venues are evident. The locale where the show is filmed resembles a comedy club that could be found in New York, Chicago, or Los Angeles. The audience members sit cramped together while guests of honor sit on stools at a bar to the side of the room. Comedians perform on a small stage with an exposed brick wall as a background. As they enter the room and walk to the stage, they pass by the DJs and special guests while giving each one a high-five in preparation for their performance. Of this spatial format and logo of the show Ervine writes:

> The fact that Debbouze was following an American model when launching *Jamel Comedy Club* is further demonstrated by the way that he launched the television programme after buying the rights to a format and logo associated with the American television show *Def Jam Comedy*. This programme is widely credited with having helped to launch the careers of many African-American comedians. (Ervine 103)

The spectators and performers involved with this project feel therefore that they are not only participating in an American institution, but that they are the inheritors of a comic tradition that was in large part brought to greatness by American ethnic minority talent whose long struggles

for recognition, equality, and opportunities are well-known by French audiences[56]. This sense of connection to American culture can prove to be a welcome alternative for French performers and audiences of immigrant background who have often been made to feel like foreigners both in France and in the countries of their parents' or grandparents' origin.

While the American influences of the stand-up genre present performers with the opportunity to feel connected to a culture and country where they have not personally felt the sting of rejection, and a comic heritage in which ethnic minorities have excelled and gained international fame, the comedians featured on *Jamel Comedy Club* generally use the platform to relate personal narratives related to their experiences as minorities in France. However, unlike the majority of humorists of immigrant background in the 1990s, they do not do this from a position of feeling the need to refute or negate common stereotypes of their ethnic identities or to contend with French Republican ideology's dictates on how immigrants and ethnic minorities should "integrate" into or function in French society. Instead, these humorists commonly depict their own multicultural backgrounds and milieux[57] while highlighting the multi-faceted nature of their own identity constructs. This is done first and foremost by recognizing the roles that race and ethnicity play within themselves and in the society in which they live. As Béru notes, « Les textes humoristiques proposés par Thomas Ngijol, Patrice Kouassi et consorts font voler en

[56] Ervine states, "Articles [on *Jamel Comedy Club*] regularly mentioned black American comedians such as Richard Pryor and Eddie Murphy—both of whom Debbouze has cited as influences—and treated the genre as one dominated by artists from minority backgrounds. Although the point was not always explicitly made in press coverage of the launch of the *Jamel Comedy Club*, a parallel can be drawn between the arrival (and subsequent re-appropriation) of originally American hip-hop culture—especially rap music and breakdancing—in 1980s France and the increased visibility of stand-up comedy in France to which *Jamel Comedy Club* contributed." (102)

[57] It is quite possible that the American influence aids these performers in recognizing and validating the multicultural nature of contemporary French society, which is not a vision that has traditionally been promoted by French Republican ideology and institutions.

éclats le politiquement correct concernant le rapport entre rire et ethnicité ; ils détruisent le consensus républicain, bâti autour de l'idée du *color-blind*—soit l'idée d'indifférence raciale » (Béru 166). / "The humoristic texts proposed by Thomas Ngijol, Patrice Kouassi, and consorts smash to pieces the politically correct [within a French context] concerning the relationship between laughter and ethnicity ; they destroy the Republican consensus, built around the idea of color-blindness—namely the idea of racial indifference." While talking openly onstage and even making jokes about issues of race and ethnicity might not appear groundbreaking to American audiences, in the French context it is quite revolutionary in that it goes against dominant and official discourses on how citizens of the Republic should approach (or more appropriately, not approach) these matters. As Béru states, « Dans une société hexagonale frileuse sur la question ethnoraciale—républicanisme français oblige—, les artistes présents sur scène se montrent en effet plutôt courageux sur ce thème tabou » (Béru 169). / "In a hexagonal society that is timid on the ethno-racial question—French Republicanism demands this—, the artists present onstage are, indeed, quite brave when it comes to this taboo topic." While *Jamel Comedy Club* and its performers do not represent a sort of comic utopia—in fact, the show has been accused on numerous occasions of committing the sin of engaging in *communautarisme*, and many of its performers have been accused of glorifying and promoting ethnic and racial stereotypes—one must commend the show for its efforts to promote the work of underrepresented comedians and for tackling difficult subjects in a light-hearted manner.

Many performers who have appeared on the show represent the qualities that both Mintz and Quemener find to be characteristic of this period and stage of ethnic humor in France, that is, "aggressive" and "offensive" humor as well as the presentation of a multi-faceted sense of identity and multiethnic worldview. Perhaps, no comedian who has performed on the *Jamel*

Comedy Club stage combines these qualities better than Samia Orosemane. She appeared only once on the show (episode 14 of season 9 which aired on December 17, 2016), but made quite an impression as evidenced by the impressive number of views that the videoclip of the performance has received on YouTube. While Orosemane is known for her charming, personable stage persona, the adjectives "aggressive" and "offensive" might not apply to her when interpreted in their traditional sense. However, if one understands these qualificatives as meaning "direct" and "unafraid of broaching somewhat taboo subject matters," then she fits the description. As Orosemane, who is of Tunisian origin, walks on stage she is dressed in a style reminiscent of a Sub-Saharan African, or "boubou style" as she often states, in brightly colored prints and a headscarf of the same colorful print worn in a turban. Her first words to the audience are « Bonsoir. Alors, pour ceux qui ne me connaissent pas et qui se demandent pourquoi je suis habillée comme ça, c'est pas Carnaval. C'est juste que j'ai toujours rêvé d'être noire. Oui, ça existe. Et le garçon dont je suis tombée amoureuse est noir. » (Samia Orosemane 0 :22-0 :37) / Good evening. For those who don't know me and who are wondering why I'm dressed like this, it isn't Carnival. It's just that I always dreamed of being black. Yes, that exists. And the guy I fell in love with is black." Immediately she represents and speaks of experiences associated with a multicultural vision of France. After continuing with her act and speaking of experiences traveling in North Africa, she jumps into her famous imitations of African accents. While some could associate this with what is considered to be the outdated racist humor of Pierre Péchin and Michel Leeb, Orosemane states her appreciation and admiration of other African nationalities before imitating Algerian, Tunisian, Moroccan, Malian, Cameroonian, and Ivoirian accents, which judging by audience applause and laughter, are very well received. Her set ends on a high note and we can see how Mintz's schema of the development of Jewish or ethnic humor has

come full circle. What started out as jokes and imitations that are deemed as offensive and racist coming from ethnic majority comedians, when re-appropriated by ethnic minority comedians, put into a different context, and supported by an open and accepting vision of a multicultural society where different communities display mutual respect, similar imitations or jokes can be uplifting and reaffirming of the right to difference.

Conclusion

This history of French comedians of immigrant background is by no means meant to be an exhaustive account of the many humorists who have contributed to the remarkable development of this genre. Instead, it is intended to give a glimpse into the major comedic trends that characterize its evolution, to help explain its growth from a complete lack of representation to becoming a highly popular form of comedy in the current era, and to place it in relation to struggles and social movements for recognition, social justice, and equality that were undertaken by people who dared to imagine a better future for themselves, their families, and their communities. Given the social climate and lack of representation in the 1970s and early 1980s, as children Jamel Debbouze and Omar Sy surely must have found it difficult to envision the level of success and influence that they would grow up to achieve. Yet thanks to their talent, determination, and sacrifices, as well as that of the pioneers who came before them, it was possible. Any study and analysis of laughter is incomplete without looking at the opposite side of the coin, which shows pain, hardship, and tears. This history highlights both sides of the coin. I ask the reader to keep in mind this history involving laughter and tears, success and failure, and joy and pain, while reading the following chapters.

Chapter 2: Fellag: Imagining a More Inclusive Concept of Algerianness through Humor

In his best-known one-man show, *Djurdjurassique Bled*, the beloved Franco-Algerian humorist, Fellag, begins with the words: « Je ne sais pas pourquoi chez nous, en Algérie, aucune mayonnaise ne prend. Rien ne marche, rien ne tient, rien ne dure ! Tout coule ! » (*Djurdjurassique Bled* 11)[58] / "I don't know why, in Algeria where we're from, not a single mayonnaise sets. Nothing works, nothing holds out, nothing lasts! Everything fails!"[59] This emphatic opening statement sounds paradoxical coming from the mouth of an Algerian immigrant in France speaking in front of an audience that is most likely comprised of many Franco-French spectators. One would assume that a foreigner or immigrant would want to present their homeland in a positive light to those who might be unfamiliar with it. Furthermore, Algeria is the setting of the vast majority of the narratives that Fellag evokes in his one-man show corpus. This introduction to his native country and backdrop of many of his comedic tales is indeed quite underwhelming. However, given that this show toured France primarily in the years 1999-2000, there was perhaps simply no way to sugar coat the situation in Algeria. These were the final years of what was known as the *décennie noire*, or 'black decade,' a period of civil war and extreme violence that had ravaged the country and its civilian population since the early 1990s. Armed Islamist groups (*groupes islamiques armés* or 'GIA' in French) were fighting the authoritarian *Front de Libération Nationale* (or 'FLN')-led government known simply as *'le pouvoir'* or 'the power,' and the Algerian people were caught in the crossfire. Therefore, to set

[58] All quotes from Fellag's one-man show, *Djurdjurassique Bled*, are taken from the 1999 Éditions J.C. Lattès publication of the show's text.
[59] All translations in this chapter are my own.

the stage by saying that “not a single mayonnaise sets here” is a euphemism that describes the situation in the lightest of terms.

As well as immediately addressing the contemporary political and social upheaval of the Algerian nation, these opening words introduce a theme that can be seen as the starting point of much of Fellag’s work involving the Algerian context, that is, the theme of narratives of failure. This theme is historically rooted, involves French and Algerian actors, and has had long-lasting consequences for Algerians on both sides of the Mediterranean. It should be noted that the failures in question are not to be attributed to the Algerian people or culture, but rather to colonial and postcolonial regimes that have overlooked the common good in order to promote structures and narratives that benefit those who wish to retain political power. In the history of French colonization of Algeria, the Algerian postcolonial state, and Franco-Algerian relations, these narratives of failure are almost too numerous to recount. However, an abbreviated list might include the extreme violence involved in the French conquest of Algeria from 1830 on and the subsequent failure of the colonial administration to be seen as fair, just, or legitimate by the Muslim population; the creation of a settler colony that set up a racial hierarchy that instilled and enshrined inequality, exploitation, and widespread racism and discrimination; France’s use of torture during the Algerian War (1954-1962) which permanently tarnished the hexagon’s reputation as an international champion of human rights; the French Fifth Republic’s failure to properly welcome and accommodate incoming populations of French Algerians (known as pieds-noirs) and Muslim Algerian immigrants at the end of the war; postcolonial Algeria’s inability to create a true democratic state that gives a voice to all components of its society; and Algeria’s lack of vision in creating a diversified economy and opportunities for its growing young population. From this partial list, it is obvious that, using the theme of failure in Franco-

Algerian and Algerian historiography as a springboard for the texts of his one-man shows, Fellag has a wealth of material at his fingertips.

In his book, *France and Algeria: A History of Decolonization and Transformation*, the historian, Phillip C. Naylor, elaborates on the themes listed above as well as others, all the while drawing attention to two root problems of both the French and Algerian administrations during and after the Algerian war of independence. These two failings would come to have enormous repercussions for Algerian peoples on both shores of the Mediterranean in the postcolonial period. In his first chapter, Naylor writes:

> Given its educational, social, and political differences that were further compounded by internal/external, Arab/Berber, and civilian/military rivalries, it was impossible for the FLN to embrace a common ideology save for the eradication of French colonialism, the restoration of an authentic identity, and the inauguration of an independent nation. The inability to develop institutions as well as programs prevented compromise or political pluralism, thus in effect repudiating Algeria's nationalist legacy. It meant that the dominating group's exercise of power would have to produce truth or myth and its own legitimacy—an exclusive rather than inclusive imagination of nation. Eventually, this was disclosed by the continued postcolonial articulation of a revolutionary discourse, a "metanarrative," as a means for providing a semblance of what was in reality a lost unity rather than a genuine national identity. The consequences of the irreconcilable nationalist movement contributed significantly to the tragic political and cultural traditions in contemporary Algeria. (10-11)

In this quote, Naylor speaks to shortsighted attempts of the FLN[60] in creating official national narratives of history and identity that would posit a homogenous Arab identity (the "authentic identity" to which Naylor refers) to the Algerian peoples who were purportedly united in defending and fighting for that national characteristic against France's desire to further marginalize them and retain colonial hegemony. It was an oversimplification of history and

[60] The *Front de Libération Nationale* or FLN is the military group that fought and gained victory over the French in Algeria's war for independence and that upon independence would transform itself into the reigning power in a highly authoritarian, single party, postcolonial Algerian state.

identity that served to obfuscate the fact that Algerians come from diverse ethnic backgrounds, played different roles during the war of independence, and hold varied political opinions. Nonetheless, this simple narrative was intended to bring together a divided and wounded nation under the leadership of a party that sought to prove its political legitimacy and command national and international respect by assuming the role of 'hero of the nation.' This myth narrative would soon prove to pave the way for the marginalization of the Berber peoples and others who do not neatly correspond to the 'pure' Arab national identity narrative, as well as to legitimize government corruption and military despotism.

In chapter 10 of his work, Naylor identifies another core problem that originated with the war of independence, involves questions of history and identity, and that continues to bring negative consequences to diasporic Algerian communities in France. He writes:

> During the postcolonial period, French society seemed anesthetized to the shared plight of the repatriated and displaced populations. The pieds-noirs[61] were categorized as misfits, racists, and even fascists. The harkis[62] were genuinely the "forgotten of France." As for the Algerian emigrants/immigrants […], they were stereotyped as incorrigibly criminal. The travails of these three communities were a result of France's inability to resolve, on social, cultural, even epistemological levels, the decolonization of Algeria. These populations have often been termed isolated and alienated. Ironically, they may be the agents able to dissipate France's postcolonial mirages and contribute to what would be less a resignation or even a resolution than a transcending historical reconciliation with Algeria, as well as with itself. (264)

[61] The pieds-noirs were the French Algerian colonialist and settler population during the period of French colonization of Algeria (1830-1962). In reality, "French" Algerian is a misnomer as many of them came from diverse European backgrounds. During this period, they benefited from many privileges that were denied to Muslim Algerians. Leading to and in the aftermath of Algerian victory (1962) in the war of independence, most pieds-noirs fled Algeria as they feared Muslim Algerian retribution. They were mostly 'repatriated' to France, despite the facts that they never knew mainland France as a homeland and that the French government was woefully underprepared to receive them in mass numbers.

[62] The harkis were Muslim Algerians who for various reasons fought on the side of France during the Algerian war of independence. They were largely viewed as traitors by the FLN-led postcolonial Algerian state and suffered mass persecution after the war. Some managed to relocate to France, however, they were met there largely with indifference if not outright scorn on the part of French society.

While postcolonial Algeria created myths revolving around origins that actively privileged certain ethnic groups (Arabs) and marginalized others (Berbers), the French response centered more around passivity, indifference, and a desire to ignore or quickly forget the ordeal of the Algerian war. The 'repatriated' or displaced communities that came to France from Algeria after the war served to the general French population as a reminder of what they were so desperately trying to shut out of their minds. Therefore, these groups were generally met with nonchalance at best, or open hostility in the form of racist and/or discriminatory verbal and physical attacks at worst. On a practical level, distribution of and housing for these populations was a pressing concern, which amplified the general French perception of these peoples as a nuisance that only aggravated preexisting problems.

These two passages from Naylor's work highlight the consequences of both Algeria and France's failed attempts to reconcile with their own difficult histories in the aftermath of the war of 1954-1962. Certain segments of the Algerian population on both sides of the Mediterranean have been figuratively sacrificed either in the name of constructing a façade of Algerian unity or for the sake of refraining from further troubling the French collective conscience. As Naylor demonstrates, these groups—including Berbers in Algeria, and pied-noirs, harkis and Algerian immigrants (and their descendants) in France—have suffered and in certain cases continue to suffer from exclusion, being refused rightful places in society and/or in representations of nationhood. Yet, in these passages the reader can make out a call to correct these failings. Naylor not only points out failures at the state-level, but he also either explicitly or implicitly suggests that to help reconcile with the past and to improve current situations and relations, more inclusive concepts of history, identity, and politics need to be imagined.

Few are better placed than Fellag to respond to these calls as they relate to both the Algerian and French contexts. Born in 1950—four years before the beginning of the Algerian war—in the town of Azzefoun in the Djurdjura Mountains of the Kabylia region of Algeria, Fellag grew up in a Berber-speaking household, like most people of this region. At the age of eight he moved to the suburbs of Algiers where he learned Algerian Arabic in the streets in order to make friends, and French in the colonial school system. Upon returning to his native Kabylia a few years later with his family, he fell in love with cinema and drama classes at school. In 1968, he enrolled in drama school in Algiers where he learned the craft of acting. For the next twenty-five years he made a name for himself touring in ensemble and solo theatre productions in Algeria and abroad, performing primarily in Arabic and in French. Unfortunately, the violence of the *décennie noire* came dangerously close to Fellag as the FIS (*Front islamique du salut*) and other armed Islamist groups targeted francophone intellectuals and artists in particular. At the height of this violence in 1993, he decided to flee first to Tunisia and then to France in 1995. In both countries he continued his theatrical and comedic work, gaining fans wherever he went and eventually landing roles in cinema. In 1997 he appeared in Christophe Ruggia's film adaptation of Azouz Begag's autobiographical novel, *Le gone du chaâba*, and much later in 2011 he landed the lead role in the highly successful Québécois film, *Monsieur Lazhar*.

Having lived through the colonial period and attended French school, grown up during the Algerian war, established a career in postcolonial Algeria, and intimately known the hardships of the civil war of the 1990s before immigrating to France, Fellag has personally experienced some of the most defining moments of Algerian history in the second half of the twentieth century. Along with this firsthand knowledge of these historical events and periods, he is fluent in the three languages that have shaped and defined the Algerian nation for centuries:

Berber[63], Arabic (both dialectical Algerian Arabic and the classical form), and French. He is therefore in a unique position in his solo comedic work to interpret, critique, and comment on a wide spectrum of Algerian experiences, including the consequences of the postcolonial state failures that have been highlighted by Naylor. In this chapter, I will focus on the interconnected themes of history, identity, and politics in passages from the one-man shows *Djurdjurassique Bled* (1999) and *Le dernier chameau* (2004, 2005), in which Fellag openly and subtly challenges monolithic views of national history and identity as put forth by official FLN discourse, as well as preconceived notions and stereotypes of Algerian diasporic communities in France. I posit that he accomplishes this by reimagining and validating a pluralistic and therefore more inclusive concept of Algerianness in his humoristic accounts of characters in both Algeria and France.

Djurdjurassique Bled: Laughing in the Face of History

It is widely believed that history belongs to the domain of tragedy. The cultural historian, Hannu Salmi, highlights this fact in his introduction to the edited work, *Historical Comedy on Screen: Subverting History with Humour*, where he writes,

> This linking of history and tragedy can be traced far back into the history of Western civilization. While the tragedians Euripides, Sophocles and especially Aeschylus wrote exclusively about an ancient era of heroic deeds, the comic playwright Aristophanes found his subject matter in everyday life and politics. The contemporary environment of the author's audience was considered more appropriate raw material for merriment than the past. (9)

The historiography of the Algerian nation is certainly no exception to this ostensible rule. Histories of the French colonial period in Algeria, the Algerian war, the civil war of the 1990s,

[63] Also known as Amazigh or Tamazigh, this is actually a family of closely related languages and dialects that are spoken by the Berber people who are indigenous to the Maghreb region of North Africa.

and even Algerian immigration to France present these topics in a tragic light, underlining the brutality and exploitation traditionally having characterized Franco-Algerian relations and the internal antagonisms and violence of the postcolonial Algerian state. The tragic nature of these historical periods cannot and should not be denied.

It is therefore even more perplexing to audience members who are familiar with these histories when Fellag continues his one-man show, *Djurdjurassique Bled*—after his opening statement about generalized failure in his native country—with his personal and ironic explanation for these failures, which constitutes a condensed—and at times wildly preposterous—comedic history of the Algerian people from the Mesozoic era of dinosaurs[64] (and Berbers, according to Fellag) up to an imagined future where Algerians will have successfully turned the tables and colonized France. Following these episodes, the humorist speaks more generally of widespread immigration to the hexagon, before recounting a story of revealing his national identity upon his immigration to France. These bits, while diverse and full of

[64] The witty yet somewhat equivocal title of this one-man show, *Djurdjurassique Bled*, would seem to originate from Fellag's comedic assertion that there was a time when the Berber people (many of whom have historically resided in the Djurdjura Mountains of northern Algeria) coexisted with dinosaurs (the subject of Steven Spielberg's popular 1993 film, *Jurassic Park*). The term "*bled*" is a term used by French people of Maghrebi descent to refer to where they (or their family) are originally from in North Africa. It originates from the classical Arabic term "*balad*" which means "country/nation" and has entered the modern-day French lexicon as a slang word meaning "village" or "backwater." However, there is also another potential layer of meaning regarding this title. As Martin Evans and John Phillips explain in their book, *Algeria: Anger of the Dispossessed*, "Caustically referring to the Club des Pins—the protected enclave outside Algiers where many of the elite lived—as 'Jurassic Park', they [the generation of young Algerians who were dissatisfied with Bouteflika's presidency in the very early 2000s] believed that the country was run by a clique of decrepit old men who had no idea how ordinary Algerians lived." (270) It is quite possible that on a certain level, the title of this show is also a nod to this meaning of 'Jurassic Park,' seeing that Fellag spent much time listening to disaffected youth in the streets of Algiers. The image of old, out of touch politicians in gated communities as dinosaurs living in Jurassic Park also ties into several of the critiques of the Algerian government that are made in the first half and very end of this one-man show.

digressions—as one-person shows and stand-up comedy specials tend to be—, are more consistent than they appear when viewed only on a superficial level. The interwoven stories all develop themes of history, identity, fear, and exclusion that, for Fellag, have come to define experiences of Algerian peoples in Algeria and in France. Constituting the first half of the one-man show[65], it will be the subject of analysis in this section.

Fellag begins his comedic explanation of widespread failure in Algeria by attributing it ironically to the nervousness of the Algerian people. He explains that it was the ancestors of the Algerians, the Berbers, who killed the dinosaurs after being formed by various chemical elements and harissa[66] during the Big Bang. Due to their nervous and impatient nature, the Berbers refused to wait until evolution to be a fully formed people, therefore they arrived shortly after the creation of the universe. As Fellag states, « Na! na! na! […] on ne va pas attendre trois milliards d'années pour devenir des Berbères, nous! Nous, on veut tout de suite! *Nâaldine*[67] DARWIN!!! » / "Na! na! na! […] we're not going to wait three billion years to become Berbers! We want it right away! To hell with DARWIN!!!" (*Djurdjurassique Bled* 15) He continues by saying that the great civilizations of the ancient Mediterranean world skipped over the Berbers,

[65] The second half involves the story of an Algerian man who immigrates to Switzerland and who must convert to Catholicism in order to marry and gain residency. This is followed by an encore where Fellag muses on the topic of censuring in Algerian television.

[66] Harissa is a chili paste that is common in the cuisines of Algeria, Morocco, and Tunisia.

[67] In his article, "Vocabulaire de Fellag: une innovation lexicale au service d'un humour translinguistique," Abderahim Moussaouer explains that "*nâaldine*" is a term in both Berber and Algerian Arabic used to curse or show contempt for someone or something. He writes, « Il convient également de mettre la lumière sur l'expression ***inɛâddîn***, présente presque dans tous les spectacles de Fellag et utilisée des dizaines de fois. C'est une locution verbale qui, ayant pour objectif d'insulter, signifie « soit maudite la religion de […] » ou dans son usage simplifié « soit maudit […] ». Elle est suivie de la personne ou de la chose que l'on veut insulter. » (6) / "I should also shed light on the expression ***inɛâddîn***, that is present in almost all of Fellag's shows and is used many times. It is a verbal phrase that, having the goal to insult, means "may […]'s religion be damned" or in its more simplified use "may […] be damned." It is followed by the person or thing that one wishes to insult." (6)

and after having read negative reports about them, the ancient Greeks stayed away. However, the Phoenicians did come and attempt to engage in commerce with the Berbers, but were promptly sent packing. The next invaders were the Romans who stayed for six hundred years and are portrayed by Fellag—as well as by certain nineteenth-century proponents of French colonization in Algeria—as precursors to the French. Yet, in this retelling they made little progress in colonizing seeing that the Berbers fought them using unconditional methods and by slowly driving them crazy before kicking them out. After a quite long description of these methods, it is mentioned in chronological order and a rather perfunctory style that the Vandals, Arabs, Portuguese, Spanish, Turks, and French all came and were kicked out by the Berbers. In this list, only the Arab and French invasions are slightly elaborated. (*Djurdjurassique Bled* 13-24)

While this history is by no means meant to be taken seriously, what is striking is the mixture of fact and fiction infused with extreme irony. Obviously, we are not to believe that the early Berbers possessed an innate nervous and impatient nature that led to future failings of the Algerian state. Nor are we to believe that they were completely impervious to the great ancient civilizations of the Mediterranean basin or that they had no culture of their own. However, this latter suggestion in Fellag's retelling of the ancient history of the land now known as Algeria would certainly resonate with French and Algerian audiences alike. Much of French colonization in Africa was based on the premise of the '*mission civilisatrice*,' or 'Civilizing Mission' that stated that the French were occupying the lands of African peoples in order to spread "French civilization." Furthermore, in order to accept and act on such a theory, one had to believe that the colonized peoples either had no civilization and history of their own, or that the civilization and history that they did possess were somehow quite lacking and inadequate. This is exactly the idea upon which French colonialists acted and also attempted to instill in the minds of the indigenous

populations that they colonized. It was a type of colonization of the mind that was intended to render the colonized submissive and accepting of the situation that was imposed upon them. Albert Memmi, the Tunisian postcolonial theorist, explains the consequences of this situation on colonized peoples in his seminal work, *Portrait du colonisé*, « Le colonisé ne se sent ni responsable ni coupable, ni sceptique, il est hors de jeu. En aucune manière il n'est sujet de l'histoire ; bien entendu il en subit le poids, souvent plus cruellement que les autres, mais toujours comme objet. Il a fini par perdre l'habitude de toute participation active à l'histoire et ne la réclame même plus. » (111-112) / "The colonized neither feels responsible nor guilty, nor skeptical, he is on the sidelines. In no way is he the subject of history; of course he feels the weight of it, often more cruelly than others, but always as an object. He ends up losing the habit of active participation in history and no longer even demands it." This belief that the people of Algeria had no civilization or culture of their own and therefore needed to turn to French civilization was instilled in Algerian schoolchildren in the French colonial school system and certainly made a psychological impact on generations of people in both France and Algeria[68]. Therefore, when Fellag ironically states that the ancient Berbers possessed nothing to rival the splendor of surrounding ancient Mediterranean civilizations, and were in fact resistant to them, he is coyly hinting at the legacy of the *mission civilisatrice* and its attempts to brainwash its colonial subjects.

[68] This French colonial idea is reflected even in the post-Algerian independence period by the French president Valéry Giscard d'Estaing when he visited Algeria in 1975. Naylor writes, "When Giscard arrived in Algiers, the French president declared: "La France historique salue l'Algérie indépendante." France with its long history and colonial past greeted independent Algeria, the pride of its old empire […] Giscard's statement more than any other during the postcolonial period disclosed the historical disposition of this relationship. France with its essentialist past greeted a state that was independent and finding itself, implicitly a state with no history. It especially illustrated Giscard's recurrent insensitivity and offended perceptive Algerian sensibilities." (112)

In her article, "Revisiting "*nos* ancêtres les Gaulois:" Scripting and Postscripting Francophone Identity," Janice Gross interprets this historical parody segment of Fellag's one-man show by viewing it as a response to French colonial denial of colonized people's history and civilization. This can explain why in this comedic history she chooses to focus her attention primarily on the passages relating to the Berbers' resistance to the Romans. Gross finds parallels between Fellag's descriptions of resistance to Roman conquerors and both the French national narrative of Gaulish resistance (under the leadership of the famed Vercingétorix) to the Romans, and René Goscinny's and Albert Uderzo's popular parodic reinterpretation of this national founding myth in the Astérix and Obélix cartoon series. Gross writes, "Fellag appropriates the glorious and ancient history of the Gaulois in order to rescript a far more ancient tribal myth of origins, one unrivaled by any later tribe or aspiring civilization. In creating "nos ancêtres les Berbères," Fellag asserts a pre-Gaul and prehistoric origin that purports to defy time itself." (954) According to Gross, looking at this section of Fellag's work through this particular comparative lens qualifies it as a response to the *mission civilisatrice*'s denial of Algerian history and also places it on a level equal to, if not superior to, France's own national founding historical/myth narrative.

The implied link to Astérix and Obélix is suggested to audience members not only through the fact that the Berbers fought the Romans (as the Gauls did), but also through the exaggerated, almost cartoon-like ways in which Fellag describes this witty and unconventional resistance. For example, he says:

> Des fois, un énorme guerrier romain se battait contre un guerrier berbère. Le guerrier berbère est tellement maigre, le Romain n'arrive pas à le toucher. Pendant vingt minutes il vise…WALOU[69] ! Tout d'un coup le Romain ne voit plus le Berbère : « Oh, mais…ce

[69] "*Walou*" means "nothing" in Algerian Arabic.

> n'est pas possible, c'est de la sorcellerie, de la magie, il a disparu…il s'est envolé ! » Mais le guerrier berbère était collé à l'épée ! (*Djurdjurassique Bled* 22)
>
> Sometimes, an enormous Roman warrior would fight against a Berber warrior. The Berber warrior was so skinny, the Roman couldn't hit him. For twenty minutes he would aim…NOTHING! All of a sudden the Roman wouldn't see the Berber anymore: "Oh, what on earth?...I don't believe it, it's witchcraft, magic, he's disappeared…he's flown away!" But the Berber warrior was stuck to the sword!

Descriptions of the Berber warriors as so small and skinny (compared to the Romans) that they could stick to their adversaries' swords and go unseen, undoubtedly evoke images of the diminutive Astérix. Just like the tiny Berber warriors who take advantage of their relatively small size when fighting opponents who tower over them and appear to have the upper hand, Astérix constantly makes good use of his small stature to win in "David versus Goliath" -like situations. Another passage from this section that highlights the highly visual language reminiscent of cartoons is the assertion that Berbers invented the first camouflage. Fellag says:

> Mais ce qu'ils [les Romains] ne savent pas, c'est que nos ancêtres, les guerriers berbères, comme ils ont la même couleur que le sol—ils sont ocres—, on a l'impression que c'est le sol qui continue. Des fois tu passes à côté d'un rocher et il te dit : « Et alors, tu dis pas *salam alikoum* ? » Des centaines de milliers de guerriers berbères sont allongés par terre, sur le ventre, confondus avec le sol, comme des caméléons. C'était le début du camouflage moderne. Les Romains leur marchaient dessus, avec les chars, les chevaux… mais les Berbères, ça ne les gêne pas ! Pour eux, c'était de la kinésithérapie. Et au moment où les Romains s'y attendent le moins, la terre se met à trembler, les rochers explosent, des centaines de milliers de guerriers berbères foncent sur l'armée romaine ! (*Djurdjurassique Bled* 20-21)
>
> But what they [the Romans] didn't know, was that our ancestors, the Berber warriors, as they are the same color as the ground—they are ocher—, you think that it's the ground that keeps going. Sometimes you pass beside a rock and it says to you: "So, you don't say *salam alikoum*?" Hundreds of thousands of Berber warriors were laying on the ground, on their stomachs, blending into the ground, like chameleons. It was the beginning of modern camouflage. The Romans were walking over them, with chariots, horses…but it didn't bother the Berbers! For them, it was physical therapy. And at the moment when the Romans were least expecting it, the ground started to shake, the boulders exploded, hundreds of thousands of Berber warriors charged at the Roman army!

Here, Fellag paints an image for his audience, specifically a cartoon panel, seeing that the descriptions and situations are so absurd and improbable that it could only be pictorially captured by a cartoonist. Along with creating parallels with Astérix and other cartoon traditions, the images that are described also suggest an affinity and sense of belonging between the Berber warriors and the mountainous terrain that they inhabit, demonstrating a certain legitimacy as the founding peoples of the territory that would become Algeria. While referring to the early Berbers, Evans and Phillips evoke the intimate relationship between the people and the terrain, writing, "This was a mountain culture where the knowledge of the landscape—its hiding places and natural fortresses—was passed down from generation to generation and used against the Romans, the Arabs, the Ottomans, the French and the post-independence state. It is the world of the outlaw and the rebel." (14) Through Fellag's hyperbolic tendencies for comedic effect, the Berbers and the landscape become one and rise to crush powerful invaders intent on obtaining the peoples' submission.

While Gross makes an important connection between Fellag's history and the Gaulish founding myths of the French nation—as well as with Astérix and Obélix—, therefore rightly viewing this passage of *Djurdjurassique Bled* as a response to French colonial attempts to negate Algerian history and civilization, her analysis fails to take into consideration the Algerian postcolonial official historical narrative with which Fellag is also in dialogue. In this comedic interpretation of history, the central players and "our" ancestors are not Arabs, but Berbers. This is in complete contradiction to official FLN-backed historiography which places Arabs as the cultural, linguistic, historic, and spiritual backbone of the Algerian nation. In fact, the passage pertaining to the Arab conquest holds a brief, albeit not insignificant, place. Fellag says, « Les Arabes, ils nous ont eus…comme ils ont la même couleur que nous, on ne les a pas vus

venir…Ils se sont mélangés avec nous. Petit à petit, jusqu'à maintenant où on ne sait plus qui c'est eux, et qui c'est nous. » (*Djurdjurassique Bled* 24) / "The Arabs, they got us…as they are the same color as us, we didn't see them coming…They mixed with us. Little by little, up until now where we don't know any more who they are and who we are." Once again, this account of events is not to be taken completely seriously, however, as is so often the case in comedy, there are glimmers of truth that can be perceived through the kaleidoscopic distortions of parody. The arrival of the Arabs did much to transform society in the area that would much later become Algeria. Arabs brought Islam as well as the Arabic language and culture to the region. Despite efforts to remain autonomous, the Berbers were greatly influenced by the Arab conquests, with the population eventually almost exclusively claiming Islam as their religion. Yet, as Fellag suggests by claiming that the Arabs "got" the Berbers and by retaining the us/them division in his narration of events, tensions existed between the two peoples in this era and continue to this day. Evans and Phillips write, "But Arabization and Islamization were not identical. The Berbers might have embraced Islam but they were still resentful towards Arab rule. The Arabs became associated with the plains and the Berbers with the mountains, although the Islamic customs and practices that now became the bedrock of the local identity did much to blur these distinctions." (20) While the lines have been blurred as Fellag, Evans and Phillips all indicate, linguistic and cultural differences as well as matters of historical and contemporary representation remain major bones of contention between the two peoples to this day.

Thus, by placing the Berber people at the heart of the history of Algeria, claiming them as the primary actors in defending the Algerian territory from invaders throughout history, and referring to them not as "*my* ancestors," but as "*our* ancestors," Fellag is engaging in a political act that openly calls into question and destabilizes the Arab origin founding myth propagated by

the FLN[70], as well as one of the Algerian government's largest claims to political legitimacy. Not only this, but the mentions of waves of invaders throughout history provide acknowledgment of the other various influences that contributed to the mosaic that is Algerian culture and history, despite the fact that Fellag states that they were all defeated and sent away by the Berbers. Retelling and embellishing upon this history in this way shifts perspectives, challenges widely held and officially authorized beliefs, and provides the people with a more comprehensive and accurate view of the complexities of their national past. While not engaging in true, accurate historiography per se, Fellag is speaking out against simplified and exclusive narratives while answering the calls of many international and Algerian historians to consider Algerian history in a much broader framework. Evans and Phillips create a dialogue with the Berber sociologist, Abdelmalek Sayad when they highlight the importance of shedding light on the pre-1830 period of national history, writing:

> For all these reasons Sayad makes an impassioned plea for a re-examination of this nationalism in a critical light. It has to be understood as the product of a particular

[70] This Arab origin myth of Algeria, although championed by the FLN since the war of independence and still in circulation to this day, came into existence much earlier than the creation of the FLN. Being a belief held my some since the arrival of the Arabs, it became a rallying call under French colonialism and especially during the early days of formal Algerian nationalist movements in the first decades of the twentieth century. As Stora notes, "These *ulama* represented the "nationalist" orientation, defending cultural identity in a motto that has remained famous: "Arabic is my language, Algeria is my country, Islam is my religion.""(16) Furthermore, in his work, *Algeria: France's Undeclared War*, Martin Evans highlights the fact that on a certain level the 'pure' Arab identity narrative was a response to French colonial techniques of divide and rule which actively sought to drive a wedge between Berbers and Arabs to weaken any attempts at unified resistance. Evans writes, "He [Arslan] also emphasized the need to resist French attempts at a policy of divide and rule across North Africa. In foregrounding Berber difference from the Arabs, Arslan warned, the French were trying to weaken both Algerian and Moroccan nationalism. Undoubtedly such advice from Arslan reinforced Messali's [Messali Hadj, founder of the Algerian nationalist groups, the MNA, the MLD, the PPA, and the Étoile nord-africaine] convictions. More firmly than ever, Algeria was linked to the wider Muslim world. Through religion, language, and culture Algerians were Arabs—an article of faith which promoted support for other Arab struggles, notably the Palestinian revolt against the British Mandate, and rejected any talk of a separate Berber identity." (60)

> context; otherwise Algerians will have no real idea of their historical origins. Moreover, research must break out of the colonial and FLN chronologies whereby 1830 is the starting point for history. The complexities of the pre-1830 period are vital to understanding of contemporary Algeria and in this respect, Sayad continues, discussion of the period before Islam must not mean that one is immediately accused of being a neo-colonialist reverting to colonial ideas of Latin Algeria. Like Tunisia with Carthage and Egypt with the pharaohs, Algeria must integrate this past into the national history. (10)

This call has been left unanswered for so long precisely because it is this insistence on an Arab past and present that has provided an illusory sense of continuity and unity for the Algerian state and that was instrumentalized by the FLN to claim their place in a long tradition of Arab-based anti-colonialist resistance and nationalist movements, thereby "proving" their political authority and right to govern as they see fit. Despite the fact that this rhetoric marginalizes Berbers and other ethnic and religious minorities as well as downplays, if not completely erases, the significance of non-Arab peoples in the historical construction of the nation—causing discontent that has been expressed on more than one occasion[71]—, any concession made to a more complex and inclusive concept of the history and culture of the nation has been perceived by the FLN as a threat to their own carefully plotted historiography and exploitation of said historiography. As Evans and Phillips explain:

> The post-independence state saw the arrival of Islam as *the* crucial event in the formation of an Arab-Islamic identity which is the spine of modern Algeria. Anything that predated Islam was dismissed as pagan ignorance, while the Roman period was a form of colonial oppression which merely anticipated the savagery of French rule. In contrast, the Berber historian Samy Hadad argues that the numbers of Arabs in the seventh century [the time

[71] One of the most notable examples of public manifestations of this discontent is the 'Berber spring' of 1980. Evans and Philipps write, "Demands for the recognition of Berber rights provoked the train of events which led to the 'Berber spring',' one of the most significant events in post-independence Algeria. The spark was the banning of a public meeting on 19 March 1980 with Mouloud Mammeri, professor of anthropology and champion of Berber culture, in Tizi-Ouzou, the capital of Kabylia. Such censorship provoked protests which erupted into a general strike across the region, during which the protestors drew an explicit parallel with the 'Prague spring' to underline their struggle for self-expression and human rights." (7)

> of the Arab conquests of the territory that would become Algeria] were relatively small, and that Algerians have been deliberately alienated from their true ethnic roots for political reasons. In his eyes Algerians are for the most part not Arabs but Arabized Berbers, and it is vital to recognize the Berber component of the Algerian nation. (17)

It is precisely in examining this pre-1830 past, and especially the ancient history of the region, that one is introduced to the largest amount of evidence that refutes the arguments for a 'pure' Arab history and identity. This helps to explain the interest that, in particular, Berber sociologists, historians, and humorists have had in this far-reaching history.

As has already been stated, Fellag's historical portrait of his native country is by no means meant to be taken as a true history. It is a historical parody that is full of ironic and misleading "explanations," hyperbole for comedic effect, and more than a few preposterous claims that provoke laughter due solely to their absurdity. However, it is an intelligent parody that is in dialogue with and offers challenging critiques of more than one hegemonic discourse. It contains enough truth to indicate that Fellag knows his history. The invasions that he recounts correspond more or less to the very brief summary of pre-1830 Algerian history provided by the renowned historian Benjamin Stora in his work, *Algeria 1830-2000: A Short History*, when he writes:

> Algeria was a hub uniting Europe, Africa, the Middle East, and Asia; its privileged situation and its resources would provoke six major invasions before the French arrived: the Phoenician-Carthaginian invasion, from 1100 to 147 B.C.E.; the Roman, from 146 B.C.E to 432 C.E.; the Vandal, from 432 to 533; the Byzantine, from 533 to 633; the Arab, from 755 to 1516; and the Turkish, from 1516-1830. (2)

If evoking many of these invasions was not already a provocation, openly contradicting French colonial slights and dismissals of pre-colonial Algerian history and FLN-backed historical discourses touting the Arabs as the sole genitors of the Algerian nation, Fellag has the audacity to place the Berber people at the center of his narrative, being chronologically preceded by no

one, not even dinosaurs. They are in fact the comic heroes of the story who, like Astérix and Obélix, are underdogs who use their resourcefulness and ability to think and act in unconventional ways to come out victorious. Surely this would resonate with the Algerian and Franco-Algerian members of Fellag's audiences who at the turn of the twenty-first century had survived more than one harrowing experience.

Immediately following this comic musing on history, Fellag transitions seamlessly from descriptions of Algerians ridding their country of the French at the end of the war of independence into a section that imagines a present and future where Algerians—not used to the absence of colonizers in their country and bored with only being surrounded by other Algerians—decide to immigrate en masse to France. Speaking of this generalized boredom that incites mass immigration, he says, « Toujours la même chose ! Que des Algériens en Algérie ! Tu regardes à droite, Mohamed-les-moustaches. À gauche Mohamed-les-moustaches. C'est la consanguinité des moustachus ! Même les bébés, ils ont des moustaches ! Eh ben, puisque c'est comme ça, on va sortir les Algériens, on va s'auto-sortir ! La preuve, [indicating audience] vous êtes tous là ! » (*Djurdjurassique Bled* 25) / "Always the same thing! Only Algerians in Algeria! You look to your right, Mohamed with the mustache. To the left Mohamed with the mustache. It's the brotherhood of the mustache men! Even the babies have mustaches! So, since it's like that, we're going to get rid of the Algerians, we're going to get rid of ourselves our own selves! The proof, [indicating audience], you're all here!" Following his inventive reasoning as to why so many Algerians have immigrated to France, Fellag acknowledges the current Algerian diaspora in France (and in his own audience), before imagining a situation where immigration from Algeria to France continues until not a single Algerian is left in Algeria. Turning the tables on French settler colonization of Algeria, Fellag invents a future where Algerians successfully

colonize France through immigration and appropriate and adapt key concepts of French colonial strategies as well as more contemporary French immigration policies. He imagines that Algerian immigrants bring with them the desert which will now expand from the very south of Algeria to Dunkerque, in the north of France. The French will have to adapt to this new climate, culture, and language. Fellag states, « Alors, de temps en temps, vous verrez passer Maurice sur son chameau. Il vient de l'oasis de Sidi Carpentras…et il va en pèlerinage à Sidna-Germain-di-Bri[72]…En route, il rencontre un autre chamelier : *« Salim alikoum* Bernard. » » (*Djurdjurassique Bled* 25-26) / "So, every now and then, you'll see Maurice pass by on his camel. He's coming from the oasis of Sidi Carpentras…and he's going on pilgrimage to Sidna-Germain-di-Bri…On his way, he meets another camel driver: "*Salim alikoum* Bernard."" Fellag then tells his audience that they are the first to be warned of what is to come and advises them to begin studying Arabic immediately. He then goes on to say where certain groups of Algerians will settle and states that, « La Tour Eiffel va devenir une H.L.M. 7 200 Algériens vont habiter dedans. Ça va devenir un bidonville. » (*Djurdjurassique Bled* 26) / "The Eiffel Tower is going to become project housing. 7,200 Algerians are going to live inside it. It's going to become a shantytown." Although the plans for the Eiffel Tower do not seem set in stone at this stage of the imagined colonization process, as he states shortly after that five times a day the people will hear the Muslim call to prayer, "*Allah u Akber…"* emanating from the heights of the iconic Parisian monument, suggesting that it will be turned into a mosque with a famously tall minaret. He draws this segment to a conclusion by saying that the French will no longer be able to bear it and will decide to immigrate en masse to Algeria, Fellag describing them as « les boat people vers

[72] A humorous Arabization of Saint-Germain-des-Prés.

l'Algérie » (*Djurdjurassique Bled* 28). / "boat people heading for Algeria." This effectively ends this section and its role reversals regarding settler colonialism and South-North migration. (*Djurdjurassique Bled* 24-29)

This imagined future segment accomplishes many things. It creates a bridge between the history of Algeria and the historic and contemporary phenomenon of mass Algerian immigration to France. It plays on the fears and fearmongering of far-right political parties in France—notably the *Front National* (FN), now known as the *Rassemblement National* (RN)—who have traditionally built their political platforms on anti-immigration policies and vilifying diasporic communities. It invites reflection on French colonial practices in and views on Algeria as well as contemporary French immigration policies by reversing and re-adapting these historical and political elements to an imagined future where Algerians have the upper hand. Finally, this section continues to build on the theme of failure as this imagined colonization jokingly responds to French far-right fears of immigration by highlighting in an exaggerated and ironic fashion the negative aspects of this mass immigration/colonization. Indeed, the verb "couler," meaning "to sink," "to fail," or "to ruin," that is uttered in the opening statement of the one-man show returns in this section as Fellag states simply, « On va couler la France. » (*Djurdjurassique Bled* 25) / "We are going to ruin France." Similar postcolonial reimaginings and reframings of relations between former colonial powers and their ex-colonies have been taken up by writers and intellectuals on multiple occasions in the twenty-first century[73], with many of their works constituting the literary and cinematic genre known as Afrofuturism. However, given that

[73] Perhaps one of the most notable examples of this is by the Djiboutian writer, Abdourahman Waberi, in his 2008 novel, *Aux États-Unis d'Afrique*, which imagines a future where Africa is the most prosperous region of the globe and immigrants and refugees from ravaged nations in Europe and North America clamor to gain entrance into developed and thriving African countries.

Djurdjurassique Bled predates the majority of these works, Fellag is quite innovative in using comedy to shake up long-lasting colonial and postcolonial power dynamics in order to imagine other possibilities and comment on past and current relationships.

First of all, this segment creates and validates a symbolic and representational space for Algerian immigrants in France. Flowing effortlessly from the historical parody of the creation of the Algerian nation, this section would appear to claim that Algerian immigration (in particular to France)—in its historic, contemporary and future forms—is in fact a part of Algeria's history and current situation. Whereas official discourses on both sides of the Mediterranean might prefer to either downplay or completely ignore the phenomenon and the people involved with it, Fellag rewrites their stories and experiences into national narratives. References to mass emigration have never played a major part of FLN narratives of the nation for numerous reasons[74]. The existence of strong waves of Algerian immigration to mainland France before, during, and after the war of independence highlights the links of interdependence between the two countries and disrupts heroic postcolonial Algerian narratives of fighting for and gaining complete freedom from the colonial power. Furthermore, the vast majority of Algerians

[74] Although, at certain moments in the history of postcolonial Algeria, leaders, for various reasons, have acknowledged the importance of Algerian immigration to France and have proposed legislation and intervention regarding the mass migrations and diasporic communities in France. For example, shortly after independence, President Ben Bella came to understand the role that emigration played. Stora writes, "In fact, the Ben Bella regime recognized—against all the theories previously put forward—that it could not do without the safety valve that the employment market in France offered. Emigration was thus considered a "necessary evil." It was encouraged, in fact, by a state concerned to ease the pressure on the labor market and to improve the balance of payments (through the hard currency sent back to Algeria by the emigrant workers to financially support their families in that country)." (138) Despite the roles that emigration played, the FLN government generally chose to see emigrants to France as pawns in political and economic negotiations with France or as quick solutions to domestic economic and demographic issues. Very rarely were or are they genuinely incorporated into official narratives of the country.

emigrated and continue to emigrate due to economic reasons, so emphasis on the phenomenon points to Algeria's economic failures. Despite the tendency to minimize the importance of large numbers of Algerian emigrants/immigrants in official FLN discourse, they have played and continue to play major roles in the history and economy of the nation and the nations where they have come to work and settle. On an economic level, Naylor underlines how France and Algeria have mutually benefitted from emigration/immigration during various time periods when he writes:

> France benefitted in many ways from the Algerian emigrant workers' presence. Though the money sent back to family in Algeria was a debit to the French balance of payments, the financial transfers provided an anti-inflationary service too. Algerians also contributed to French social security programs. The workers' remittances were invaluable across the Mediterranean. Germaine Tillion related during the decolonization that the workers " support, directly or indirectly, a third of the rural Moslem population in Algeria." Michel Massenet believed at independence that their monies directly enabled 1.25 million Algerians to subsist. Other economists claim that the number was as high as 2 million. In certain areas of the Constantinois and Kabylia, 80 percent of the population's revenues came from these workers. (65)

Throughout multiple stages of history, Algerian immigrant workers have contributed simultaneously to the French and Algerian economies through their labor, their taxes and social security contributions, and the money that they sent to family members back in Algeria. On a political and historical level, either revolt or emigration have been typical responses from the Algerian people to French colonization and imposed injustices. As the historian, Allan Christelow, writes in his book, *Algeria without Borders: The Making of a Global Frontier Society*:

> There was a major wave of *hijra* [emigration/immigration/flight from infidel conquest] during the initial period of conquest. As the French took measures to grant recognition and support to Islamic legal and educational institutions in the 1850s, the pressures for *hijra* diminished. Such pressures reemerged periodically from the 1860s until just before the First World War as the French introduced measures that would permit compulsory military recruitment of Algerian Muslims, imposing the responsibilities of citizenship

without granting the accompanying political rights. (10)

Therefore, emigration/immigration for numerous reasons—political, religious, economic, etc.—has been a feature of Algerian history from the mid-nineteenth century to the present. What Fellag does in this segment is to reinstate a prominent place for members of the Algerian diaspora by placing them at the important juncture of past, current, and future narratives of Algerian experiences, attributing powers to them that they have traditionally been denied, and to break the fourth wall to point out and acknowledge Algerian immigrants in his own audiences. All of this contributes to giving them visibility and a sense of recognition when they and their experiences have been marginalized in narratives in both their native and host countries.

The second major feature of this imagined future section is that it talks back to the anti-immigrant/immigration stances of French far-right political parties (primarily the FN) by drawing on and comically developing the very fears about immigrants that they actively spread to the French population. Traditionally, the FN's anti-immigration rhetoric has disseminated fears about the possible dangers that large populations of foreign-born people on French soil pose to the well-being of society as well as to French culture, language, and traditions. Seen through the eyes of extremist politicians such as Jean-Marie Le Pen and his daughter, Marine Le Pen, large numbers of Muslim immigrants in particular, would Islamize secular French thought and practices—seen as a concern especially during the period of Islamist violence in Algeria during the 1990s[75]—, actively work to 'contaminate' or even 'destroy' French language and

[75] As Naylor states in reference to certain French responses to the Algerian civil war of the 1990s, "Alain Rollat canvassed French political opinion during this time. As he talked with three members of the Front National, one unsurprisingly conjured the specter of massive flight and asserted: "Immigration will end in invasion…they want to make France Algerian." Former prime minister Michel Debré considered the Islamic movement "a menace for France."" (180)

culture, and in general constitute economic and even criminal threats to Franco-French members of society. Fellag's imagined future of total Algerian immigration to and colonization of France plays on these propagandistic fears by ironically presenting them as truths and then embellishing their consequences to comic effect. By suggesting that men of such 'pure' French stock that their names are Maurice and Bernard would become camel drivers who in their own country greet each other by saying "*salam alikoum"* (*Djurdjurassique Bled* 25-26) and by warning French audience members that they should enroll in Arabic courses immediately (*Djurdjurassique Bled* 26), he is playing on deep-rooted, although largely irrational, fears of being on the losing side in a cultural war between West and East (or Global North and Global South). Although these fears have existed in the French collective consciousness for centuries—let us remember that *La Chanson de Roland*, considered by many to be the founding text of French literature, describes the 778 Battle of Ronceveux Pass in which Charlemagne's army defends France from Muslim North African invaders—, they have been exploited and propagated with force since the FN gained political clout in the 1980s. Fellag's reference to the Muslim call of prayer being cried five times a day from atop the Eiffel Tower (*Djurdjurassique Bled* 28) speaks not only to age-old fears of Muslim invasion, but especially to concerns of how a large Muslim population could influence the revered principles of French *laïcité* (secularism). Other passages in this section allude to overcrowding and general decline of sanitary and environmental conditions, seemingly corresponding to French racist stereotypes of North Africans that have existed since early days of colonization and that have unfortunately been given new life through anti-immigration rhetoric. For example, he says, « La Seine va devenir un oued[76]. Ce sera tellement dégueulasse, tu peux

[76] "*Oued*" (in French or Arabic) or "wadi" (in English) is the name for a river or stream in the Maghreb. They are usually dry except for during the rainy season.

marcher sur l'eau. Ce sera la promenade des Arabes… » (*Djurdjurassique Bled* 26) / "The Seine is going to become a wadi. It will be so disgusting that you can walk on the water. It will be the Arab's promenade…" As is the case so often in the historical parody segment of this one-man show, these descriptions are meant to be ironic and not accepted at face value. Their merit, in large part, lies in how they are in dialogue with other narratives, beliefs, and attitudes, and how they suggest alternatives to them. Through laughing at fears, Fellag attempts to underline their irrational and unfounded nature while stripping them of the power that they hold over people's minds. As Fellag says in an interview, « Les sketches que j'écris sont toujours des histoires qui visent à déjouer mentalement les pièges de la peur. C'est, au moment où je les partage avec le public, deux heures de liberté, deux heures que j'ai gagnées contre la misère et la peur, cette peur de tous les jours face au pouvoir ou à une démographie qui explose. » (« Rire de ses peurs» 20) / "The sketches that I write are always stories that aim to mentally thwart fear's traps. They are, in the moment when I share them with the audience, two hours of freedom, two hours that I have won against misery and fear, this everyday fear in the face of power or a demography that is skyrocketing." Thus, for Fellag, laughing in the face of fear and helping audiences to do the same serves to stop fear in its tracks. Ironically, by comedically exaggerating these fears regarding Algerian—and more generally, Muslim—immigration to France, he is exposing the fears as overblown, irrational, and in the service of a far-right rhetoric that attempts to vilify immigrant populations in order to win French votes.

The final aspect of this section that deserves critical attention involves the ways in which Fellag's imagined future Algerian colonization of France mirrors, reappropriates, and comments upon some aspects of the French settler colonization of Algeria and more contemporary French policies regarding immigration. He states, « On va s'intégrer par la désertification ! Petit à petit

ça va être le désert ici…De Dunkerque…à Tamanrasset, le grand erg central. » (*Djurdjurassique Bled* 25) / "We are going to integrate ourselves through desertification ! Little by little it is going to be the desert here…From Dunkirk to Tamanrasset, the great central sand dunes." As preposterous as this claim is, what is interesting is that it suggests a certain homogeneity from the city of Tamanrasset in the southern Algerian Sahara region all the way to the city of Dunkirk at the extreme north of metropolitan France. This was the same distance cited in a slogan that advocates of French Algeria used during the colonial period when stating that Algeria was an integral part of France and therefore Algerian independence was both unimaginable and something to be avoided at all costs[77]. Here, Fellag reappropriates this slogan of diehard supporters of keeping Algeria French in the 1950s, but reverses the power dynamics to reflect a stretch of land to be dominated by Algerians. What was at one time a saying that rallied together colonialists, now in an imagined postcolonial future, becomes an idea that would be not only completely unpalatable but also terrifying to French right-wing politicians and voters. Given that the only thing that has changed between the 1950s colonialist slogan and Fellag's comic reappropriation of it is the power dynamics, this passage exposes what was truly at the heart of French colonial resistance to an independent Algeria. It was not about maintaining the integrity and unity of the lands and peoples of France and Algeria, but rather about maintaining French power and control. The comments about Algerians bringing the desert with them to mainland France and "integrating themselves through desertification" appear nonsensical and incite

[77] As Alec G. Hargreaves points out in his article, "The Politics of Naming in Franco-Arab-ic Cultures," this slogan is attributed to Charles De Gaulle shortly after his 1958 election. Hargreaves writes, "De Gaulle's return to power in 1958 amidst the agony of the Algerian war brought a restatement of the old assimilationist promises, dreams or illusions (depending on the perspective from which they were seen), encapsulated at this time in the slogan "Tous Français de Dunkerque à Tamanrasset."" (284)

laughter through the mere image of such a drastic and sudden climatic change brought about by immigration. However, in this fanciful anecdote desertification can be viewed as the Algerian immigrant parallel to the French concept of integration where immigrants to France are expected to conform to certain French ideals of culture, language, habits, and even ways of thinking in order to enter into society and coexist with native-born French citizens with a minimum of inconvenience to all parties involved. This concept, while promoted as an ideal and intended to facilitate the incorporation of foreign peoples into French society, is unbalanced as it places the brunt of the work of integration on the shoulders of immigrants and makes little to no mention of efforts needed on the part of the host country to welcome and accommodate incoming peoples. Hence, just as the idea of integrating through desertification is ludicrous, when held up as a parallel or alternative to the French concept of integration of immigrants, it highlights the shortcomings and near impossibility of the French assimilationist model and policies regarding immigration. This segment plays and builds on several bad ideas and negative points, once again building on the idea of failure. Furthermore, with the return of the verb "couler" in this section—« On va couler la France. » (*Djurdjurassique Bled* 25) / "We are going to ruin France."—Fellag ironically brings back the theme of failure. However, nothing in this segment should be taken literally. Instead, what the audience witnesses is a reappropriation of and twist on the bad ideas, negative points, and failures of French colonialism as well as general fears and mishandlings surrounding contemporary immigration to France, in order to expose and comment on them.

In the final section of the first half of *Djurdjurassique Bled*, Fellag continues the theme of immigration in a section where he speaks of the consequences of the FIS (*Front islamique du salut*—the Islamic fundamentalist party) winning the first round of national elections in Algeria in 1991. The results were that, despite a majority of the population voting for this political

party—Fellag explains this by saying that the Algerian people thought the elections were a joke and that the party who received the least votes would win, as per usual—everyone was terrified with the results (even Islamists themselves) and rushed to any consulate available, although primarily the French consulate, to apply for a visa so they could leave the country. Fellag then muses on visas, standing in line, passport photos, and embarks on other digressions before stating that he was one of the many people who were frantically trying to obtain a visa to flee the country. He then speaks of his arrival in France and says that immediately upon arriving in Paris he went to a night club where he could dance away forty years of frustrations—plus the accumulated, inherited frustrations of his father, grandfather and great-grandfather. (*Djurdjurassique Bled* 44). After his arrival at the club he says, « Je me suis promené pendant deux heures au milieu de cette merveille et tout d'un coup, en me retournant, j'ai vu une carte de résidence aux yeux bleus ! Oh pardon, une fille aux yeux bleus, excusez-moi, j'ai fait un clapsus ! » (*Djurdjurassique Bled* 44) / "I walked around for two hours in the middle of this marvelous sight and all of a sudden, while turning around, I saw a blue-eyed green card! Oh, I'm sorry, a blue-eyed girl, excuse me, I made a Freudian clip…slip!" He then decided to observe the young woman from afar before approaching her. After having worked up the courage to talk to her, he asked her to join him on the dance floor and they began to dance cheek to cheek. He states that it was the happiest day of his life until she asked the seemingly innocent question, "Where are you from?". After a bit of hesitation, the conversation resumed:

> --[…] Je…je…(embarrassé) je…Allez-devine!
> --Euh…tu viens d'Espagne ?
> --Enfin, c'est pas très loin…
> --Hum…Italien ?
> --*No exactemente* !
> --Tu es juif ?
> --…c'est des cousins !

--Oh non, je ne vois pas. Allez, s'il te plaît, dis-le-moi !
--[…]
--[…] Je suis ALGÉRIEN !
--(Étouffée) AL…GÉ…RIENNNN !
--(Lui faisant faire des mouvements brusques de danse) C'est rien, c'est rien…
--(Au bord de l'évanouissement) ALGÉRIEN !
--Pourquoi, c'est grave ? Mais tu sais, ça se soigne, hein !
--ALG… »
Elle a fondu dans mes bras. J'ai essayé de la rattraper, j'arrivais pas. Je l'ai COULÉE ! (*Djurdjurassique Bled* 46-47)

--[…] I…I…(embarrassed) I…Go ahead, guess!
--Umm…you're from Spain?
--Well, it's not far…
--Hum…Italian?
--*No exactemente*!
--You're Jewish?
--…they're cousins!
--Oh no, I don't know. Go ahead, please tell me!
--[…]
--[…] I'm ALGERIAN!
--(Choking) AL…GER…IANNNN!
--(Having her do brusque dance movements) It's nothing, it's nothing…
--(On the verge of fainting) ALGERIAN!
--Why, is it serious? You know, it can be treated!
--ALG…"
She collapsed into my arms. I tried to catch her. I couldn't do it. I brought her DOWN!

With this purportedly personal anecdote, and with the returning verb "couler," the first half of *Djurdjurassique Bled* comes to an end. (*Djurdjurassique Bled* 29-47)

In this section Fellag moves away from overtly historical and future narratives of groups of people, and instead focuses on the theme of national identities in a more contemporary and intimate setting. While this would appear to be a foray into completely new territory, he sets up the anecdote in such a way that the audience is able to recognize how these identities and attitudes to said identities have been historically formed throughout the course of over a century of tense Franco-Algerian relations. In the anecdote, Fellag's slip of the tongue when referring to the young French woman as a "green card," his hesitation and anxiety concerning revealing his

nationality to her, and her extreme emotional response that leads to a physical reaction all reveal attitudes about Frenchness and Algerianness that have been constructed between the two peoples through a long history of colonization, war, and immigration. Furthermore, Fellag's revelation of his Algerian nationality as if it were a type of disease, saying that it can be cured, and the woman's fainting after digesting the news, all cast Algerianness seen from a French perspective as a sort of pathology.

In his short documentary film, *Salam Alikoum Bernard*, the director, Adam Pianko, uses clips of *Djurdjurassique Bled* and interviews with Fellag and members of the Algerian diaspora in France to explore contemporary experiences of Algerian immigrant communities. In one interview Fellag speaks of this segment set in the nightclub saying, « Ce passage-là est peut-être un des passages-clés de tout mon spectacle. Pourquoi ? Parce qu'il parle d'une image de la peur, de la peur de se dire. C'est tout le complexe des gens de chez nous, du Maghreb […] qui est révélé dans cette scène.[78] » (TAMAZIGHT TV4 17 :37-18 :01) / "This passage here is perhaps one of the key passages in my entire show. Why? Because it talks about an image of fear, of the fear of revealing oneself. It's the whole hang-up of people from where we're from, the Maghreb […] that is revealed in this scene." After this, Fellag states that the story did not in reality involve himself at all, but was inspired by a young Algerian man in France who originally told his French girlfriend that he was Polish to avoid her reaction to his Algerian nationality, and after three years of dating had still not told her the truth. Then Fellag enters into an analysis of this fear by explaining:

> Pendant 132 ans de colonialisme, on nous a donné une image. On nous a donné une image, on nous a plaqué une image de l'Arabe, en fait de l'Algérien vil, voleur, assassin, traître et qui fomente toujours des trahisons. Je crois qu'au bout d'un moment, euh, on

[78] All transcriptions from this documentary are my own.

> s'est accaparé de cette image de nous-mêmes. Dans l'inconscient, dans le subconscient il y a toujours cette peur de se dire. En France, ici, les gens d'origine de chez moi ont peur de leur propre image, ont peur de ce que les Français vont penser d'eux. Et parfois, quand on veut exprimer ça, quand on veut lutter contre l'image qui est finalement une espèce de complexe d'infériorité qu'on nous a donné, et parfois peut-être qu'on le fait un peu trop fort. Peut-être qu'on le fait un peu violemment, ou même très, très violemment. Parce que l'image de dévalorisation est tellement puissante que pour s'en sortir, eh ben, on provoque une autre violence qui est une identité exacerbée. Peut-être qu'on fait trop après, quand on veut exister en tant qu'Algériens. (TAMAZIGHT TV4 19 :32-20 :52)
>
> During 132 years of colonialism, they gave us an image. They gave us an image, they stuck an image on us of the Arab, actually of the Algerian who is vile, thieving, murderous, treacherous, and who incites betrayals. I think that after a while, umm, we appropriated this image of ourselves. In our unconscious, in our subconscious, there is always this fear of revealing ourselves. Here in France, people who are where I'm from or who have roots there are afraid of their own image, are afraid of what the French are going to think of them. And sometimes, when we want to express that, when we want to push back against the image that is after all a kind of inferiority complex that they gave us, sometimes maybe we push back a little too hard. Perhaps we do it a little violently, or even very, very violently. Because the discrediting image is so powerful that in order to get out from under it, well, we bring about another violence that is an extreme identity. Maybe we do too much in the aftermath of it all, when we want to exist as Algerians.

This explanation, that relates not only to this passage of *Djurdjurassique Bled* but to several other passages pertaining to young Algerian men in a western European context or in their encounters with Europeans, as Fellag underlines, is historically rooted. French and other European settler populations in colonial Algeria traditionally debased Muslim Algerians in their rhetoric and actions in order to legitimate their usurpation of land and resources as well as to assert themselves and their authority as superior. These demoralizing discourses and attitudes have become so deeply rooted that they continue to live on in French perceptions of Muslim North African immigrants and have embedded themselves in the psyches of Algerians. Fellag highlights this in this passage of *Djurdjurassique Bled* by comically amplifying his reticence in telling the young woman where he is from, describing Algerianness as a sort of disease, and then having the woman respond in such an extreme way that she eventually faints. In the final

sentence of the passage, « Je l'ai COULÉE ! » (*Djurdjurassique Bled* 47) / "I brought her DOWN!" we see the return of the verb "couler" to hint once again at the theme of failure. However, as is always the case when this verb arises in this work, the literal sense of the sentence should be questioned. It is not truly the Algerian man, in this instance, who brings the woman down and incites failure, but rather the sentence hints at historical failures to construct positive images of Arabs and the long-lasting consequences of these failures. Yet, Fellag chooses to use laughter to push back against this negative image and the fear surrounding it, thus contributing to a deconstruction and reconsideration of the larger issue of perceptions and images of Algerians and their repercussions in French and other contemporary European multiethnic societies.

The passages of *Djurdjurassique Bled* that I have chosen to analyze all use an extreme sense of irony and sarcasm to highlight ways in which both France and the postcolonial Algerian state have historically excluded certain members—primarily Berbers in Algeria and Algerian immigrants in France—from representations of nationhood and rightful places as upstanding members of society. These historical processes of othering, which represent failures to construct healthy, equitable societies, have repercussions that are felt in various ways in present-day perceptions of Algerians on both sides of the Mediterranean. Yet, Fellag's comedic manipulations of history, creative imaginings of future role reversals concerning power dynamics, and making fun of contemporary French perceptions of Algerianness, not only shed light on the errors of the past and their unfortunate consequences, but also momentarily relieve these serious topics from some of their heaviness so that audiences may look at them from different perspectives and potentially discover new ways of correcting centuries-old failures and shortcomings. As Henri Bergson wrote in his seminal essay, *Le Rire,* « Il [le comique] exprime

donc une imperfection individuelle ou collective qui appelle la correction immédiate. Le rire est cette correction même. Le rire est un certain geste social, qui souligne et réprime une certaine distraction spéciale des hommes et des événements. » (113) / It [comedy] thus expresses an individual or collective imperfection that calls for immediate correction. Laughter is this very correction. Laughter is a certain social gesture that underlines and represses a certain special absent-mindedness of men and of events." This view of laughter as a corrective device does not so much function as a rectification of individual behavior in this one-man show—as was so often the case in Bergson's own applications of his theory—, but rather as a correction to social ills that have been formed primarily by administrations throughout history. The individual characters or groups that provoke laughter in Fellag's sketches harken back to historical failures that necessitate corrections in the present day if French and Algerian societies are to become more inclusive and just regarding certain segments of their populations.

Le dernier chameau: Questioning Identities and Roles

While Fellag's one-man show, *Le dernier chameau* (2004, 2005) continues to investigate *Djurdjurassique Bled*'s themes of history, identity, and politics, the comedic tone is different. *Le dernier chameau* consists primarily of Fellag's childhood memories of growing up during and immediately after the Algerian war of independence, and discovery of the larger, quickly changing world around him. Whereas *Djurdjurassique Bled*'s comedy is based more on irony and biting sarcasm, the comedy in *Le dernier chameau* is more observational, with the humor coming from a child's perspectives on and attempts to understand a complicated historical, watershed moment. Even the moments of fantastical make-believe that are a feature of both

shows, possess a softer, less overtly politically charged, and more whimsical feel in *Le dernier chameau*. Olivier Mongin summarizes the tone in his book, *De quoi rions-nous?* by stating:

> Le rire est ici celui de l'enfance retrouvée, l'humour est moins noir et cruel que dans les autres spectacles de Fellag. En effet, dans celui-ci il a délibérément mis entre parenthèses, hormis quelques allusions, la période qui va de l'indépendance en 1962 à son départ pour la France en 1995. C'est dire que le pouvoir n'est pas l'objet du rire et qu'il s'agit moins de savoir comment on peut survivre dans un monde de répression que de rire de la manière dont on vivait ensemble. (103-104)
>
> The laughter here is that of a remembered childhood. The laughter is less dark and cruel than in Fellag's other shows. In fact, in this one he deliberately puts to the side for the moment, except for some allusions, the period from independence in 1962 to his departure for France in 1995. That is to say that power/the government is not the object of laughter and that it is less about knowing how we can survive in a world of repression than it is about laughing at the way in which we lived together.

However, that is not to say that an indirect criticism of structures of power is completely absent from this one-man show. It simply is expressed in a gentler manner, through the observations, impressions, and questionings of a child. The show explores a myriad of topics, including reflections on cinema and Fellag's early experiences with film, television, and radio; the first time that he saw French people in person; perspectives on the Algerian war of independence seen from a child's eyes; the French colonial school system; visiting the circus and conversing with a talking camel named Miloud; relations with pieds-noirs; the eventual Algerian victory and the subsequent departure of the pied-noir population; and a concluding scene that depicts Fellag's own departure for France thirty-three years later. In this section, close attention will be paid to the theme of questioning identities and roles in passages involving Fellag's first encounters with French soldiers, childhood relationships with pieds-noirs, and varying perspectives on the end of the Algerian war and its consequences for identities and the composition of Algerian society.

The opening section of *Le dernier chameau* involves musings on chaotic film screenings in an Algerian cinema of the late 1950s/early 1960s and the films that left a lasting impression on

the young Fellag. This introduces the spectator to the overarching theme of the comedian's initial discoveries of the wider world around him, a theme that will be developed throughout the course of the one-man show. Immediately following this lengthy introduction, he explains that in the late 1950s and very early 1960s, during the Algerian war, he lived in an isolated mountain village in Kabylia that was cut off from the rest of the world. Thus, the tumultuous events of the war and the main actors of the conflict remained abstractions for the young boy. Naturally he had heard talk of the French but had never seen one with his own eyes. When news that a French army unit would be arriving in the village to collect weaponry so that it cannot be intercepted by the FLN, the entire population of the village is in nervous anticipation of witnessing firsthand exactly what a French person looks like, in particular the young Fellag. He is at odds with his emotions as the older people have spoken of the great beauty of the French, all the while evoking a cruel, almost inhuman quality that they possess. When the fateful day arrives and the villagers spot the French military unit approaching them from afar, everyone is shocked at what they see. The French soldiers are, in fact, a company of *tirailleurs sénégalais*—Senegalese colonial troops in the service of the French army—who pray five times a day and observe Ramadan just like the villagers themselves. This leaves the young Fellag to his own devices as to reconciling what he has witnessed with the bits of information that he has heard regarding the French. Shortly after this event, he learns that he too is French and looks deeply into the mirror expecting to see a black person, since he believes all French people to be black after seeing the soldiers arrive in his village. From the moment of anticipation of seeing French people for the first time, to the shock of discovery, and finally to the young child's attempts to synthesize what he has heard with what he has witnessed and thinks he knows for certain, the spectator not only laughs at the ways in which the young Fellag grapples with notions of identity but also begins to question these

notions just as he does. For, in the end, his youthful innocence and ignorance serve merely as another perspective from which to consider the complicated questions of national, racial, and ethnic identities.

Fellag's combination of nervousness and excitement at the announcement of the arrival of French soldiers, up to this point a completely abstract concept for him, derives primarily from the contradictory manner in which he has heard adults speak of the French. He states:

> Une légende, qui courait depuis la nuit des temps, disait qu'ils [les Français] étaient d'une grande beauté. Au point que nous utilisions couramment l'expression *Yeçbeh am-urumi !*, qui veut dire : Il est beau comme un Français ! Mais, en même temps, dans l'imaginaire transmis par ma grand-mère, ma mère et mes tantes, ils n'étaient pas tout à fait humains. Ainsi, quand je refusais d'aller au lit, ma mère n'évoquait-elle pas le loup, mais disait d'une voix menaçante : Va te coucher tout de suite, sinon *Bitchouh* viendra te manger tout cru ! Dans les cinq secondes qui suivaient, je dormais à poings fermés, de peur de me faire dévorer par cet ogre, dont les deux syllabes me terrifiaient. *Bitchouh* était la transcription phonétique kabyle de Bugeaud, l'un des fameux généraux qui avaient « pacifié » l'Algérie comme on dit chez vous, et auquel les autochtones prêtaient un caractère sanguinaire et monstrueux[79].
>
> Est-ce que les militaires français, malgré leur grande beauté, seraient aussi terribles que leur auguste prédécesseur ? (*Le dernier chameau et autres histoires* 137-138)[80]
>
> A legend that had been in circulation since the dawn of time said that they [the French] possessed a great beauty. To such an extent that we frequently used the expression *Yeçbeh am-urumi!* which means: He is handsome like a Frenchman! But, at the same time, in the collective imagination transmitted by my grandmother, my mother, and my aunts, they were not completely human. Therefore, when I refused to go to bed, my mother did not evoke the wolf, but rather said with a threatening voice: Go to bed right away, or *Bitchouch* will come eat you alive! In the five seconds that followed, I was fast asleep out of fear of being devoured by this ogre whose two-syllable name terrified me. *Bitchouh* was the phonetic transcription in Kabyle of Bugeaud, one of the famous generals who had "pacified" Algeria as they say where you are from, and to whom the

[79] These legends were apparently widespread. As Evans and Phillips state, "French history books would extol Bugeaud as the founding father of French Algeria, the genius who opened the way for colonization. For Algerians, though, his name lives on as a byword for brutality. Growing up in the village of El-Arrouch in the 1930s, Mohammed Harbi vividly remembers how his mother frightened him with stories about the ogre Bugeaud, who would come and eat him up if he did not go to sleep." (29)

[80] Unless otherwise noted, quotes from the one-man show, *Le dernier chameau*, are taken from Fellag's published text, *Le dernier chameau et autres histoires* (2004), published by Éditions JC Lattès.

> natives attributed a bloodthirsty and monstruous nature.
>
> Would the French soldiers, despite their great beauty, be as terrible as their imposing predecessor?

It is thus quite understandable that the young Fellag would have conflicting emotions regarding the arrival of French soldiers to his village. While renowned for their supposed good looks, they were also the descendants of Bugeaud, a French military "hero" whose reputation became the material for chilling legends among Algerians during the colonial period. This reputation seems honestly earned as Marshal Thomas Robert Bugeaud (1784-1849) led and inspired military campaigns in Algeria that finalized the brutal conquest and paved the way for settler colonization, forcing the submission of Muslim Algerians using any means necessary. It was Bugeaud who initiated and promoted horrifying and inhumane tactics against Muslim Algerians that would give the early years of colonization in the region its particular ruthless and savage qualities and would unfortunately set the tone for 132 years of French domination in Algeria. In her book, *By Sword and Plow: France and the Conquest of Algeria*, the historian, Jennifer E. Sessions, offers vivid descriptions of Bugeaud's tactics, writing:

> The primary tactical weapon in Bugeaud's "total war" was the *razzia*, a scorched-earth raid designed to simultaneously destroy the enemy's economic resources and feed the French army. His predecessor had condemned the first French *razzias* as inexcusable "wars of savages," but "cut," "burn," "devastate," "ravage" became the orders of the day after 1841. […] The atmosphere of unrestrained violence gave rise to other horrific practices, as well, and French troops "[took] on a savagery that would make an honest bourgeois' hair stand on end," according to one officer. Algerian soldiers were decapitated and their heads displayed on bayonet points, flagstaffs, saddles, and camp walls as a warning to local people. Cash rewards were distributed for each pair of ears taken from the enemy, and one commander ordered that any man who brought in a living prisoner be beaten. Officers' accounts rarely mention rape, specifically, but scattered references to "insulted women" leave no doubt that sexual violence was part of the French repertory of terror. Most horrific to French observers were the *enfumades* of the mid-1840s, in which French forces trapped hundreds of Algerian civilians inside caves and smoked them to death by setting bonfires at the cave entrances. Characterized by metropolitan legislators as an "act of premeditated murder of a defenseless enemy," the

enfumade became the ultimate symbol of the barbaric nature of Bugeaud's war. (163) The Marshal Bugeaud and his tactics became so notorious that over one hundred years later the mere mention of his name made the boogey man appear relatively harmless in comparison for a generation of Algerian children. Thus, despite the fact that as a child Fellag had never seen a French person with his own eyes and the violence of the war of independence did not seem to have much impact on his isolated village, he did possess rudimentary notions of the reputation of the French through rumors, folk sayings, and second-hand knowledge passed down through generations.

If the contradictory messages concerning the French that Fellag received are not sufficiently confusing for the young boy, his actual witnessing of French soldiers adds another layer of intricacy that further complicates his views of the broader world around him. The French soldiers that he sees are a battalion of *tirailleurs sénégalais,* naturally leading him in his child's reasoning to the assumption that all French people are black and Muslim. Fellag says, « Non seulement les Français étaient noirs, mais, en plus, ils étaient musulmans ! Les gamins du village couraient partout en hurlant l'incroyable nouvelle : les Français sont noirs ! Les Français sont noirs et musulmans ! » (*Le dernier chameau et autres histoires* 140-141) / "Not only were the French black, but, on top of that, they were Muslim! The kids of the village ran around everywhere shouting the incredible news: The French are black! The French are black and Muslim!" It is highly unlikely that anything in his previous experiences would have mentally prepared him for this shocking discovery. Despite the fact that he is from a remote mountain village in Kabylia and had never seen a French person with his own eyes prior to this event, Fellag does speak of being a fervent fan of cinema in his youth. If this part of his youth does in fact correspond to the period where he avidly frequented cinemas and had the experience of

consuming numerous French and other European films—even if he did not understand the language—, he would have encountered visual images of Frenchness. However, none of the films of this period would have explicitly or implicitly associated blackness with Frenchness. In fact, the probability of Fellag seeing black people on movie screens during his youth is quite small. The Senegalese film director, Ousmane Sembène's classic film, *La noire de…*, which is considered to be the first African film does not appear until 1966. Representations of black characters in French cinema before the late 1960s are quite rare indeed[81]. Despite the young Fellag's preconceived notions of Frenchness and cinematic influences that would have seemingly confirmed the idea that French people are white, the child's observations that French people are black are not completely erroneous. The soldiers that he sees possess French citizenship—as does the young Fellag, which he will soon discover—, providing him with not only an initial glimpse of real French people, but also of the diversity of France. While his early discovery of French black people confuses him, challenges his previously held notions of what it means to be French, and leads him to the erroneous conclusion that *all* French people are black, this experience sparks a healthy questioning of matters of identity and an appreciation of multiethnic, pluralistic societies. These become recurring themes not only in Fellag's one-man shows under consideration in this work, but in the comedian's entire corpus. This childhood anecdote is therefore a moment that must be seen as influential in forming Fellag's worldview and shaping his ideas on identity.

In the published text of *Le dernier chameau*, this section ends with the village children running and shouting that the French are black. However, in a filmed version of the show at the

[81] Jean Renoir's classic film about WWI, *La grande illusion* (1937) does feature one token black soldier.

Théâtre des Bouffes du Nord in Paris from July 4, 2005, this section continues with an attempted synthesis of the young Fellag's recent discoveries. He says:

> Un peu plus tard, j'ai appris que c'était un bataillon de tirailleurs sénégalais. Et un tout petit peu plus tard, j'ai appris que moi aussi, j'étais français. Aïe ya ?!?! [He attempts to look at himself from multiple angles in disbelief.] Je suis allé tout de suite me regarder dans un miroir pour voir si j'étais noir. Je passais des heures entières devant la glace à regarder le Français qui était moi de l'autre côté. Et au bout d'un certain temps d'observation, j'avais déduit en fonction du modèle que j'avais en face que les Français nous ressemblaient comme deux gouttes d'eau. Alors, parfois je m'amusais à parler à l'autre moi-même de l'autre côté de la glace. Je te peu ne me [indistinct French sounds] …Mohand [indicating himself]. Oh, re peu de je me. Re peu te me heu je me ? Oh, re peu de je re heu me je me ne veu [more indistinct French sounds]. Mais on n'arrivait pas à communiquer parce que je ne comprenais pas ce que je me lui disais. Un jour, je suis allé voir mon père et je lui dis, « Papa, c'est vrai que moi aussi je suis français ? » Et mon père, d'un air grave me dit, « Oui, mon fils. Tu es français jusqu'à nouvel ordre…et le nouvel ordre est en marche ! »[82] (Fellag-Le dernier chameau (spectacle complet HD) 45 :00-46 :20)

> A little later, I learned that it was a battalion of *tirailleurs sénégalais*. And a little later after that, I learned that I too was French. Whaaaat?!?! [He attempts to look at himself from multiple angles in disbelief.] I immediately went to look at myself in a mirror to see if I was black. I would spend hours in front of the mirror looking at the Frenchman that I was from the other side. And after a certain amount of time spent in observation, I deduced, based on the model that I had in front of me, that the French looked exactly like us. So, sometimes I played around talking to the other me from the other side of the mirror. Je te peu ne me [indistinct French sounds]…Mohand [indicating himself]. Oh, re peu de je me. Re peu te me heu je me? Oh, re peu de je re heu me ne veu [more indistinct French sounds]. But we weren't able to communicate because I didn't understand what I was saying to the other me. One day, I went to see my father and I said to him, "Dad, is it true that I'm also French?" And my father, with a serious tone said to me, "Yes, my son. You are French until further notice…and the further notice is underway!"

This passage provokes much audience laughter in part because most everyone can relate to the experiences of a child who is on a quest of self-discovery and pieces information together in attempts—however clumsy they might be—to know a little bit more about who they are. Indeed, the young Fellag's gazing into a mirror and not knowing for sure exactly who is looking back at

[82] This transcription is my own.

him is vaguely reminiscent of Lacan's mirror stage of infancy, even though Fellag is well beyond that point at this moment in his life. The complex information that he is trying to process understandably confuses him and leaves him destabilized and questioning some of the most basic elements of his own existence. No matter how ridiculous it might appear from an outside perspective, the truth of the matter is that growing up in Algeria during the war of independence would have given Fellag very few points of reference regarding who he is and what makes up his own identity. It was a time of not only violence and political insecurity, but also of mixed messages. The young Fellag is growing up surrounded by Berber traditions and language, has recently had exposure to diverse elements of French culture from cinema and his glimpses of French soldiers, but lives in a country where the FLN is using a purported shared sense of Arabness as a rallying cry for all Muslim Algerians to fight the French. Furthermore, Fellag's father is a Kabyle Berber, but through his identification with the struggle for independence subscribes to the FLN's claims of a national Arab identity for all Muslim Algerians. The father has even bought a radio solely for the purpose of listening to the pan-Arab inspired radio program, "Les Arabes parlent aux Arabes," that the Algerian resistance broadcasts from exile in Cairo. (*Le dernier chameau et autres histoires* 142-143) Thus, when Fellag learns that he—along with the Senegalese soldiers that he has seen—is actually French, it is almost unfathomable. Yet, it is true[83]. After over a century of bearing the status of "French subject," and being denied

[83] As G.H. Bousquet states in his article, "How the Natives of Algeria Became French Citizens," "The law of May 7, 1946, confirmed by Article 80 of the French constitution of the same year, proclaimed all Algerians who were previously native subjects to be citizens on the same level as all others." (603) This law was the *loi Lamine Guèye* and applied to all natives in France's territories, many of whom had previously held the status of "French subject."

French citizenship—with the exception of a select few—all Algerian Muslims became citizens in 1946, four years before Fellag's birth.

When this passage is considered in its entirety—anticipation of French soldiers' arrival and presentation of preconceived notions of Frenchness, shock of witnessing black French soldiers, and innocent and naïve attempts to come to terms with his own status as a French citizen—the instability and questioning of identities that it presents evoke Julia Kristeva's seminal work on alterity, *Étrangers à nous-mêmes*. In this work she writes, « Vivre avec l'autre, avec l'étranger, nous confronte à la possibilité ou non d'*être un autre*. Il ne s'agit pas simplement—humanistement—de notre aptitude à accepter l'autre ; mais d'*être à sa place*, ce qui revient à se penser et à se faire un autre à soi-même. » (25) / "Living with the other, with the foreigner, confronts us with the possibility of or of not *being an other*. It is not simply—humanistically—about our ability to accept the other; but rather *being in their place*, which comes back to thinking about oneself and making oneself an other to oneself." Regardless of the lighthearted innocence and youthful ignorance that surround Fellag's mirror scene in particular, this passage performs Kristeva's sophisticated musings on finding alterity and true empathy outside as well as within one's own self. In fact, the young Fellag's lack of guile while undergoing these processes of internal and external discovery and reflection, represent Kristeva's noble ideals involved in questioning identity and attempting to understand ourselves and others, perhaps better than any serious work on the subject ever could. The playful and genuinely curious nature of the young Fellag at the center of these passages allows for a more open-minded and impartial perspective on questions brought about by some of the most contentious and violent moments in French and Algerian history. These unique perspectives on difficult questions of identity and history continue throughout the show.

After these initial discoveries of the outside world and questioning of complicated identity issues during his youth in his native village in Kabylia, Fellag's narration continues in a more or less chronological manner, recounting his family's move to a suburb of Algiers where he attends a French colonial school and unexpectedly meets De Gaulle, then another move two years later back to Kabylia, this time to the larger city of Tizi-Ouzou. It is in his recollections of daily life in Tizi-Ouzou where Fellag offers his audience nuanced perspectives from a child's eyes on pied-noir—Muslim Algerian relations on the ground during the war of independence. In Tizi-Ouzou, his father finds the family a place to live in project housing where two groups cohabitate, French Algerians and Algerian Algerians, in the words of Fellag. (*Le dernier chameau et autres histoires* 153) These descriptions of European—Algerian relations during the war are noteworthy as they give the spectator a different point of view and tone from what one normally reads in history books and witnesses in documentaries on the subject. He describes tensions and socio-economic inequalities between the two groups, but at the same time he provides details of childhood relationships between members of different racial and ethnic groups from the perspective of lived experience, adding intricacies and an individual approach that are often lacking from more formal studies of this particular historical moment and event.

Fellag prefaces the section by highlighting discriminatory perceptions that have characterized European—Algerian relations since the beginning of the colonial period. He states:

> Jusqu'à l'indépendance, les Européens se considéraient comme les seuls véritables habitants du pays. Nous, au plan administratif, nous étions des Indigènes. Au plan géographique des autochtones. Au plan racial des Arabes. Au plan ethnique des Berbères. Des musulmans au plan religieux, et des melons au plan botanique. Ne comprenant pas le rapport que nous avions avec cette cucurbitacée, je consultai le dictionnaire à « melon » et lus : *plante annuelle rampante, cultivée pour ses fruits, demandant de la chaleur et de la lumière* ! Désormais, j'étais très fier d'être un melon.
> (*Le dernier chameau et autres histoires* 153-154)

> Until independence, the Europeans considered themselves to be the only true inhabitants of the country. On the administrative level we were the indigenous people. On the geographic level, natives. On the racial level, Arabs. On the ethnic level, Berbers. Muslims on the religious level, and melons [a pejorative, racist term in French for Arabs] on the botanical level. Not understanding the connection we had with this member of the gourd family, I consulted the dictionary under "melon" and I read: *trailing annual plant, cultivated for its fruits, needing heat and light*! From that point on, I was very proud to be a melon.

This introduction describes the ways in which the French colonial administration and European settler population viewed Muslim Algerians throughout the colonial period, placing them at the very bottom of a racialized hierarchy so as to better implement their own authority and prestige, while appropriating and exploiting resources and labor[84]. In Fellag's categorization of the settler European view on Muslim Algerians, they are broken down at every level until the very last "botanical" level is reached, in which they are reduced simultaneously to a racist slur and a fruit from the Cucurbitaceae family. Being a child and not recognizing the offensive term, "melon," he does research and finds the scientific definition of the plant. His guileless approach to his research, once again, leads to confusion but also more than one astute observation. By giving the definition of the plant, he sheds light on the fact that the slur is a way of stripping the people to whom it is meant to refer of their humanity. It is this dehumanizing view of Muslim Algerians that facilitated European settler mistreatment of the native population for over a century. Only

[84] Naylor cites Pierre Bourdieu and references Albert Camus when seeking to explain the pied-noir conception of their own position and attitudes toward Muslim Algerians. He writes, "As colonialism entrenched itself in Algeria, the pieds-noirs became consumed by illusions that distorted their historical perspective. This explained their garrison mentality and opposition to change or reform. Colonialism produced the pied-noir's identity at the expense of the colonized. The European settlers' identity became inventive; it not only subordinated the native Muslims but also "inferiorized" them. Pierre Bourdieu observed that "the European gradually created an environment that reflected his own image…,a world in which he no longer felt himself to be a stranger and in which, by a natural reversal, the Algerian was finally considered to be the stranger." Even in the works of Camus, a man with extraordinary sensitivities, Meursault thinks nothing of killing an Arab in *The Stranger* and Oran's epidemic seems to have remarkably spared the missing, omitted Muslim population in *The Plague*." (15)

when seen as less than human could the Europeans proceed with the usurpation of Muslim land and resources, denigration of their culture, and denial of certain rights. However, by giving this definition of the term, Fellag is able to reappropriate the slur as something that is admirable. Noticing the positive aspects of the plant—need for warmth and light, recurring every year, and bearing fruit—he puts a spin on the meaning and claims it as a mark of pride.

When describing the general atmosphere between pied-noir and Muslim Algerian schoolchildren while growing up in Tizi-Ouzou, Fellag demonstrates that the historical antagonisms of the above passage manifest themselves in daily life. He notes that European and Algerian children mirror the tensions of the grown-up world of war that surrounds them. They walk to school separately. They play against each other on separate soccer teams. They play cowboys and Indians, with the Europeans always in the role of cowboys and the Algerians always in the role of Indians. (*Le dernier chameau et autres histoires* 154-155) They also play a game in which whoever can crush the most ants wins. In this game red ants represent the French and black ants represent the Algerians. As one might assume, European children crush black ants and Algerian children crush red ants. Fellag states, « À la fin de la partie, nous comptions les cadavres des fourmis, et le groupe qui avait perdu devait crier Vive l'Algérie française ! Ou Vive l'Algérie algérienne !, selon le cas, ce qui était l'humiliation suprême. » (*Le dernier chameau et autres histoires* 157-158) / "At the end of the game, we would count up the dead ants, and the group that lost had to yell "Long live French Algeria!" or "Long live Algerian Algeria!," depending on the case, which was the ultimate humiliation." Despite the tension between the children, it is important to note that through it all they still attend school and play together.

Fellag also mentions two pied-noir individuals for whom he holds a particular fondness: Monsieur Bitoun, the owner of the neighborhood electronics store; and Jeannette, a childhood

friend. Monsieur Bitoun, who lives above his shop, leaves a television in the display window on during the weekends and school breaks so that all the neighborhood children, regardless of their ethnic or racial backgrounds, can gather around and watch. He even responds to requests and comes down to adjust the volume or the antennae. Jeannette is the same age as Fellag and is the daughter of a European neighbor who everyone calls Charlot, presumably because he resembles Charlie Chaplin. The young Fellag and Jeannette are close friends and play soccer together every day. Although, as Fellag becomes slightly older, he begins to realize that his feelings for Jeannette surpass the bonds of friendship. He says:

> Un jour, j'ai sauvé une grande fourmi rouge du massacre, la mis dans une petite boîte en bois et décidai de l'appeler Jeannette. J'appris par cœur certains dialogues de mes films d'amour préférés et les lui répétai en secret. Je lui disais tout ce que je n'avais jamais osé avouer à l'autre Jeannette. Et dès que je me sentais à l'aise, je me laissais aller à l'improvisation : --Oh Jeannette, ma petite fourmi rouge ! Tes yeux verts sont comme les torches électriques que les mineurs de *Germinal* avec Jean Sorel et Claude Brasseur se mettaient sur le front. La lumière verte de tes yeux voyage à travers les galeries de mon âme pour chercher le secret de l'endroit où j'ai caché les bonbons que m'a donné Mme Pérez […]
> (*Le dernier chameau et autres histoires* 158)

> One day, I saved a large red ant from the massacre, put it in a little wooden box, and decided to name it Jeannette. I memorized certain dialogues from my favorite romantic movies and repeated them to her in secret. I used to say everything that I didn't dare confess to the other Jeannette. And as soon as I felt comfortable, I let myself improvise: --Oh Jeannette, my little red ant! Your green eyes are like the flashlights that the miners in *Germinal* with Jean Sorel and Claude Brasseur put on their foreheads. The green light of your eyes travels across the tunnels of my soul to look for the secret of the place where I hid the candy that Mrs. Pérez gave me […]

The comedy of this passage undoubtedly comes from the clumsy juxtaposition of images from his inner imaginary worlds that constitute his improvised love soliloquys. He mixes scenes from films he has recently seen with other details of his personal life and creates awkward love lines that he recites to a red ant who he imagines is the object of his affection. Aside from the humor of this section, the spectator is also struck by the parallels between this scene and the scene in

which the young Fellag speaks to himself in the mirror in an invented French-sounding gibberish. Both acts are done in private, are moments in which he rehearses what he would say in a real situation if the opportunity arose, and are glimpses into his inner life. This creates a connection between his (imagined) collocutors in both situations, a French-speaking Fellag and a representation of the pied-noir Jeannette, suggesting a special bond between the two—at least in his mind. Both Monsieur Bitoun and Jeannette represent personal bonds that the young Fellag possesses with the "enemy."

Considered together, these images of pieds-noirs during the war of independence paint a much more nuanced and detailed portrait of relations between Muslim and European Algerians than what is generally depicted in historiography of the era. Fellag introduces the subject with a description of the prejudiced attitudes of the pieds-noirs towards the Muslim population and proceeds to illustrate these convictions and the subsequent tensions that they create through childhood memories of playing with European children in his neighborhood. Other than the playful dimension that a child's perspective lends to this situation, this aligns with and reflects the broader historical moment and hostility of war. Yet, Fellag does not limit himself to an impersonal, anonymous, and amorphous description of the pieds-noirs of his childhood. His anecdotes involving Monsieur Bitoun and Jeannette show individual personalities, one-on-one relationships, and at times intimate feelings for these "others" in his community that contrast sharply with his previous descriptions and more general views. This more complex perspective on Fellag's pied-noir neighbors is important as by the final years of the war of independence, this population had developed a rather negative reputation on both sides of the Mediterranean. While it is true that they had collectively benefited from the inequalities of colonial Algeria and anti-Muslim racism was the order of the day while they occupied the privileged positions in this

society, the pieds-noirs were in reality a rather diverse and homogenous group, coming from various backgrounds and holding various political beliefs—just like Muslim Algerians—, and encountered much hostility upon their "repatriation" to France at the end of the war. As Naylor writes:

> Suffering from their own "psychoexistential" mentality that projected a superiority complex, most pieds-noirs found the idea of an "Arab" Algerian independence unbearable. From their perspective, they had constructed Algeria for France; it belonged to themselves and France. Pieds-noirs were portrayed by the French press as OAS[85] supporters, while actually the vast majority who entered France were confused, disoriented victims of its terror. […] Ironically, the pieds-noirs were now stereotyped as they had done to Algerians. Pierre Bourdieu observed at the time: "There is a good deal of unfairness in the attitude of those Frenchmen who make the pieds-noirs their scapegoats and blame all the tragic happenings in Algeria on their racism…it is the colonial Algeria that has produced the pied-noir and not the reverse." There were also pieds-noirs who expected and accepted eventual independence in some form; some even supported and collaborated with the FLN (42)

Thus, while not going so far as offering an apology for pied-noir attitudes and behaviors during the period of colonialism, Fellag nonetheless gives descriptions of this group in his one-man show that underline their diversity and complexities. On one hand he demonstrates the racism and tension that existed, while on the other hand highlighting his positive relationships with select individual pied-noir characters, providing a counter to certain historiographies that have, as Bourdieu suggests, attributed the creation of an oppressive and exploitative colonial system to them, instead of more realistically showing them as participants within this system who benefited from it. In a sort of postface to the one-man show, Fellag fast forwards to over thirty years in the future, after he has immigrated to France. While waiting in the ASSEDIC office (former French unemployment office), he sees Jeannette for the first time since she and her family left Algeria.

[85] The OAS (*Organisation de l'armée secrète*) was an extremist terrorist group and paramilitary unit during the Algerian war that fought to prevent Algerian independence and to keep Algeria French.

During their tearful reunion she asks about how things are in Tizi-Ouzou and he responds, « Ça va très bienn, *hamdoullah*, Jeannette ! Il ne manque que vous là-bas ! (*Le dernier chameau et autres histoires* 170) / "Things are reeeally good, Jeannette! Praise be to God! The only thing missing there is you!" While there is more than a little irony in this statement, seeing that this exchange occurred in the middle of the civil war of the 1990s and things were, in fact, not going well in Tizi-Ouzou, Fellag does suggest here and in later parts of the conversation that Jeannette is still a part of Tizi-Ouzou and vice versa. He says later that since she was born and raised there, it is also her home. This is meaningful as Jeannette and her family, along with the majority of pieds-noirs, would become uprooted at the end of the war, not being able to truly call anywhere home.

The final passages of *Le dernier chameau* depict the end of the war of independence and present several scenes that reflect Fellag's conflicting feelings at this time. He rejoices in this newfound independence that puts an end to the inequalities and tensions of the colonial era, but mainly mourns the loss of diversity and plurality that comes with the departure of large segments of the population and the arrival of a one-party state that seeks to unite remaining Algerians under the homogenizing and flattening official narrative of a single national identity. In the filmed performance, this section begins with the following passage, which is missing from the published text:

> Le 5 juillet 1962, l'Algérie devînt indépendante. Quelques jours plus tard, pour faire de moi un futur révolutionnaire, mon père me prit par la main et m'entraîna vers la grande place de la ville pour écouter le premier discours du premier président du pays. Il y avait des centaines et des centaines de milliers de femmes et d'hommes qui buvaient goulument les paroles du grand raïs. Soudain, vers le milieu de son discours, le président, excité, en colère se mit à marteler fortement du poing sur la table en hurlant « Nous sommes arabes, arabes, arabes ! » Mon père, ému, la larme à l'œil, se pencha vers moi et me dit, « Tu vois, mon fils. Je t'avais dit que c'était provisoire. C'est fini. Tu n'es plus français. Maintenant tu es arabe, arabe, arabe. » Je ne sais pas pourquoi, mais soudain j'ai

> eu très peur. Peur d'être trois fois la même chose.[86]
> (Fellag-Le dernier chameau (spectacle complet HD) 1 :25 :05-1 :26 :21)
>
> On July 5, 1962, Algeria became independent. A few days later, in order to turn me into a future revolutionary, my father took me by the hand and led me to the large town square to listen to the first speech of the first president of the country. There were hundreds and hundreds of thousands of women and men who were voraciously drinking up the words of the great head of state. Suddenly, towards the middle of his speech, the president, excited and angry, started to pound the table hard with his fist while yelling "We are Arab, Arab, Arab!" My father, moved, with a tear in his eye, leaned towards me and said, "You see, my son. I told you that it was temporary. It's done. You are no longer French. Now you are Arab, Arab, Arab." I don't know why, but all of a sudden, I was very scared. Scared to be three times the same thing.

It is immediately after this that Jeannette and her family, as well as all of the other pied-noir families in the neighborhood, leave the country in a rush. Fellag already feels the effects of this new era in Algeria. While heads of state clamor and tell their citizens emphatically who they are, large segments of this population who do not correspond to this identity flee precipitously. It is not only the pieds-noirs who rush to leave the country at the end of the war. Algeria's Jewish population with deep roots in the country, as well as harkis, leave in droves at this historical watershed moment. However, Fellag remains with his new, state-sanctioned identity of Arab cubed.

Immediately after attending the new president's speech, the young Fellag runs to the circus to announce to his friend, Miloud, that they are all free now. In a previous, whimsically fanciful passage of the one-man show, we are introduced to the character of Miloud, a talking camel who after an illustrious career in the film industry now works for the circus[87]. However, when the young boy goes to talk to his dromedary friend, he discovers that Miloud does not respond. He says, « Je compris alors qu'il avait cessé de parler. C'était le jour de mes douze ans,

[86] Transcription is mine.
[87] The name of the one-man show, *Le dernier chameau*, comes from this character.

qui coïncidait précisément avec le début de l'indépendance. Comme pour la plupart des hommes, mon enfance venait de prendre fin. Je savais maintenant que les animaux ne parleraient plus jamais. » (*Le dernier chameau et autres histoires* 165) / "I thus understood that he had stopped speaking. It was my twelfth birthday that coincided exactly with the beginning of independence. As was the case for most men, my childhood had just ended. I knew then that animals would never talk again." In Fellag's narration of events, he is able to capture the bittersweet aspect of Algerian independence[88]. While the country is free and colonialism's violence, inequities, and racism have met their long overdue end, Algeria's people suffer a loss of diversity and freedom of speech as a one-party state seizes control and attempts to unite the war-torn nation by dictating homogeneity of being and thought. Miloud and his ability to talk are not only representative of Fellag's childhood in which he is free to imagine and ask questions of the world around him, but they also symbolize the voice of the Algerian people who are now silenced.

Conclusion

In an abecedary attached as an addendum to the published text of *Djurdjurassique Bled*, Fellag briefly summarizes his views on recurring themes in his work. Under the entry marked, "Algérie," he writes:

[88] As well as capturing a range of emotions and multiple perspectives on the end of the war and the beginning of Algerian independence, Fellag's views could also be seen as reflecting the figure of the harki, Muslim Algerian soldiers who fought on the side of France during the war of independence and who have been viewed as traitors by the FLN-led postcolonial Algerian state. Fellag does not openly mention harkis in the one-man shows under consideration in this chapter. As Naylor mentions in earlier quotes, they were forgotten in France, and I would add in Algeria as well. However, with Fellag's complicity with pied-noir characters and mixed emotions surrounding independence, which could be viewed as treacherous by some, I would argue that he is evoking the figure of the harki whose name had become ineffable on both sides of the Mediterranean in the years following independence.

> L'Algérie est un pays blessé dans son identité. Peuple pluriel et de différentes dimensions culturelles, linguistiques : l'Algérie est tournée vers l'Afrique, la Méditerranée, l'Europe, elle a été traversée par les Romains, les Juifs, les Phéniciens, les Vandales, les Arabes, les Turcs, les Français, les Espagnols…Il faut absolument préserver la pluralité de notre culture. (*Djurdjurassique Bled* 109)

> Algeria is a country with a wounded identity. A plural people with different cultural and linguistic dimensions: Algeria looks towards Africa, the Mediterranean, Europe, it was crossed by Romans, Jews, Phoenicians, Vandals, Arabs, Turks, French, Spanish… It is absolutely necessary to preserve the plurality of our culture.

This is exactly the mission that Fellag sets out to accomplish in the passages of *Djurdjurassique Bled* and *Le dernier chameau* that are analyzed in this chapter. Countering narratives of homogeneity and 'pure' Arab identity propagated by the post-independence Algerian state, and laughing in the face of French preconceived notions of and discrimination against diasporic communities issued from France's colonial legacy, he seeks to show the richness and diversity of pluralistic Algerian identities on both sides of the Mediterranean. He rewrites the Berber people back into Algerian history and gives them the central role that they have been denied. He shows that Algerian immigrants in France have had, have, and will continue to have a rightful place in society. He demonstrates that the Berber, Arab, and French languages and cultures all contribute to making Algerian identity complex and strong. He goes beyond commonly accepted views of pieds-noirs to consider them as unique individuals who have played various roles in Algerian and French histories. In short, much of his one-man show work shakes up rigid historiographies and seemingly fixed views in order to highlight the diversity of peoples, opinions, and situations that constitute the Algerian experience, therefore paving the way for a more inclusive concept of Algerianness. As is often stated, "laughter is the best medicine," and through Fellag's humoristic and deeply thoughtful consideration of peoples that have been written out of official historical

narratives or who have been cast aside in postcolonial French and Algerian societies, he applies a balm to wounded histories and identities.

Chapter 3: Jamel Debbouze and Company: More Than Just Fooling Around

As seen in Chapter One, Jamel Debbouze has played a significant role in the development of ethnic minority comedy in France since the 1990s and continues to not only break barriers, but to pave the way for a new generation of multicultural French humorists. When he was starting out, the only other French comedian of Maghrebi origin to have already achieved mainstream success was Smaïn. Today, thanks in large part to Smaïn's groundbreaking work and Debbouze's influence as well as dedication to mentoring and providing platforms for new humorists of varied backgrounds, the French comedic landscape much better reflects France's cultural diversity than what it once did a mere twenty years ago. Debbouze has had an illustrious career as a solo and ensemble performer for the past almost thirty years, having begun his career in the mid-1990s, and then gradually but consistently gaining more and more success among French and francophone audiences—following his performance in Alain Chabat's hit film, *Astérix et Obélix: Mission Cléopâtre* (2002), he was reported to have been France's best-paid actor that year (Higbee 41). Alongside his one-man show and stand-up work, he has also collaborated with other performers in radio, television sitcom, various film genres, and sketch comedy. His collaborations have at different times (and occasionally simultaneously) involved work with seasoned, well-established comedians who have provided him with opportunities and sage professional advice; peers and colleagues with similar backgrounds and ambitions who have helped him to navigate the precarious world of the entertainment industry; and talented but inexperienced newcomers, many to whom he has given their first chance for widespread exposure. In this chapter, I hope to convey some of the breadth and influence of Debbouze's body of work by highlighting not only his appearances in several different genres and mediums (film, sitcom, sketch comedy, and solo performances), but also his fruitful professional

relationships with other comedians, writers, and directors; all the while highlighting his political and social engagement in numerous works of his comedic corpus.

Jamel Debbouze was born in 1975 in the Barbès district of Paris to immigrant parents from Morocco. While still very young, his family returned to Morocco, but shortly afterwards made the decision to return once again to France. From the age of three, Debbouze was raised and grew up in the Paris banlieue of Trappes, a disadvantaged peripheral area of the Île-de-France region known for its large immigrant and multicultural population. While the suburb has the reputation for being a rather rough place to grow up and to live, in large part due to its low-income housing estates and gang-related violence, several contemporary French entertainment celebrities of ethnic minority background have hailed from Trappes. Some notable stars from this suburb include the comedian and actor, Omar Sy (1978-); the rapper, Laouni Mouhid (1981-), whose better-known stage name is La Fouine; and the R&B singer, Tamara Marthe (1985-), known to audiences as Shy'm. Despite having obtained national and international celebrity status, Debbouze has throughout his career remained intimately linked to his hometown of Trappes in the minds of his fans. The media has played a role in promulgating this association, however, Debbouze himself has consistently highlighted his familial and hometown origins in much of his work as well as in cultivating his public image, wearing both as badges of honor. Isabelle Vanderschelden, a scholar of French cinema, states that, "He was brought up and educated in a French *banlieue*, where he immersed himself into the social life and culture of the housing estate as a teenager, whilst at home Arabic was spoken and the family's Moroccan

cultural heritage was preserved[89] […].” (64) While he has greatly publicized his origins in his stage and screen career, often spotlighting and most likely exaggerating the out-of-the-ordinary elements for comedic effect, Debbouze’s childhood was a modest one, being a child of Maghrebi immigrant parents in France who both worked hard to provide for their children.

His teenage years were formative in more ways than one, and led him to become the iconic, recognizable performer that he is today. On January 17, 1990, when Debbouze was fourteen years old, he was clipped by a high-speed train (TGV) at the train station of Trappes. A friend of his died in this devastating accident. Debbouze was left with a paralyzed right arm and hand. Throughout his career he has downplayed his physical handicap by keeping his right hand in his pocket and very rarely bringing explicit attention to this aspect of his condition and life story. In a filmed interview conducted by Daphné Roulier, she begins by asking him about his memories of the accident. He responds that he has very few memories of this moment and that this serves as a form of protection. However, he does share one memory that sheds light on how he managed and continues to manage his handicap, as well as his attitude toward the situation. He states :

> Quand le médecin est arrivé pour m’annoncer que je ne bougerais plus le bras, je me souviens qu’il y avait plein de stylos. Et j’en ai demandé un tout de suite pour me mettre à apprendre à écrire de la gauche immédiatement. Je savais qu’il ne fallait pas perdre de temps. Et donc, je n’ai pas souffert en disant « C’est un drame absolu. Comment je vais faire ? » Non, j’ai tout de suite bossé. […] Je me suis tout de suite adapté, on va dire[90]. (LCP – Assemblée nationale 1 :10-1 :29)
>
> When the doctor arrived to tell me that I would no longer move my arm, I remember that there were a lot of pens. And I asked for one of them right away so I could immediately start to learn to write with my left hand. I knew that I shouldn’t waste any time. And so, I

[89] In fact, Vanderschelden later continues to elaborate on some of the points made here by stating, “He promotes his French-Moroccan cultural heritage, possibly more than other Beur artists of his generation, using it as material to construct his stage image.” (64)
[90] All transcriptions in this chapter are my own.

> didn't suffer saying "It's an absolute disaster. How am I going to manage?" No, I went to work right away. […] I adapted right away, one could say[91].

While this incident surely changed his life and played a role in restricting future opportunities, as the quote demonstrates, Debbouze refused to allow it to completely hinder him, just as he currently refuses to be defined by his physical handicap. A paralyzed arm and hand would just serve as one more obstacle, but also as another reason to push himself to succeed despite all of the setbacks. It was shortly after this event that he discovered the world of the stage thanks to Alain "Papy" Degois, a drama teacher and founder of Déclic Théâtre in Trappes. In an article written by Degois himself, he describes how a young Jamel approached him saying that he wanted to do one-man shows and how Degois helped him in these beginning stages (Degois 25). He later continues his observations on the teenage Debbouze:

> Le premier spectacle de Jamel est le fruit de sept ans de travail. Tout jeune, Jamel avait cette flamme dans les yeux qui vous faisait croire en lui. Tout jouait pourtant contre lui : il était minuscule, handicapé, arabe, asthmatique…Selon ses propres termes, il ne pouvait même pas « faire poubelleur » ! Mais quand il montait sur scène, il jouait sa vie. Lui-même n'arrive toujours pas à croire à sa réussite. Il enfonce des portes sans savoir où cela s'arrêtera. Il fait bouger des lignes de la culture en France. (28)
>
> Jamel's first show was the fruit of seven years of work. Even at a young age, Jamel had this fire in his eyes that made you believe in him. Yet, everything was working against him: he was tiny, handicapped, Arab, asthmatic…In his own words, he couldn't even "be a garbage collector!" But when he got on stage, he performed his life story. He himself still cannot believe his success. He is breaking down barriers without knowing where it will stop. He is changing the cultural landscape in France.

These difficult teenage years could have discouraged Debbouze from pursuing dreams and opportunities. However, thanks to his own talent and determination, as well as help from

[91] All translations in this chapter are my own.

encouraging mentors, friends, and family members[92], he began down a path that would quite quickly lead him to success and fame on a national level.

Performing with Alain Degois' amateur theatre group in Trappes and on tour, and then attention earned from his first one-man show, *C'est tout neuf* (1995), led Debbouze to be discovered by Jacques Massadian and Jean-François Bizot who recruited him to make regular appearances on their radio channel, Radio Nova in 1996. (Vanderschelden 63) His unique, humorous perspectives and banlieue youth-inspired manner of speaking and expressing his views were entertaining and refreshing to listeners. Shortly after, he transitioned to the small screen where he appeared on the cable channel, Paris première, and then in 1997 on the premium television channel, Canal +. Many French spectators first became acquainted with the work of Debbouze through his vignettes, 'Le monde de Jamel' and 'Le cinéma de Jamel' which were regularly featured on the Canal + program, *Nulle part ailleurs* (1987-2001). It is also during his appearances on this program that he perfected what is often referred to as a "Canal + style of comedy," which consists of extreme close-ups and moments in which the featured comedian directly addresses the audience by looking straight into the camera, a style that he would occasionally incorporate into his future solo and sketch comedy work. The final years of the 1990s are when Debbouze began to receive leading television and film roles. The Canal + workplace sitcom, *H* (1998-2001), highlighted Debbouze as well as Éric Judor and Ramzy Bedia—of the popular comic duo, Éric et Ramzy—in weekly tour de force comedic performances from these emerging, young talents. Jamel Debbouze played a leading dramatic role in his first full-length feature film, *Zonzon* (1998), a prison drama directed by Laurent

[92] In interviews and solo performances, Debbouze often heartwarmingly cites his mother as one of his biggest supporters, role models, and sources of inspiration.

Bouhnik. In 1999, he was part of the small ensemble cast of the box-office hit comedy, *Le ciel, les oiseaux et…ta mère!*, directed by Djamel Bensalah.

After having established himself solidly and having achieved a certain recognizability in the French televisual and cinematographic landscapes during this time period, Debbouze then experienced a meteoric rise to success with film roles in the early 2000s. To mention just a few of his notable film roles, he played Lucien, the grocer's assistant, in Jean-Pierre Jeunet's *Le fabuleux destin d'Amélie Poulain* (2000), for which he was nominated for a César supporting role award; and in Alain Chabat's *Astérix et Obélix: Mission Cléopâtre* (2002), the character of Numérobis that he incarnated was written specifically for him. His success seemed to have reached its zenith, and he became a household name in France, in large part thanks to his participation in high-grossing films[93]. With these accomplishments under his belt, Debbouze began to branch out and participate in projects outside of his established domain. In 2006 he co-produced and co-starred in Rachid Bouchareb's film, *Indigènes*, a historical drama about the participation of colonial North African troops alongside Free French forces in the liberation of France from Nazi Germany during World War II. This film's importance lies in the fact that these soldiers' contributions had long been unacknowledged, and that shortly after the release of the film, granting overdue pensions to these North African soldiers was finally being discussed by

[93] In fact, Mogniss H. Abdallah points out that, « Au début de l'année 2003, en pleine période de vœux, Jamel Debbouze fait une entrée surprise dans le classement des personnalités préférées des Français—le « Top 50 » Ifop-*Journal du dimanche*. Si l'abbé Pierre reste en pôle position pour l'ensemble des sondés, Jamel devient le préféré des dix-huit-vingt-quatre ans, devant Jean-Jacques Goldman et Zinedine Zidane. » (130) / "At the beginning of the year 2003, in the middle of the New Year season, Jamel Debbouze made a surprise entry in the French people's favorite celebrities rankings—the "Top 50" Ifop—*Journal du dimanche*. If Abbé Pierre remained in the top position for the entirety of those surveyed, Jamel became the favorite for the eighteen to twenty-four age group, ahead of Jean-Jacques Goldman and Zinedine Zidane."

the French government. Never abandoning his work in comedy, 2006 also marked the year that Debbouze founded *Jamel Comedy Club* (2006-present), a Canal + television program (as well as actual theatre in Paris), that officially imported the genre of stand-up to France from the United States, and aims to give exposure to talented, novice French stand-up comedians, many of whom are of minority ethnic background. Today, there exists an entire generation of French humorists who were introduced to audiences through this show and were mentored by Debbouze himself, who also, when his schedule permits, hosts the show. Always faithful to his roots, in 2011 he founded the *Marrakech du rire* comedy festival, an international showcase of French, Francophone, and Arabophone comedians that takes place annually[94] in Marrakech, Morocco, and that is also broadcast on the French television channel M6. The festival serves as a transnational stage for established French comic performers as well as promising, young French and Moroccan stand-up artists.

This brief and incomplete overview of Debbouze's work and accomplishments recounts the artist's activity and influence, but yet tells little about his comedic style, his stage and screen personas, and what endears him to audiences and fans. Some of the nicknames that he has acquired over the years can perhaps shed light on some of these aspects. He has been referred to in the press and by colleagues as "*le prince de l'humour*," or "the prince of humor." This sobriquet gives him recognition for his achievements and places him among "comedy royalty" in the French entertainment industry, however it must be noted that he has been given the title of "*prince*," and not "*roi*," or "king." One could speculate that this is due to his diminutive size as

[94] However, the festival did not take place in 2020 or 2021 due to the Covid-19 pandemic. It also did not take place in 2023 as renovations were being made to the El Badi Palace in Marrakesh where the comedy festival is held and with which it is intimately linked.

well as his youthful humor and long-established appeal among younger audiences. He has also been called "*ambassadeur de la banlieue*," or "ambassador of the suburbs." As Laurence Huughe aptly points out, « Le choix du mot ambassadeur mérite cependant qu'on s'y intéresse de plus près puisqu'il nous semble révélateur des rapports qu'entretient la France avec l'espace d'exclusion que constitue la banlieue. » (75) / "The choice of the word ambassador deserves nonetheless closer attention since it seems to us to be revealing about the relationships that France maintains with the space of exclusion that constitutes the suburbs." This highlights Debbouze's disadvantaged origins and places them in conflict with French culture at large. This will be discussed further on this chapter. Lastly, Debbouze is also commonly referred to as "*le bouffon de Trappes*," or "the fool from Trappes." Once again, his geographical as well as socio-economic origins are evoked while also referencing his comedic style and his stage and screen personas. This nickname could lead to some unfortunate misunderstandings as persona is too often confused with personality of the artist in question, especially when it comes to beloved comic performers. Jamel Debbouze is no fool in the traditional, derogatory sense of the term. His long list of accomplishments hopefully convinces the reader of this fact. Yet, more often than not, he plays the character of a fool in his solo and ensemble comedic work, first and foremost to provoke laughter, but also in order to convince mainstream French audiences who may or may not hold preconceived notions of Franco-Maghrebi men from the banlieue as violent or aggressive, that he is non-threatening[95]. He has typically achieved this through presenting his

[95] It is important to remember that Jamel Debbouze gained initial attention and celebrity status in the 1990s and early 2000s, when the 'serious' French media regularly broadcast and promulgated images and stories of ethnic minority young men from the banlieue as violent, radical, dangerous, and unwilling and/or unable to integrate themselves into French society. The comedic style of many ethnic minority humorists of this time period was therefore defensive and by necessity was intended to respond and to repudiate somehow these negative stereotypes. This is why this stage of ethnic minority comedy in

humoristic personas and characters as individuals who struggle to speak proper French (to the point of creating their own comedic neologisms when they appear unable to find appropriate French words and expressions to express themselves), whose reasoning skills appear to be a bit eccentric, and who occasionally resort to trickery in order to obtain their goals. These are all reasons for mainstream audiences to perceive Debbouze's stage and screen persona to be that of a fool, invoking the negative connotations typically associated with such a figure[96].

Far too often, we fail to recognize that the fool is in fact a complex figure who fulfills multiple societal functions. For example, one must consider the possibility that when the fool appears foolish because they cannot function "properly" in society, that this could point not necessarily to a dysfunction within the fool figure themself, but rather to a dysfunction in society or in the way that things are habitually done in society. In this way, the fool can therefore serve as a form of social critique, or at a bare minimum, as an opportunity to reflect on certain aspects of society. It is likely that Isabelle Vanderschelden is recognizing the foolish dimension of Debbouze's stage and screen comedic personas, but not taking into consideration the larger societal functions of the fool when she writes, "Debbouze is probably less politically committed than other comedians like Smaïn or Dieudonné." (69) However, one should not allow Debbouze's "playing the fool" to obstruct their ability to recognize the critique of and challenges to political and societal status quos that dominate much of his work. Even in his comedic corpus, Debbouze's political and societal engagement is made clear through his commitment to

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France corresponds to Mintz's third phase in the development of Jewish (or ethnic minority) humor, the defensive stage. See Chapter One for more details.

[96] In French banlieue culture, as well, the "*bouffon*," or "fool" is not a coveted position. As Hakim Abderrezak points out while discussing the main character, Johnny, in Djamel Bensalah's film, *Il était une fois dans l'oued* (2005), "[…] Johnny conforms to the image of the social type of the farcical "buffoon." In banlieue slang, *bouffon* is an insult." (84)

highlighting and promoting representations of a multicultural France; exposing injustices done historically to France's colonized populations, and presently to its immigrant and ethnic minority communities; and cleverly combatting widespread racial and ethnic stereotypes. This chapter sets out to demonstrate this through exploration and analysis of selected comedic works of Jamel Debbouze, including the film, *Le ciel, les oiseaux et…ta mère!* (1999); an episode of the television sitcom, *H* (1998-2002); a sketch from the DVD, *Made in Jamel* (2010); and *Tout sur Jamel*, a solo performance that blurs the lines between the one-man show and stand-up genres.

Le ciel, les oiseaux et…ta mère! : Banlieue Youth Take Representation Into Their Own Hands

When it was released in French movie theatres in 1999, *Le ciel, les oiseaux et…ta mère!* was a surprise box-office hit with 1.1 million ticket sales. (Higbee 50) The success was unexpected for a number of reasons. Firstly, it was a low-budget comedy and the first ever full-length film of the—at the time mostly unknown—director, Djamel Bensalah. Bensalah, a French film director of Algerian origin, has since gone on to direct many popular, mainstream film comedies. However, in 1999 he had only previously directed and released one short film. Secondly, the starring ensemble cast members were also relatively new to the big screen, many of whom having worked with Bensalah in his short film, but lacking exposure in lead film roles. The exception here is Debbouze himself who already had one leading film role credit to his name and who had spent the past four years acquiring radio and television experience, making him perhaps the one recognizable name to French audiences and the standout in this ensemble cast. A final reason for the unexpected nature of the film's success is that the film lacks direction in terms of its plot. Written by Gilles Laurent, the script depends quite heavily on the comedic portrayals of its main performers, the interactions and dynamics between its protagonists, the

themes of representation and social critique, and a strong appeal to a youth/young adult audience. However, these elements are implemented cleverly and the cast's performances are praiseworthy. As Higbee notes,

> Not only did it [*Le ciel, les oiseaux et…ta mère!*] launch the career of Bensalah and establish Jamel Debbouze as a Maghrebi-French comedy screen actor with true crossover potential, but it also proved to French producers, distributors and exhibitors that there was a mainstream market for genre cinema directed by, starring and promoting the experiences and outlook of Maghrebi-French protagonists. (50-51)

While not the first film comedy to be directed by and to star a Franco-Maghrebi artist in the history of French cinema, Higbee highlights the fact that this was one of the first films of its kind to achieve great box-office success and paved the way for similar films and artists to gain widespread popularity in the 2000s. (50-51)

Le ciel, les oiseaux et…ta mère! follows the adventures of a multicultural trio of young men from the northern Parisian banlieue of Saint-Denis—which happens to be the hometown of Bensalah—as they produce a fake documentary-style report for a competition in which the prize is a vacation to the upscale resort town of Biarritz on France's southern Atlantic coast. The high school-aged young men (Youssef, played by Jamel Debbouze; Stéphane, played by Stéphane Soo Mongo; and Christophe, played by Loràn̂t Deutsch), with the help of a somewhat pesky acquaintance (Mike, played by Julien Courbey), manage to win the competition despite the highly questionable quality and content of their documentary report. The trio of friends exuberantly commence their trip in Biarritz—which is most likely the first time any of them has been on a vacation without parental supervision—when they are met up by Mike, who is not pleased at having been unacknowledged and left behind in light of the fact that the prize-winning documentary would not have been possible without his help. The friends spend their time trying to pick up young women, lounging on the beach, and getting kicked out of clubs, all the while

filming many of their experiences with a handheld video camera. Christophe tries to seduce women by telling them that he works as a journalist and director for both France 3 and Canal +, and is currently working on a documentary film on troubled banlieue youth, aka his friends, Youssef and Stéphane. Youssef sparks up a summer romance with Lydie, a young, affluent Parisian woman who is renting the condo next to theirs while on vacation. Stéphane eventually becomes upset that women and love seem to be tearing the young men's friendship apart. Mike continues to bother everyone, adding to the irritability and tension that develop among the main characters during their stay. In the end, the protagonists experience perhaps even more heightened occurrences of tension and social exclusion during their highly anticipated dream vacation in Biarritz than what they knew back in their banlieue of Saint-Denis. Stéphane leaves the others in a fit of rage to return to the Paris suburb. Youssef, Christophe, and Mike return to Saint-Denis by car. During the long trip back, they work through feelings of dejection, however, they come to the meta-reference-like conclusion that their adventure was something "*comme dans un film*," or "like in a film."

Two scenes in particular deserve closer attention, as they highlight the young protagonists' extreme self-awareness; recognition of how French media, and consequently the general population, see and represent banlieue youth and ethnic minorities during this time period; and the main characters' techniques to confront and/or to exploit to their own advantage these negative representations and stereotypes. Considering that the characters are quite young and often appear or act like "*bouffons*," and that the film is designed to appeal to a young adult/adolescent audience with its comedic lightness and plot built around a vacation getaway, the effective ways in which the film addresses serious questions of representation could strike some spectators as surprising. However, it is the film's *raison d'être*, constituting its principal

themes and Bensalah's message to mainstream audiences. The two scenes that will be analyzed in this section include the opening scene in which the young men film their documentary and announcements are made of its selection as winner of the competition, and a scene toward the end of the film in which Youssef and a bus ticket inspector become engaged in a racially motivated verbal altercation.

In the introductory scene, immediately following the initial image of the title of the film set against a backdrop of a light blue sky with fluffy clouds (presumably located over a beach), the scene abruptly cuts to a dimly lit locale and the spectator is given the information, « 9 :55. Dans un parking de Saint-Denis, le 13 mars » / "9:55. In a parking garage of Saint-Denis, March 13." It is here that Youssef, Stéphane, and Christophe gather behind a video camera sitting on a tripod that is filming Mike. Standing in front of a yellow wall, Mike gives a forced, lackluster performance in which he confesses that after struggling to find his way in college, he turned to drug dealing. He is quickly interrupted by Christophe who comes up to tell him that his performance is terrible and that he is simply not believable in the role. This is the first indication that what is taking place is only a farce. Youssef and Stéphane agree with Christophe and elaborate on how unconvincing the acting is. Mike takes offense and reminds them that he is doing them all a favor by doing this. He questions what the goal of this all is and enquires as to why they asked him to play this role. The young men confirm that it is for the Seine-Saint-Denis high school documentary competition and Youssef tells Mike that they wanted him to do the acting because of his « sale gueule, » or "ugly face." More bickering ensues and Mike threatens to leave the project, forcing the trio of friends to quickly change their tone and directorial approach. Christophe says to Mike, « Bah, ouais. Tout à l'heure, ce que t'étais était le stéréotype parfait du petit dealer des cités qu'on a l'habitude de voir dans ces émissions pourries à la télé

[…]. » (PasseLeTemps 2 :37-2 :41) / “Yeah. Earlier, what you were was the perfect stereotype of the little drug dealer from the projects that we’re used to seeing in these lame shows on t.v. […].” Youssef suggests that he put the hood of his windbreaker up and smoke a joint while giving his fake confessional to add more authenticity because, « […] sinon, il y aura un manque de réalisme pour les beaufs qui jugeront notre reportage. » (PasseLeTemps 3 :20-3 :24) / “[…] if not, there will be a lack of realism for the losers who will judge our report.” The viewer is led to believe that the next take is the final cut, despite the fact that it is even worse than the previous one. The mike boom makes an unwanted appearance in the shot while Mike smokes a joint and coughs occasionally (obviously he is not used to smoking marijuana) when recounting his regret-filled path to becoming a drug dealer. The next image is a cut to a television whose screen comes to occupy the entire frame as a newscaster from the channel Cable 93 announces that it is this documentary report about a former drug dealer turned drug addict that has won the Seine-Saint-Denis high school documentary competition award. News footage then shows a golden camera statuette that serves as a trophy and cuts to a formal ceremony where a local politician hands the trophy to the young men (Mike is not present) and states to the gathered audience, « Je suis fier de récompenser ce film superbe. Superbe parce qu’il est d’une honnêteté, d’une finesse et d’un réalisme remarquables. » (PasseLeTemps 4 :14-4 :34) / “I am proud to reward this superb film. Superb because it is of a remarkable honesty, keenness, and realism.” The politician shakes their hands and they are given an opportunity to express themselves. This deteriorates into an incomprehensible display of childish behavior as they try to talk over each other in their joy and excitement. However, at the end the viewer can make out the following words from Youssef: « Merci pour les vacances. Je vais passer de très bonnes vacances grâce à vous. » (PasseLeTemps 4:51-4:54) / “Thanks for the vacation. I’m going to have a really good vacation thanks to you.”

The screen then abruptly cuts to a promotional advertisement about tourism in Biarritz and the introductory scene of the film which details how the young tricksters duped the jury and won the reward comes to an end.

This opening scene sets the stage in many ways. Not only does it introduce the spectator to the main characters and their project of winning a prize of a trip to Biarritz through the making of a fake documentary, it also situates the protagonists and their narratives in relation to the media by holding up a sort of mirror to expose the propagation of stereotypes and the biases and horizon of expectations that it creates. The 1990s and early 2000s were far from being the golden age of media representation of ethnic minorities and banlieue youth in France. The 1980s, while still flawed, offered advancements in these areas with social justice and civil rights movements such as *La marche pour l'égalité et contre le racism*e (1983) and its subsequent organized marches, and a brief "*Beur is beautiful*" movement in mediatic and cultural spheres which aimed to promote and validate ethnic and racial diversity. However, after many unfulfilled promises on the part of Mitterrand's socialist government in regard to immigration policy as well as equal rights and opportunities for immigrants' offspring, combined with the rise of the FN (*Front national*) and their anti-immigration stance and fear mongering rhetoric concerning ethnic minorities, the following years were in large part bleak. "Serious" journalism presented major French cities' banlieues—which were and continue to be the homes of many immigrant and ethnic minority communities—as dangerous hotbeds of gang violence, religious (Muslim) extremism, and general refusal to integrate into French society through rejection of French Republican values. Banlieue youth, in particular, were regularly presented as products of this largely fictive environment, with young men being associated with violence of all sorts, and young veiled women portrayed as threats to French *laïcité* and other values held dear by the

Republic. When Christophe and Youssef refer to stereotypes commonly found in television and preconceived notions of the banlieue perceived to be held by members of the jury who will judge their documentary report, it is this that they have in mind.

However, another conception of the multicultural France that is often reflected in banlieue society and culture was becoming widespread in the media in the latter part of the 1990s. It is the "*black-blanc-beur*" trope that came to mainstream popularity after France's 1998 World Cup victory. It was widely noted that the multicultural diversity of the French team, with white, black, and Arab players (the most celebrated player being Zinedine Zidane, who is of Algerian descent), reflected the ethnic diversity of the French population. If this team could go on to win the World Cup, then perhaps a multicultural society was, despite what FN rhetoric suggested, an advantage rather than something to bemoan. "*Black-blanc-beur*" reflected the national soccer team, the major ethnic and racial components of French demography, and was a reference to and play on words of "*bleu-blanc-rouge*," the colors of the tricolor flag. Immediately, in *Le ciel, les oiseaux et…ta mère!*, Bensalah presents the ensemble cast of a trio of banlieue youth friends as a reflection of this trope, Stéphane being black, Christophe being white, and Youssef being of Maghrebi Arab origins. As Kate Griffiths would appear to suggest in her article, "Borrowed Identities: Mathieu Kassovitz and Djamel Bensalah," this also harkens back to Mathieu Kassovitz's now classic film, *La haine* (1995), in which the main protagonists are a trio of "*black-blanc-beur*" friends from the banlieue. In fact, Kassovitz, was rather avant-garde in this portrayal as his film predates the 1998 French World Cup victory by three years.

Beyond the ethnic and racial aspects of the main characters in *Le ciel, les oiseaux et…ta mère!*, in this initial scene the viewer is equally struck by their awareness and subsequent manipulation of mainstream journalistic representations and stereotypes, and their relation to

them. Youssef, Stéphane, and Christophe are depicted as immature and as having somewhat limited interests, for example, women and free trips. The fact that from the very beginning they are able to recognize and play to their advantage certain media techniques and popular biases demonstrates that there is more to their superficial foolish character than meets the eye. The way that they produce, direct, and market their fake documentary, while not very polished, is certainly complex, clever[97], and requires a great talent for observation. By playing on widespread stereotypes of themselves and their milieu, they create a fake façade of verisimilitude that shows others what they think they know about banlieues and their residents. In order to do so, they imitate what they have seen in the media. As Kate Griffiths states in her aforementioned article on films by Kassovitz and Bensalah, "The two films by Kassovitz and those by Bensalah explore the power of imitation. Certain of their characters construct an identity for themselves by borrowing from elsewhere, inserting themselves into a variety of systems of representation." (186) From imitation the protagonists move to manipulation and exploitation. On this fake documentary scene, Will Higbee writes, "The trio's understanding of how such stereotypes are recognised and 'authenticated' by mainstream France is turned to their advantage as their film wins a competition, with the prize of a holiday in Biarritz." (51) Therefore, from the beginning of the film, this fake documentary announces some of Bensalah's main themes as well as sheds light on the character and perspicacity of the protagonists.

In terms of the comedic aspects of this scene, viewers are expected to obtain a humoristic satisfaction at the portrayal of underdogs who achieve their goals through pulling the wool over

[97] Here we can read "clever" in the English sense of the word, while also incorporating the French equivalent of "malin," which can often suggest a smartness with intent to trick or dupe others for profit or personal gain.

the eyes of those in positions of power and authority. In addition to this, there is also a strong element of irony that runs throughout the entire scene. It must be noted that the role of the newscaster who announces the story of the winning documentary is played by none other than Ramzy Bedia, a French comedian of Algerian origin who is a contemporary and close colleague of Jamel Debbouze, both having come from similar backgrounds and worked on many of the same projects together. On the television screen the name "Jean-Claude Devoize" appears before Bedia states in his most professional, journalistic tone, « C'est le film, *Jeunesse cocaïne*, qui a été récompensé aujourd'hui par le prix du meilleur reportage lycéen '97. Réalisé par trois jeunes du lycée Paul Éluard de Saint-Denis, ce documentaire retrace le parcours d'un ancien dealer devenu toxicomane. Ces reporters en herbe ont reçu de la part du préfet de Seine-Saint-Denis un hommage bien mérité. » (PasseLeTemps 3 :54-4 :14) / "It's the film, *Jeunesse cocaïne*, that was rewarded today with the Best High School Report '97 prize. Directed by three young men from the Paul Éluard High School of Saint-Denis, this documentary retraces the journey of a former drug dealer who became a drug addict. These budding reporters received a well-deserved tribute from the Saint-Denis prefect." As a comedian of Algerian origin who evokes connotations among audiences of a banlieue upbringing and associations with an urban, multicultural outlook, this newscaster played by Bedia can be assumed to be "in on the joke" of the fake, farcical documentary report designed to swindle the stuffy types at the Seine-Saint-Denis prefect who judge the competition. While he reads the news story convincingly and objectively, as any good newscaster should, the observant spectator will notice a hint of sarcasm in his tone as be pronounces the words "bien mérité" / "well-deserved" with a rising intonation as if he were speaking to a small child.

If the first scene confronts and exploits stereotypes through a sneaky, comedic, trickster-style approach, the second scene under consideration here stands up to them by means of a full-frontal verbal attack. Throughout the course of their stay in Biarritz, Youssef meets and falls in love with Lydie, a young Parisian woman who is also on vacation and is staying with her friends in the adjacent condo. After insensitively but inadvertently insulting her with an antisemitic comment upon finding out that she is Jewish, Youssef goes to apologize to her and to express his true feelings of love. The problem is that she has already left with her friends for the airport to return to Paris. Youssef, therefore, runs to catch the bus for the airport. With time against his side and his passionate emotions in high gear, he barely manages to enter the departing bus from a back door. Immediately upon arrival he is met by the ticket inspector who asks him for his ticket. Youssef says that he was just about to go to the front of the bus to purchase a ticket, but the inspector does not believe him and begins procedures to issue him a fine. Youssef argues and offers a few insults to the unempathetic inspector who immediately asks for his *carte d'identité*, or identity card. The argument escalates when Youssef does not have this form of identification with him. The inspector bluntly states, « Avec les gens comme vous, je ne m'amuse pas. » (PasseLeTemps 1:11:42-1:11:44) / "With people like you, I don't mess around." Eventually Youssef is able to present him with his voter registration card as a form of identification and the following exchange occurs:

> Contrôleur : Vous êtes né où ?
> Youssef : [sarcastically] Je suis né à Hong Kong, en Autriche. [ticket inspector gives him a dirty look] Aubervilliers. C'est marqué là. Aubervilliers. A-U-B-E-R-villiers…villiers.
> Contrôleur : Nationalité ?
> Youssef : Ma *quoi* ?
> Contrôleur : Oui, votre nationalité.
> Youssef : Ma nationalité ?
> Contrôleur : [even more annoyed and angry] Oui, votre nationalité. Qu'est-ce qu'il y a d'extraordinaire ? Je vous demande votre nationalité.

Youssef : Putain. […] Je viens de vous donner ma carte d'électeur *français*, monsieur. […]
Contrôleur : D'accord, d'accord. OK. Je me suis trompé. Ça arrive, hein. C'est l'habitude.
Youssef : C'est l'habitude ? J'espère que c'est l'habitude.
(PasseLeTemps 1 :12 :09-1 :12 :48)

Ticket Inspector: Where were you born?
Youssef: [sarcastically] I was born in Hong Kong, in Austria. [ticket inspector gives him a dirty look] Aubervilliers. It's written right there. Aubervilliers. A-U-B-E-R-villiers…villiers.
Ticket Inspector: Nationality?
Youssef: My *what*?
Ticket Inspector: Yes, your nationality.
Youssef: My nationality?
Ticket Inspector: [even more annoyed and angry] Yes, your nationality. Is there something extraordinary about that? I am asking you your nationality.
Youssef: Damn. […] I just gave you my *French* voter registration card, sir. […]
Ticket Inspector: Alright, alright. OK. I made a mistake. It happens, OK. It's a habit.
Youssef: It's a habit? I hope it's just a habit.

After the tense interaction, Youssef ends up with a fine but is eventually able to arrive to the airport in time to catch Lydie and repair their relationship.

While this scene is almost completely devoid of comedic interest—it is in fact one of the few scenes of the film that takes a serious, rather dramatic tone—, it is important as it shows how certain individuals (e.g., the ticket inspector) internalize the media's dissemination of negative ethnic stereotypes and weaponize them in their encounters. It demonstrates as well how others can react to them in a visceral, direct manner. As soon as Youssef enters the bus, the ticket inspector wastes no time in confronting him, assuming that he has no ticket and is looking for a free bus ride. This is perhaps because the young man has entered the bus from a back entrance that is not to be used, however, it is more likely an instance of racial profiling. In the ticket inspector's comment of « Avec les gens comme vous, je ne m'amuse pas. » / "With people like you, I don't mess around.", one can see that he sees Youssef as an "other" and immediately

attributes biases and preconceived notions of the ethnicized/racialized other to him. In the tense exchange that follows, asking him for his nationality when he is holding his French voter registration card in his hands indicates that while Youssef was born in France and is indeed a French citizen who is fully integrated into French society, because of his background and non-white physical features he will be continually classed as a perpetual foreigner in the eyes of some. When it is pointed out that he is holding a form of *French* identification, the ticket inspector becomes defensive as he is aware that he is implicitly being accused of an act of racism. By calling him out in this subtle way, Youssef tips the power dynamics ever so slightly in his own favor in that brief moment. In summarizing the purposes of this scene of confrontation on the bus, Higbee writes, "For it [the scene] serves to remind the spectator that the obstacles faced by young *banlieusards* (especially those of non-European immigrant origin) are frequently compounded by an additional level of prejudice that mobilises ethnic and religious difference as insurmountable barriers to integration and social mobility." (54) Despite the clever repackaging and reselling of stereotypes that won the young men the prize of a trip to Biarritz, once they are finally there the same old prejudices await them.

Le ciel, les oiseaux et…ta mère! is one of the early projects in Jamel Debbouze's career that catapulted him to fame and made him a household name in France in the late 1990s. While it helped solidify his "*bouffon*" (and at times "trickster") persona amongst the general public, introduced wider audiences to his comedic virtuosity, and established him as an icon of popular youth culture, the film also demonstrates his engagement in and commitment to social critique in humor, particularly when it comes to matters concerning immigrant and ethnic minority communities in France. The temptation to classify this film as light comedic fare targeted at a young adult audience might lead some to dismiss this work or to allow the engagement with

serious themes to go unnoticed. Yet, if one does this, one misses out on the important, intelligent, and innovative ways in which Bensalah and his young cast contribute to undermining harmful stereotypes and talking back to the systems that disseminate them. For, in fact, the ways in which the friends construct their faux documentary by manipulating these stereotypes, mirrors and challenges the ways in which more serious, professional forms of media do the exact same thing. Therefore, Youssef, Stéphane, Christophe, and Mike expose these stereotypes—wherever they may be found—as the social constructs that they are, rather than images to which one should attribute any truth or authoritative value.

Laughing to Remember: The Television Sitcom H Tackles France's Colonial History of Slavery

During the same time period that Debbouze made his comedic film debut in *Le ciel, les oiseaux et…ta mère!*, he was continuing similar work on the small screen. After his initial successes on Canal +, he was offered by the same channel a leading role in the ensemble cast of a sitcom known simply as *H* (1998-2002)—the letter "H" referring to the constant defining characteristics of this workplace sitcom, "hôpital" / "hospital," "humour" / "humor," and "histoire" / "story" or "history." The sitcom is set in a Parisian hospital and follows the misadventures of a group of colleagues and friends. Quite obviously inspired by trends in American sitcoms of the 1990s, *H* is one of the first French sitcoms to feature a multiethnic cast. The inclusion of the young ethnic minority comedians, Jamel Debbouze, Ramzy Bedia, and Éric Judor ensured not only an ethnically diverse representation, but also that they would attract their young fan bases to the show. In fact, it would at times appear that the sitcom serves primarily as a platform to feature the physical and verbal comedic talents of these three—at the time—rising stars of the French entertainment industry. Debbouze stars as Jamel Dridi, a hospital receptionist;

Judor plays the role of Aymé Césaire[98], a nurse of mixed Antillean and Austrian origins, which reflects Judor's own ethnic background; and Ramzy Bedia plays the part of Sabri Saïd who in the first season is a stretcher bearer at the hospital, but in subsequent seasons works at the bar across the street which serves as a popular meeting spot and hangout for hospital employees. All three of these principal characters correspond more or less to fool and trickster comedic types, but each has his own specificities. The character of Jamel appears quite childish in his speech, often making humoristic puns, word plays, and neologisms[99], but is quite competent in his position of receptionist. Aymé, perhaps playing on common Antillean stereotypes, is the quintessential ladies' man and his romantic reputation and adventures serve as catalysts for plots and subplots in many episodes. Sabri, while at times rather eloquent in his speech and demeanor, plays the fool who can never be trusted to do anything correctly. It is because of this that his professional life is a disaster—he dreams of becoming an actor, however, any acting gigs that he lands ultimately end in catastrophe. The rest of the cast includes Sophie Mounicot in the role of the heavy-handed, authoritarian, and oftentimes unempathetic head nurse, Clara Saulnier; Catherine Benguigui as Béatrice (Béa) Goldberg (seasons 1 and 2), a kind, intelligent, but nerdy, and somewhat oblivious doctor; and Jean-Luc Bideau as Professeur Max Strauss, chief surgeon and absent-minded professor *par excellence*. With each role's own unique stock character-like persona, they often complement or antagonize each other like contemporary *commedia dell'arte*

[98] The name of this character is a bold choice and an obvious reference to the Martinican author, thinker, and politician, Aimé Césaire (1913-2008). The change from "i" to "y" in the first name is most likely to avoid legal issues. One can speculate that the choice of this name is to highlight the character's Antillean origins and to once again foreground the multicultural makeup of the show's cast as well as the ethnic diversity of the French population.

[99] These are all typical of Debbouze's humor whether he is playing a character or not, and have become trademark features of his persona, as mentioned in the introduction and will be explored further in following sections.

characters. Despite the many squabbles, arguments, and misadventures that they all participate in and which constitute the comedic plots of every episode, the joking and mockery remain in good nature, and reflect the playful, jocular bonds that can often be found in groups of friends. For example, Béa is often the butt of their jokes. However, if someone from outside of their circle insults or makes fun of her, the others are quick to defend her.

As can be seen from this introduction to the program, *H* corresponds closely to the typical defining characteristics of the sitcom genre. It is popular, formulaic, commercial, limited in plot and character development, and it exploits stereotypes for comedic purposes—all of which are features that have contributed greatly to giving the television sitcom the reputation of being one of the least respected narrative genres. Mundy and White reference Brett Mills when they write of the sitcom genre, "This critical discussion reminds us of television's low critical status: 'running throughout analysis of the sitcom is the critique that it is hegemonic and conservative' (Mills 2009:30. See also Cook 1982:2)." (107) While all of these negative aspects must be acknowledged, it must also be stated that the sitcom has evolved over time and continues to develop, is often avant-garde in its representation of minorities, and touches a wide audience, making it capable of reaching and influencing large numbers of people for whom more literary or intellectual genres might not be accessible. When a sitcom episode makes social critique and challenges widespread beliefs or societal status quos, these messages resonate on a grand scale. With its ethnically diverse cast and popular appeal, *H* was at times able to bring to light issues that were of concern to immigrant and ethnic minority communities for a larger, mainstream French audience. This section sets out to explore and analyze one such episode.

In 1998, France officially commemorated the 150-year anniversary of its abolition of slavery with a year marked by academic conferences on the subject, concerts, slogans, and other

related fanfare. In 2001, the Loi Taubira was passed, which officially recognized the slave trade as a crime against humanity and introduced the subject matter into the French primary school curriculum. In between these two historical moments, on November 20, 1999, an episode of *H*, entitled "Une histoire d'amnésie," first aired. Written by Philip Giangreco, Éric Lavaine, Xavier Matthieu, and Lionel Dutemple; and directed by Jean-Luc Moreau, this episode intertwines the ostensibly disparate storylines of Aymé finding an ancestor's slave journal, Clara undergoing a breast augmentation surgery, and Jamel trying to help a friend who is an undocumented immigrant to stay in France. While these plots and subplots appear to be incongruent, the argument can be made that they were placed together in the same episode for reasons beyond unexpected juxtapositions for comedic effect. I propose a reading of this episode in which these three plotlines come together to form a sort of trickster tale allegory which comments on and critiques official French acknowledgment of its own colonial history of slavery (in particular, treatment of the subject in 1998 when the 150-year commemoration of its abolition occurred), and makes parallels between the treatment of this subject matter and that of current immigrant and ethnic minority populations in the Hexagon.

The episode begins in the café/bar that is the usual after-hours hangout spot for these hospital employees. A woman enters the bar to ask if she can exchange francs for euros. No one offers to fulfill the request. Meanwhile, Aymé enters fully engrossed in a book that he is holding. He reads to Jamel a passage from this recently discovered journal of his great-great grandfather who was a slave in Guadeloupe. Professeur Strauss enquires as to the contents of the book. After being told and asked if he would like to take a look at it, the professor responds, « Non, non, non. La science-fiction, c'est pas mon truc. Moi, je préfère l'histoire. » ("Une histoire d'amnésie" 1:14-1:20) / "No, no, no. Science fiction isn't my thing. I prefer history." Afterwards, a second

woman who happens to be much more buxom than the first enters with the same request to exchange currency, and she is met by offers from nearly every man in the establishment. This sparks a rather crude general conversation on the topic of the merits of women who have a well-endowed chest area. The next scene takes place in the hospital where Aymé is continuing to read to Jamel from the slave journal. After the two recognize the last name of the slave master described in the diary, Clara stops by to inform Aymé that he must work this weekend so that she can visit family in Guadeloupe. This seems to confirm their suspicion that Clara is a descendant of the slave master of Aymé's great-great grandfather. The scene then cuts to what will be the first of several somewhat fanciful visions that Aymé has of himself as a slave and Clara as a slave master. The next scene begins actively developing the second plotline of Clara's plastic surgery. She is interested in a breast enlargement after witnessing the unequal treatment of the two women at the café, overhearing the coarse discussion that ensued, and learning that Professeur Strauss has made plastic surgery a new specialty of his and is trying to drum up business by offering discounts. Meanwhile, Jamel comes up with a plan to help his undocumented Argentinian immigrant friend, José stay in France. He believes that if they break José's arm, the French government will take pity on him and not deport him. This constitutes the material for the third subplot.

A certain amount of time later, Clara's operation takes place and results in total failure as she wakes up from the anesthesia with only one implant and a case of amnesia. The spectators see her colleagues gathered around her trying to help her regain her memory by showing her pictures of animals and asking her what they are. It is pertinent here to point out that there seems to be a racial divide in this scene with the white doctors (Strauss and Béa) on one side, actively trying to help Clara (who is also white) regain her memory, and Aymé (who is métis) on the other

side deriding their efforts and mocking Clara. After the professor and Béa leave, Aymé begins to see an opportunity in one of Clara's very rare moments of vulnerability. Realizing that she does not recognize him, he demands that she address him with the formal "vous" form and begins feeding her all the lies that he wants. The following scene, taking place in the employee break room, fully realizes his plan as we see him lounging on the couch while Clara massages his feet. He gives her orders and informs her that her full job title is « femme de ménage au service des infirmiers, pratiquant des massages gratuits à volonté. » ("Une histoire d'amnésie" 15:52-15:55) / "cleaning woman at the service of the nurses, practicing free, unlimited foot massages." Jamel enters and immediately demands that she do chores and errands for him as well and later proposes that she even marry José in a green card marriage. Aymé has turned the tables and made Clara his slave, which is also reflected in the visions that he has. However, Aymé and Jamel only have a limited time to play slave masters to Clara's slave as she undergoes a second corrective surgery, from which she wakes up with her memory completely intact. The charade must come to an end, and with that, Clara informs her former task master that he will be working weekends for a while since she needs time to recuperate[100]. As in all classic trickster narratives as well as in the

[100] There is also a fourth subplot involved in this episode that revolves around Béa's upcoming marriage. She gives her wedding dress to Sabri to keep safe behind the bar at the café where he works. One night after work, Sabri decides to try the dress on while he is sweeping the floors of the establishment. Professeur Strauss enters and demands that Sabri dance with him. During this awkward moment, a glass of red liqueur is spilled on the dress and Sabri spends the rest of the episode trying to figure out how to resolve this problem. He decides to cut out the front part of the dress with the stain and exchange it with a part of the dress in the back. When Béa enters the town hall to get married, Sabri and Jamel accidentally tear off the back of her dress while holding the train of the dress. This is undoubtedly because of Sabri's shoddy tailor skills. Béa goes to her wedding with her rear end exposed and the wedding is called off. The final scene consists of all the colleague friends at the café/bar where Béa is understandably depressed and the others try to console her. José enters and Jamel proposes that he marry Béa for a green card. José declines the offer. While this subplot does connect with the themes of marriage and immigration found in the other subplots, I do not find strong links here with the other more substantial storylines and therefore omit it from my analysis.

typical description of the carnivalesque role reversal as theorized by Bakhtin, in the end the former order is restored and/or the trickster figure is duped in turn or punished for their actions.

What is the viewer to make of this extremely busy and chaotic jumble of storylines crammed into an only 23-minute-long episode? Depending on where the viewer decides to devote their attention, one can come to a number of varying conclusions. Focusing primarily on the plots revolving around Aymé's discovery of the family heirloom slave journal and Clara's plastic surgery and subsequent case of amnesia, I suggest that this episode enters into debates over France's acknowledgment of its colonial history of slavery and offers a new perspective, exposing officially accepted French republican historiography on this topic as one-sided and self-serving. Traditionally, since the moment of France's second abolition of slavery in 1848, a politics of forgetting has predominated all discourse—or lack thereof—on the subject[101]. In this light, we can see Clara as a sort of allegory for the French nation and her amnesia as a metaphor for France's politics of forgetting surrounding all aspects of its involvement in the trading and owning of slaves during its earlier waves of colonization. Furthermore, this reading of the episode goes a step further in casting judgment, as the fact that Clara's amnesia is a result of plastic surgery, or the strong desire to make herself and be seen as beautiful. While the politics of forgetting France's slave past have been attributed to many factors—the desire to prevent revenge, in the name of bringing together former slaves and slave owners in reconciliation and forgiveness, etc.—, this analysis proposes that the need to forget stems primarily from the desire on France's part to appear outwardly beautiful and attractive. In order for France to be known for

[101] This is certainly not the last time that French republican responses to heinous acts that occurred during colonialism favored a politics of forgetting. Many aspects of the Algerian War (1954-1962), perhaps most importantly the question of torture, became taboo subjects for decades after the end of the war.

its fundamental values of liberty, equality, and fraternity, as well as its Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen (1789), it is important that its reputation at home and abroad not be tarnished by major human rights violations. Therefore, it is in the best interest of the nation to forget certain aspects of its history, according to certain historiographical trends.

Scholars have highlighted many ways in which this politics of forgetting has been achieved by the French state since 1848. Emphasizing and mythologizing certain abolitionists, such as Victor Schoelcher, and turning them into national heroes has been France's most trusted and long-lasting method of assuring that it saves face, effectively claiming the role in history of benevolent granter of freedom and human rights for itself, while stripping slaves, former slaves, and their descendants of any agency in their long history of struggle to obtain freedom, equal rights, and recognition. Doris L. Garraway, in her article entitled "Memory as reparation? : the politics of remembering slavery in France from abolition to the Loi Taubira," writes:

> […] it was rather the suppression of memory without reparation or pardon that became the dominant means of dealing with the legacy of slavery from abolition until the end of the twentieth century. That is, in negation of the theoretical necessity of pardon, repair or consent as a precondition of collective forgetting, the French state together with advocates of departmentalization effected an official politics of forgetfulness by transposing the memory of the crime, slavery, into that of its opposite: the magnanimity of abolition and of France's civilizing mission. (367)

These were the dominant modes of dealing with the issue of slavery's past from 1848 through to the departmentalization of Martinique and Guadeloupe in 1946, and well into the end of the twentieth century. It would seem clear with the theme of amnesia that this episode of *H* is critiquing that long tradition. Furthermore, given that this episode aired only one year after the 1998 commemoration of the 150-year anniversary of the abolition of slavery, it is most likely that *H* is participating in the large debate that ensued over the appropriateness of that official commemoration program. As Catherine Reinhardt underlines, "[…] the 1998 commemoration

sidestepped the powerful influence of Caribbean liberation movements." (5) The result is what Nelly Schmidt refers to as "ambiguous." She continues, addressing the subject of the slogan for the events, "Tous nés en 1848," by remarking that "The net result of this slogan was denying the past centuries of slave resistance and giving 1848 a particularly positive character, representing it as a solution to all the problems raised at the time in the form of national reconciliation." (115) An example from the episode of this reflex to deny as tied to politics of forgetfulness could be from Professeur Strauss who speaks of Aymé's great-great-grandfather's slave journal by saying, « La science-fiction, c'est pas mon truc. Moi, je préfère l'histoire. » ("Une histoire d'amnésie" 1:14-1:20) While the denying that occurred during the 1998 anniversary was rather a denying of agency on the part of slaves and their descendants, Professeur Strauss' stronger form of denial—of the very existence of slavery—could be considered as an extreme consequence of a politics of forgetting. The fact that this receives a two-second laugh from the audience (or more likely from the laugh track) in the episode can be interpreted as him being laughed at and ridiculed in a corrective manner[102]. If so, this prepares the viewer from the very beginning to empathize with Aymé and to pay attention to the history lesson that he provides.

The storyline of José, Jamel's undocumented Argentinian immigrant friend—while not as closely related to the other main plots of the episode—suggests a modern-day parallel in the way that France has more recently treated its immigrant population. Just as official French republican historiography has—in an attempt to highlight the French nation's more benevolent role in the history of slavery—traditionally suppressed or forgotten the history of slave revolts and efforts from slaves to obtain freedom and equality, it has acted similarly in the case of its immigrant

[102] For a more detailed explanation of the corrective function of laughter, see Henri Bergson's seminal essay, *Le rire* (1900).

populations and communities throughout history. Through excessive emphasis on the French Revolution and the Enlightenment in authoring its own national mythology, France has effectively swept under the rug its history as a *terre d'accueil.* or adoptive country of immigrants, and the contributions to French society that waves of immigrants have made for centuries. Similarly, the anti-immigration rhetoric and vilification of immigrants that serve as the cornerstone of FN rhetoric has conveniently wiped from the national consciousness' memory the contributions of more recent waves of immigrants and the fact that France would not have been able to rebuild itself and to prosper in the post-WWII period without the help of its immigrant workforce. It is perhaps for this reason that when introduced to an amnesic Clara after her first, failed operation and given the offer to marry her in a *mariage blanc*, or green card marriage, José refuses on the grounds that, in his own words, « Elle n'a qu'un nichon. » ("Une histoire d'amnésie" 18:24-18:27) / "She only has one boob." He also rejects the offer to marry Béa later on stating, « Si c'est ça la France, je préfère retourner dans mon *país*. » ("Une histoire d'amnésie" 23:02-23:05) / "If this is France, I prefer returning to my *país*." In these examples, Clara, and then Béa, serve as allegories for the French nation when the façade of beauty is crumbling. Rather than these being direct comments on the beauty of these two women, José's rejection of them can be interpreted as him seeing in them symbols of a France that has not done right by certain segments of its population and is therefore showing its uglier side.

It must be noted that while this episode of *H* can be seen as quite progressive in its recognition of and commentary on France's colonial history of slavery at the time of its initial airing, it seems that much of the comedy and broader social critique come at the expense of women, in particular, Clara. In order to bring justice to the exploited and abused body of the slave, Aymé, Jamel, and José engage in the misogynistic objectification of the female body.

Along with other crude comments that have already been mentioned, Clara ends up with only one breast implant after her first surgery because Aymé and Jamel accidentally burst the second one after childishly feigning to fondle it when Professeur Strauss asks them to hand it to him during the operation. This misogynistic humor is unfortunate, yet it is important to recognize in this reading that Clara serves as an allegory of the French nation, along the lines of Marianne. Just as José's comments on Clara and Béa can be interpreted as not truly directed at them as people, Aymé's and Jamel's deriding treatment of Clara in her vulnerable state of unconsciousness under the effects of anesthesia and subsequent amnesia can be seen as a reflection of their anger against a France that has mistreated their people. At a bare minimum, it serves as an opportunity for revenge at a superior who treats them in a patronizing, heavy-handed manner when she is in her normal state of being. The crasser, more corporal, and questionable aspects of the humor in this episode stem from the sitcom genre's reliance on stereotypes and the fact that Aymé and Jamel incarnate fool/trickster types, while Clara plays the comedic role of the haughty superior. As Paul Radin notes in his seminal work, *The Trickster: A Study in American Indian Mythology*, "His [the trickster's] function […] is to add disorder to order and so make a whole, to render possible, within the fixed bonds of what is permitted, an experience of what is not permitted." (185)

Despite its weaknesses, which, in general, are also the faults commonly attributed to the sitcom genre as a whole, *H* tackled major issues pertinent to France's ethnic minority communities at a time when this population was made to suffer overall negative representation in the French media. The "foolish" voices of Debbouze, Judor, and Bedia in their roles as Jamel, Aymé, and Sabri, served to counter portrayals of ethnic minority banlieue youth as anything but innocent, playful bringers of merriment. Furthermore, as this reading of this particular episode

demonstrates, they also often used their platform not just to showcase their comedic talents, but to broach difficult, taboo societal issues and to present opinions and points of view which were not commonly featured in mainstream avenues. While endearing themselves to audiences and making fans for life, they also made French society take a closer look at what had for far too long been hidden.

"Made in France" : Jamel Debbouze and Sophie Mounicot on Frenchness and Cat Allergies

In 2010, after having made a major name for himself in French television and cinema, Jamel Debbouze released to DVD a project in which himself, numerous other established comedians, and a couple young mentees[103] of the "*Prince de l'humour*" himself, star in a series of unrelated comedy sketches. In the DVD, entitled *Made in Jamel*, perhaps the only common thread that links its divergent sketches together is the history of professional relationships that Debbouze has maintained with his co-performers and the fact that the material for the various sketches seem to spring forth like multiple tiny geysers from his comedic universe. *Made in Jamel* is truly a work that reflects the famous comedian's professional path over the previous fifteen years in the French comedy and entertainment industry. Notable sketches include film parodies such as "La source à Manon," a spoof on the 1986 period film, *Manon des sources*, in which Jamel stars as a love interest of Manon who is played by Audrey Lamy; a parody of the *Rocky* films entitled "Rocky et demi" in which Jamel plays a wizened, old man who trains Fatsah Bouyahmed to reenter not the boxing business, but rather the stand-up comedy circuit; and a *Grease* (1978)-influenced parody of the *High School Musical* series entitled "Low School

[103] A young Malik Bentalah is featured in minor roles in several of the sketches. A young Shirley Souagnon is also cast as a background performer in the "Low School Musical" sketch.

Musical," which recounts the improbable love story between Ricky (Jamel Debbouze) and Sandy (Florence Foresti). Other parodies include "Les chevaliers de la table basse," a medieval Arthurian spoof in which Jamel plays a squire to Gad Elmaleh's knight looking for his Guinevere; and a Moroccan crime show parody entitled "Les Experts: Ouarzazate," featuring Debbouze, Fatsah Bouyahmed, Malik Bentalah, and Wahid Bouzidi[104] as incompetent crime detectives. More imaginative—and at times absurdist—sketches include "La leçon de Jamel à Stromae," which provides an alternate origin story to Stromae's 2009 hit song, "Alors on danse"; "Amiral Empereur Général Colonel Sadafi," in which Debbouze incarnates the eponymous title role of a Muammar Gaddafi-style dictator of an unnamed North African country who is ruthless, yet completely enamored of and controlled by his wife, hilariously performed in drag by Didier Bourdon; and a mock interview conducted by the respected journalist, David Pujadas, with one of the shoes that an Iraqi journalist famously threw at former American president, George W. Bush, in 2008—the role of the shoe being played by Debbouze. These sketches, reflecting French, American, and Maghrebi history and pop culture, appeal to audiences thanks to their humoristic originality, the playful rapport that Debbouze maintains with his fellow performers, and the presence of recognizable French show business stars in every sketch.

Inserted amongst these disparate humoristic vignettes is a short sketch entitled "Made in France." Albeit brief—at only four minutes in length—and leading up to a rather simple comedic climax that consists of a translingual pun, the sketch speaks volumes on the effects of media and

[104] Wahid Bouzidi made a name for himself in French comedy in part thanks to opportunities provided by Debbouze and *Jamel Comedy Club*. He unfortunately passed away on August 20, 2023 of a stroke at the age of 45, while research for this chapter was being carried out. Recognized as a great talent and kind, gentle soul, many tributes to him were made by his numerous past colleagues, Jamel Debbouze, and the *Jamel Comedy Club* cast.

political representation of French citizens of Mahrebi origin. Very little information is provided on the two characters involved or of the context, which can lead to potential comprehension issues. However, on closer reflection, one realizes that this ambiguity is intended and heightens the message and social critique offered by the piece. Jamel Debbouze, whose character is unnamed but who we discover at the very end is, in fact, playing himself, is a Frenchman of Maghrebi origin who needs to renew his *carte nationale d'identité*, or government-issued identity card. Sophie Mounicot, who French audiences will recognize as the uncompromising, domineering head nurse, Clara Saulnier, from the sitcom *H*, plays an anonymous civil servant who is charged with dealing with his case and related paperwork. Even though these two characters remain unidentified, the casting of Mounicot in this role opposite Debbouze reveals much about the relationship between the two. Audiences familiar with *H* will infer and apply the authoritarian boss and flippant employee relationship of Clara Saulnier and Jamel Dridi to Mounicot's and Debbouze's characters in this sketch, which is appropriate in terms of power dynamics. As Debbouze enters Mounicot's office in what we can only assume to be a local prefect, he appears meek and sheepish, holding his oversized dossier of paperwork under his arm and awaiting instructions. Mounicot, on the other hand cuts an imposing figure. She radiates a confident and professional, however somewhat judgmental and icy aura as she sits behind her desk wearing a tweed dress jacket. The audience is meant to gather her function from her surroundings. Directly behind where she is seated one notices two French flags, a tricolor emblem with the letters "RF" for *République française* (French republic) in gold, and a bust of Marianne. When the camera pans to another view of the office, the viewer can see an even larger French flag as well as a small flag of the European Union hanging on a side wall. Not only is Mounicot's character a simple French civil servant, she is a gatekeeper of Frenchness.

Immediately upon his entering the office, Debbouze's and Mounicot's characters greet each other formally and professionally, with her inviting him to have a seat. Debbouze sits and sets his giant folder of *paperasse*, or forms and related paperwork, on the table. She confirms that the appointment is for an identity card renewal and he answers in the affirmative. She proceeds to ask him to produce a series of documents—rent receipt, electricity bill, gas bill—as well as three identical, four-color process printed, passport-sized, headshot photos. He searches for and obediently hands all the requested items to her, upon which she checks each item off of a list. This introduction of the sketch is quite realistic, subdued, and almost somber in tone. However, anyone familiar with French bureaucracy will find a subtle humor in the enumeration of the many detailed elements that are habitually necessary in order to obtain the simplest government-issued document.

After she has stated that she has all of the necessary paperwork, she states in a matter-of-fact tone, « Mmh mmh. Bon, ben, il n'y a qu'à prouver que vous êtes français. » ("Jamel – Made in Jamel – Spectacle et Sketchs Complets" 15:59-16:04) / "Mmh mmh. Ok, well, the only thing left is to prove that you are French." She then folds her hands on top of her desk, looks at Debbouze, and gives a forced smile while batting her eyes, as if she is expecting him to produce yet one more thing. Without skipping a beat, he closes his folder and pushes it to the side in order to make room for the performance that he is about to give and for which he has been preparing like a student prepares for a test. What follows is a virtuosic comedic performance in which Debbouze's character energetically demonstrates an extensive, however at the same time, partial, mixed-up, and confused general knowledge of French history, culture, cuisine, and geography. Without being prompted to begin on the subject, he details the 1815 Battle of Waterloo while acting out how the English executed an ambush attack. Mounicot follows him with her eyes as

he seems to go down an invisible flight of stairs in front of her desk. He reaches even further back in history for the next bit:

> J.D.[105] : D'après les historiens, tout le monde s'accorde à dire que Charles Martel en 732 marchèrent [wrong verb conjugation in the passé simple] sur Poitiers. Vous avez déjà été à Poitiers ? Il y a un…[does not complete sentence]. Les Arabes s'engouffraient au Futuroscope[106]. Charles Martel, fort de son apanage, duc d'Aquitaine[107] déjà à l'époque, leur dirent [another wrong verb conjugation in the passé simple], « Non. Non, vous ne rentrerez pas au Futuroscope. Moi, Charles Martel, duc d'Aquitaine, je ne vous laisserai point rentrer en ce territoire. »[108] [cut to new episode] Vercingétorix, quant à lui, fut…euh …fut débouté en…[takes time to think] 400. 400. Pile.[109]
> S.M. : Ah, je ne savais pas ça.
> J.D. : Non, madame. Il faut se renseigner ça.
> ("Jamel – Made in Jamel – Spectacle et Sketchs Complets" 16:22-16:57)
>
> J.D.: According to historians, everyone is in agreement in saying that Charles Martel in 732 marchest on Poitiers. Have you ever been to Poitiers? There's a …[does not complete sentence]. The Arabs rushed into the Futuroscope. Charles Martel, made powerful by his privilege, already Duke of Aquitaine at the time, toldest them, "No. No, you will not enter the Futuroscope. I, Charles Martel, Duke of Aquitaine, will not let you enter into this territory." [cut to new episode] Vercingétorix, as for him, was…umm…was kicked out in …[takes time to think] 400. 400. Exactly.
> S.M.: Ah, I didn't know that.
> J.D.: No, ma'am. You have to educate yourself.

Up to this point, Sophie Mounicot passively watches the show that Debbouze is putting on. But she now begins to ask him questions, the first being on how to prepare *bœuf bourguignon,* or beef Burgundy. According to him, one needs « 60 grammes de bourguignon et 200 grammes de bœuf » ("Jamel – Made in Jamel – Spectacle et Sketchs Complets 17:00-17:03) / "60 grams of Burgundian and 200 grams of beef," that one mixes in a pot and cooks on low heat before adding

[105] In citing dialogue from this sketch, I will indicate the characters by the initials of the actors who play them, J.D. for Jamel Debbouze and S.M. for Sophie Mounicot.
[106] The Futuroscope is a theme park located near Poitiers that opened in 1987.
[107] Charles Martel was Duke and Prince of the Franks, but not Duke of Aquitaine.
[108] Here, Debbouze's character attempts to give an account of the Battle of Tours/Battle of Poitiers. Surprisingly, the date given is correct.
[109] This is inaccurate.

a pinch of coriander, some salt, an optional trickle of olive oil, and red wine. When asked about politics, he names French presidents but includes prime ministers in his list. When asked about sports he names five soccer stars who are all of immigrant or ethnic minority origins. After this comes a Bourvil impression. She requests that he sing in French and he gives a spirited rendition of "Je t'aime, moi non plus," and then attributes it to Charles Gainsbourg[110]. She then asks him to recite some French poetry. What ensues is a mash-up of poetic lines that any French person would have been required to memorize in elementary school. For example, he recites the following: « Demain dès l'aube où blanchit la campagne, j'écris ton nom, Liberté[111] » ("Jamel – Made in Jamel – Spectacle et Sketchs Complets" 17:54-17:59) / "Tomorrow at dawn when the countryside becomes clear, I write your name, Freedom," and credits it to Jules Verne. When asked to name some French rivers and tributaries, he lists « La Saône, la Loire, la Jouvence, la Décadence et…et la Myrtille » ("Jamel – Made in Jamel – Spectacle et Sketchs Complets" 18:02-18:06) / "The Saône, the Loire, The Fountain of Youth, the Decadence, and…and the Blueberry." As a showstopper, he is asked to sing the national anthem, "la Marseillaise," of which he sings an excerpt, naturally a mix of the veritable lyrics with his own made-up words.

Throughout the entire exhibition of jumbled up facts, information, and knowledge, Sophie Mounicot watches in an objective, neutral manner, rarely interjecting and never confirming or rejecting his answers. Once it is all over, she simply states, « Parfait, monsieur. Ce sera tout. » ("Jamel – Made in Jamel – Spectacle et Sketchs Complets" 18:16-18:17) / "Perfect,

[110] The song was famously performed for the first time in 1969 by *Serge* Gainsbourg and Jane Birkin.
[111] Here he is mixing incomplete lines of Victor Hugo's "Demain dès l'aube…" with Paul Éluard's "Liberté," and citing the author as Jules Verne.

sir. That will be all," while shuffling papers and giving him a forced smile. However, her cool, professional demeanor takes a sudden turn in the final section of the sketch :

> J.D. : C'est bon pour…à votre avis, pour le renouvellement de ma carte d'identité ?
> S.M. : Oui, oui. Normalement, ça devrait être bon. [continues to shuffle papers]
> J.D. : Inshallah[112]. [closes his dossier]
> S.M. : [stops shuffling papers, becomes very serious all of a sudden, leans into J.D. and looks him straight in the eyes] Pardon ? [J.D. tilts his head as if he does not understand.] Vous avez dit quoi, là ? Répétez.
> J.D. : Je…je ne vois pas ce que vous…
> S.M. : Vous avez dit « chat, chat, chat », quoi là ?
> J.D. : Le chat ? ...Ah oui. Oui, oui, oui, oui. Il y a…chat. [nods head] Il y a un chat là. [points to floor and starts to cough] Il y a un chat [said while coughing]. Je suis allergique aux chats. [turns to look around office] Il y a un chat ? Il y a un chat dans votre bureau.
> S.M. : [staring at J.D. with a very suspicious look]. Mmh, oui. Bien sûr. Il y a un chat [said sarcastically, knowing that he is lying]. [S.M. continues to stare at him in an askance manner as he stands up, puts his dossier under his arm, and leaves the office all the while coughing.] [S.M. picks up papers and shuffles them on desk while looking at the departing J.D. with a mixture of suspicion and disgust.]
> ("Jamel – Made in Jamel – Spectacle et Sketchs Complets" 18:18-19:00)

> J.D. : Is it all good for…in your opinion, for the renewal of my identity card?
> S.M. : Yes, yes. It should be fine. [continues to shuffle papers]
> J.D. : Inshallah. [closes his dossier]
> S.M. : [stops shuffling papers, becomes very serious all of a sudden, leans into J.D. and looks him straight in the eyes] Excuse me? [J.D. tilts his head as if he does not understand.] What did you say there? Repeat it.
> J.D. : I…I don't see what you…
> S.M. : You said "cat, cat, cat[113]" ["chat, chat, chat"], what?
> J.D. : The cat? [Le chat?] …Ah yes. Yes, yes, yes, yes. There is…cat. [Il y a…chat.] [nods head] There is a cat there. [Il y a un chat là] [points to floor and starts to cough] There is a cat. [Il y a un chat.] [said while coughing]. I'm allergic to cats. [turns to look around the office] Is there a cat? There's a cat in your office.
> S.M. : [staring at J.D. with a very suspicious look]. Mmh, yes. Of course. There is a cat [Il y a un chat] [said sarcastically, knowing that he is lying]. [S.M. continues to stare at him in an askance manner as he stands up, puts his dossier under his arm, and leaves the office all the while coughing.] [S.M. picks up papers and shuffles them on desk while looking at the departing J.D. with a mixture of suspicion and disgust.]

[112] This is a common Arabic expression meaning "God willing."
[113] I include the French in this translation as well, because the joke is based on word play and does not work in English. English translations here should be only for reference.

The very last image of the sketch is of the new identity card with Jamel Debbouze's name, photo, and other identifying information, set against a background of the French flag. In said photo he appears quite confused.

This entire sketch serves to provide a commentary on a point made by Hédi Abdel-Jaouad in which he states, "Young Beurs in particular, albeit citizens of France, continue to be seen and treated by the mainstream as perpetual immigrants or *immigrés à perpétuité*." (117) The viewer of the sketch could easily become confused as to who the character of Debbouze actually is and what he is doing in the office of the prefect[114]. Despite the fact that it is clearly stated in the beginning that he is there for a simple government-issued identity card renewal, after the preliminary paperwork passage, the appointment takes on the appearance of an immigration or a *titre de séjour* (approximate French equivalent of a green card) interview. This should not have been the case. Debbouze's character should not have been asked to prove his Frenchness as he was coming in, not to initially obtain, but to renew his *carte d'identité*, a document that all French citizens possess[115]. This is proof enough of his Frenchness. Sadly, the fact that Debbouze's character does not blink an eye upon being asked to prove that he is French—in fact he shows that he was expecting this and had prepared—, demonstrates that he has internalized and come to accept the fact that he is seen as a foreign "other" even though he was born and raised in France and has always possessed French citizenship. Furthermore, Sophie Mounicot in her role as civil servant, demonstrates a certain cultural racism at various points throughout the sketch. Debbouze clearly failed the Frenchness test, or at best demonstrated an only partial

[114] This confusion is also reflected in the final image of the sketch where the photo on Debbouze's new *carte d'identité* features him looking dazed and confused.
[115] Parallels can hence be made between this sketch and the scene in *Le ciel, les oiseaux et…ta mère!* where Youssef has his nationality questioned by the bus ticket inspector.

mastery of the codes of *francité*. The fact that she does not view this as a hindrance in renewing his identity card (even though this was not a necessary step in the first place) suggests that she does not expect, or perhaps even desire, full integration into French culture and society of those of Maghrebi origin[116]. The only telling sign of the limits of her tolerance in regards to the presence and integration of Franco-Maghrebis is when she reacts fiercely to Debbouze's simple utterance of "inshallah" (Arabic for "God willing"), forcing him to backpedal and transform his Arabic expression with strong religious connotations into the similar-sounding, yet completely different in meaning French sentence, "*Il y a un chat là*," or "There is a cat there." While she permits a certain level of ignorance of general French culture on his part, she, as gatekeeper of Frenchness, cannot condone markers of religious expression, especially when it comes to expressions of Islam. Presumably, this can be attributed to an ostensible vehement defense of French *laïcité*, and has a long history in the granting or rejection of French citizenship to Muslims. It is important to remember that during the majority of French colonial rule in Algeria, any Muslim applying for French citizenship had to first renounce their status as a Muslim, as adherences to both Muslim and French republican values and principles were thought to be

[116] This also harkens back to Laurence Christine Huughe's discussion of Jamel Debbouze's nickname of "*ambassadeur de la banlieue*." After stating that the term "ambassador" deserves further inspection and explaining that the title is most likely because of his banlieue origins, the banlieue being seen in France as a space of exclusion and otherness, she writes: "Dans cette perspective, reconnaître en Jamel un ambassadeur de la banlieue, c'est peut-être le voir aussi comme celui qui est chargé d'une mission, comme celui qui devrait servir d'intermédiare entre ces deux territoires en conflit. C'est à cette possible fonction de négociateur que nous voudrions nous intéresser ici en examinant le rire comme l'instrument privilégié qui permet à l'ambassadeur de la banlieue de proposer un "terrain d'entente", lieu possible de résolution de conflit." (76) / "From this perspective, recognizing in Jamel an ambassador of the banlieue, is perhaps to see him also as he who is charged with a mission, as he should serve as an intermediary between these two territories in conflict. It is this possible function of negotiator that we will be interested in here by examining laughter as the privileged instrument that allows the ambassador of the banlieue to propose a "common ground," a possible space of conflict resolution."

incompatible. As the sociologist, Abdellali Hajjat, notes in his work, *Les frontières de l'« identité nationale » : L'injonction à l'assimilation en France métropolitaine et coloniale*, regarding the postcolonial situation of Muslims seeking to obtain French nationality in the Hexagon, « À partir de 1974, apparaissent les premiers cas de refus pour défaut d'assimilation lié à la polygamie, qualifiée de « coutume du pays d'origine, […] tranchant sur le comportement d'un citoyen français », et au « voile islamique » […]. Ce type de dossiers n'est en fait que la partie la plus visible des cas de refus pour défaut d'assimilation. » (164) / "Starting in 1974, the first cases of refusal on grounds of lack of assimilation tied to polygamy appear, described as a "custom of the country of origin, […] deviating from the behavior of a French citizen," and tied to the "Islamic veil" […]. These types of files are in fact only the most visible part of the refusal cases on grounds of lack of assimilation." It is important to note here that polygamy and the wearing of the veil are both associated with Islam. Therefore, it would appear that the strong reaction of Mounicot's civil servant to Debbouze's utterance of "Inshallah" has a long precedent in colonial as well as postcolonial French contexts.

Seeing that much of the humor in this sketch is based on verbal comedy, this would appear to be a prime opportunity to discuss Debbouze's creative and humoristic use of language. Many researchers have noted the inventive, non-standard ways in which he manipulates the French language to comic effect. In fact, it has become a part of his recognizable humoristic style. One can perceive in his speech a slight stutter, which often becomes much more pronounced when he plays comic characters or is emphasizing his "fool" persona. On top of this, there are many words that, in his comedy work, he simply does not pronounce correctly. As Hédi Abdel-Jaouad notes:

> Because Jamel is most attuned to the concerns of the young whose language he speaks intimately, his humour derives essentially from a playful, if not mischievous, mispronunciation of often simple and recognizable words or names (such as "Joney Star" for Joey Starr, "Neménemzz" for M&M's). His inimitable distortion of Zidane's name "Zimadime Zimdame[117]" has become his comedic signature. This self-deprecating humour is directed specifically at the mainstream audience that often deliberately mispronounces Arabic names […] (125)

Another humorous distortion of the French language from the sketch includes wrong conjugations of verbs in the literary passé simple tense. In attempting to use the passé simple conversationally he is attempting to appear erudite, however, the wrong conjugations would undermine these attempts. This could also be seen as a jab at the French language or even at French people who commonly use overly complicated linguistic forms and stylings in order to elevate their image in front of others. Oftentimes, code-switching between French and/or Arabic and/or English (often done incorrectly or inappropriately) constitutes a humoristic linguistic device. Very little of that occurs in this particular sketch, perhaps because he is attempting to impress Mounicot's character and pass her tests. Although, the entire sketch does build up to the translingual pun of a play on words between "Inshallah" and "Il y a un chat là." In all of these examples, we notice that Debbouze's comedic language deviates greatly from standard French and its usual uses. On the incompatibility of rhetorical styles and comedic language, Luigi Pirandello, in his seminal work, *L'umorismo* (*On Humor* in its English translation), writes:

> Humor needs a highly spirited, free, spontaneous, and direct movement of language—a movement that can be achieved only when form creates itself anew each time. Now Rhetoric taught the writer not to *create* form but to *imitate* it, to compose it externally. […] Movement is only in living language and in form that creates itself. And the humor that cannot do without this movement, I repeat, we shall find it (both in its broad sense and in its proper sense) in the humoristic expressions in dialect, in macaronic poetry, and in the writers who rebelled against Rhetoric. (35)

[117] This pronunciation of Zinedine Zidane's name occurs in the "Made in France" sketch when he is listing famous French soccer players.

Debbouze exemplifies Pirandello's theoretical conception of comedic language in many ways: through his banlieue "dialect," his innovative neologisms and mispronunciations, his turning away from the precepts of standard French, and his creative use of code-switching. The only times that he ostensibly attempts to conform to rhetorical styles or "proper" French, he intentionally fails, resulting in audience laughter.

Considering that the "Made in France" sketch is so short (four minutes exactly) and plays on some minimalist devices (for example, unnamed characters and little context), it provides a significant amount of comedic content as well as major social critique. As was often the case in the episode of *H* examined in this chapter, the sketch also plays on types or even stereotypes. In fact, Debbouze and Mounicot recycle the personas of their *H* characters for this sketch, that is, those of the fool and of the harsh authority figure. While that does not lend itself necessarily to impressive plot or character development, it is not needed in this performance. The comedy as well as the message come, not from either of the individual characters or their storylines, but rather from the interactions, dialogue, and antagonisms between the two set types. In the end, Debbouze's feigned cat allergy exposes the fact that Mounicot's character suffers from an allergy of another kind.

Tout sur Jamel: Debbouze Turns the Tables on His Audience

In 2011, Jamel Debbouze decided to dedicate an extended period of time to his first love, live solo comic performance, with his show, *Tout sur Jamel*. From 2011 to 2013 the show toured venues not only in France, but also in Belgium, Switzerland, Morocco, Spain, Ile Maurice, Ivory Coast, Senegal, Algeria, Lebanon, Canada, and the United States (www.planetjamel.fr), highlighting his status as an international celebrity. A filmed version was distributed on DVD in

2011 and will serve as the primary source material for this section[118]. *Tout sur Jamel* is his fourth major solo show that has been on tour and filmed. Previous solo shows include *C'est tout neuf* (1995), *Jamel en scène* (1999), and *100% Debbouze* (2003). Subsequent solo performances include *Jamel improvise…*(2016) and *Maintenant ou Jamel* (2019). What makes *Tout sur Jamel* stand out from his other solo shows, besides the high quality of the content and performance, is its placement in his career trajectory. After having achieved national stardom with television and film successes, having founded *Jamel Comedy Club* (2006-) and revolutionized the French comedic landscape with the mainstream introduction of the stand-up genre, and having begun to obtain an international fan base in francophone countries and beyond, with this show Jamel takes time to reflect on his life path and how he came to stand in his current position. Intended to take the form of a pseudo-autobiographical, confessional-style (as the title of the show suggests) performance, he recounts purported episodes of his personal and professional life while highlighting major themes that have shaped his identity: family, education, a mixed marriage, celebrity status, and perhaps above all, his place in a multicultural France[119]. The following analysis explores the genre of this show, the theme and importance of multiculturalism in France

[118] The live performance that was filmed for DVD release took place on July 1 and 2, 2011 in front of a full house at the Casino de Paris. The text was written by Jamel Debbouze, Mohamed Hamidi, and Hichem Lamriq. Staging is credited to Mohamed Hamidi and direction to Richard Valverde. The DVD was produced by Kissman Productions and distributed by TF1 Video.

[119] In terms of Debbouze's identity, he has made it clear to audiences that his Moroccan heritage plays a large role. However, he is also deeply marked by his belonging to a French society where different cultures exchange and interact. On this aspect of his identity, Constance Desloire writes, « Quelle est la place de l'identité arabe de Jamel Debbouze dans ses prestations humoristiques ? Se définit-il lui-même comme « Arabe » ? Comment son humour s'appuie-t-il sur cette identité, la distord-il ? Jamel Debbouze est arabe, mais arabe de France avant tout et fier de l'être. » (201) / "What is the place of Jamel Debbouze's Arab identity in his humoristic appearances? Does he define himself as "Arab?" How does his humor rely on, distort this identity? Jamel Debbouze is Arab, but Arab from France first and foremost, and proud of it."

found in the performance, and how Debbouze frames and delivers the content to his audience in order to better communicate his messages.

The particular comedic genre of *Tout sur Jamel* is difficult to place, but worthy of further reflection. Debbouze began his early career writing, producing, and starring in one-person shows. This is understandable as the genre is popular in France where it has a long history that springs forth from the *café-théâtre* tradition. Debbouze was influenced by artists who excelled in this format, and his solo work up to this point consists primarily of one-man show productions. However, prior to 2006, he became equally influenced by American stand-up performers, such as Eddie Murphy and Chris Rock, who inspired him to bring the genre of stand-up to mainstream French audiences, which he succeeded in doing on a grand scale with his theatre and Canal + television show, *Jamel Comedy Club* (2006-present). The genres of one-person show and stand-up share many points in common, but also diverge from each other in several meaningful ways. Both are humoristic performances undertaken by solo artists in front of live audiences. Yet, one-person shows generally keep the fourth wall between performer and audience intact, are more noticeably theatrical and text-based, and more often feature platforms for artists to develop a character; whereas stand-up typically breaks the fourth wall (the performer is expected to speak directly to and interact with audience members), has a more ostensibly improvisational feel, and allows performers to develop their own comic personas rather than present a character. This is not to say that the one-person genre cannot be more personal, interactive, and/or improvisational on occasion; or that stand-up is entirely unscripted (it most certainly is not) and that stand-up comedians never present characters. However, the above-mentioned characteristics constitute the defining traits, and above all, the moods of the respective genres. In the filmed DVD performance of *Tout sur Jamel*, the spectator witnesses Debbouze blurring the lines between one-

man show and stand-up. Naturally, this being his first major solo performance tour since the creation of *Jamel Comedy Club* in 2006, he wants to demonstrate his credentials and prove his legitimacy as one of—if not *the*—premier stand-up artist on the French scene. It is for this reason, that immediately after entering on stage, he asks for the house lights to be turned up so that he can see the audience. After commenting on the diversity of the crowd he comes down off of the stage, physically breaking the fourth wall, and greets a man in the front row by giving him a kiss on both cheeks and commenting on how the man's liberal application of Christian Dior's Fahrenheit cologne is perhaps an attempt to seduce him. The personal interactions with the audience are meant to establish this as a stand-up performance from the very beginning. However, Debbouze is playing to a full house at a very large venue, the Casino de Paris. Because of this, he struggles to maintain the interactions and intimacy with his audience throughout the duration of the show that are typical of stand-up presented in a club or a smaller theatre. He returns to the stage after greeting the man in the front row and further interactions with the audience are limited and carefully planned and doled out for the rest of the performance. In fact, later on when a man in the balcony yells something out to Debbouze, the comedian tells him to be quiet and appears to have not fully appreciated the interruption. In a true stand-up set, the performer would be expected to use any interruptions from the crowd as potential opportunities to interact and improvise with the audience member in question in a back-and-forth manner. It is quite possible that along with the constraints of playing to a packed audience in a large venue, Jamel's awareness that the show is being filmed impedes his willingness to improvise with his public. However, a desire to interact is present. In any case, it is for these reasons that this particular performance of *Tout sur Jamel* can be seen as a sort of hybrid creation, mixing elements of the one-person show genre with stand-up.

The questions of how and why Debbouze establishes a relationship with his audience during the course of this show are important and will be returned to later in this section. For the moment though, it will be useful to explore the content and main themes. Throughout the course of the show, Jamel recounts what we are made to believe to be actual episodes of his life from his childhood to the present moment. Shots of his parents and his wife in the audience, as well as a brief slide show of family photos at the end are meant to reinforce the veracity of the stories that he tells. An overarching theme found in these narratives—as well as in his entire professional body of work—is the description and validation of a multicultural France and Debbouze's place within it. As Constance Desloire states,

> Mais même si son arabité est une matière essentielle de ses créations, c'est le caractère multiculturel de l'univers de Debbouze qui est le plus évident sur scène. Sa première référence est la culture française. D'une part Debbouze est né et a grandi en France ; d'autre part il est hors de question de s'aliéner un public français non immigré, très nombreux à l'adorer. (92)
>
> But even if his Arabness is essential material for his creations, it is the multicultural character of Debbouze's universe that is most evident on stage. His primary frame of reference is French culture. On the one hand Debbouze was born and grew up in France; on the other hand, it is out of the question to alienate non-immigrant French audiences, very many of whom love him.

Debbouze was born and raised in the multicultural world of the French banlieue. It is this French, yet ethnically diverse upbringing that connects him to other French citizens of all races and ethnicities, and nurtures his worldview. In the following excerpts of *Tout sur Jamel*, the spectator witnesses not only how Debbouze finds humor in this ethnically diverse culture, but how he is influenced and effected by it, validates it, and at times feels the need to defend it from attack.

Early on in the show, while narrating events from his childhood and adolescence, he speaks of sitting in math class in school. He states, « Un jour la prof a demandé, « Qui peut venir me dessiner au tableau une parabole ? » » (*Tout sur Jamel*, 2011) / "One day the teacher asked,

“Who can come draw me a parabola on the blackboard?”” Jamel, while sitting on a stool raises his hand enthusiastically and begins to jump up and down in his seat while singing “la Marseillaise.” He looks at the audience and repeats, “une parabole,” with a look that would seem to say “who better than me is fitted to this task?” The teacher calls on him and he walks up to an imaginary blackboard while continuing to hum the French national anthem. He says, « Je suis allé au tableau comme si j’avais reçu la Légion d’honneur. » (*Tout sur Jamel*, 2011) / “I went to the blackboard as if I had received the Legion of Honor.” He then puts all of his energy into drawing the biggest, most beautiful satellite dish complete with connectors that he believes has even been drawn. Proudly, he says to the teacher that she can get all the channels with that. The teacher responds by yelling “Get out!” A genuine misunderstanding has occurred between the young Jamel and his math teacher as “une parabole” in French means both the mathematical term, “parabola,” and a “satellite dish.” He later says to the audience, « Il n’y a rien de plus humiliant au monde qu’une prof qui crie fort, « Dehors ! » devant tout le monde comme ça. […] Et moi, je vous jure de tout mon cœur, j’étais sûr d’avoir bien fait. Tu vois ? » (*Tout sur Jamel*, 2011) / “There’s nothing more humiliating in the world than a teacher who yells loudly “Get out!” in front of everyone like that. […] And I swear to you with all my heart, I was sure that I had done a good job. You see?” The word play that is critical to the humor in this bit as well as the context and connotations would appear to be clear to a French audience, as Jamel receives a laugh immediately upon saying that the teacher asked who could come up and draw a “parabole” on the blackboard. Nonetheless, it will require some explanation for the non-French reader/viewer. First and foremost, the national education system in France is a part of and intimately linked to the government and the French republic itself. It is for this reason that the young Jamel associates doing well in class, or even the possibility of doing a good job, with an

act of patriotism, hence his singing of "la Marseillaise" and his reference to the Legion of Honor. Secondly, the satellite dish represents more than just an object capable of receiving a large range of television channels. It had become a common feature in many Franco-Maghrebi households in France and was associated with the ability to connect immigrant families with channels offering the language, culture, and values of their countries of origin. The satellite dish was a veritable symbol of immigration and belonging to two or more cultures, in a word, of multiculturalism itself. As Alec G. Hargreaves writes:

> In 1995, a survey conducted for the European satellite company Eutelstat indicated that 21 per cent of Arabic-speaking households in France had invested in satellite receivers, compared with 4 per cent of the general population (*Le Monde*, 29-30 Oct. 1995). A year later, the number of Arabic-speaking households with satellite dishes was believed to have doubled (*Le Monde*, 29 Nov. 1996). By the end of the decade, satellite TV had become a standard fixture in the homes of most Maghrebi immigrants.
> (*Multi-Ethnic France* 80)

When the word play, contexts, and connotations are put into place, the viewer understands the symbolic value and power of this comedic math class incident. A young Jamel Debbouze believes that his teacher, a representative of the French state and in that moment his reference for Frenchness, will recognize and laud his multicultural background as an asset to the nation. Instead, he is rejected, publicly humiliated, and left feeling dejected.

In another passage detailing his professional life, he does not wait for others to praise multiculturalism, but rather extols the gifts of immigration himself. While speaking of a time when he invited the French national soccer team to the Jamel Comedy Club and to dinner, he recounts that he had to call the team's dietician (although he mixes up the words "diététicien" / "dietician" and "esthéticien" / "beautician," resulting in a joke and moderate audience laughter) and learned that « […] la moitié de l'équipe de France mange halal. » (*Tout sur Jamel*, 2011) /

"[…] half of the French team eats halal." Upon stating this he launches into a very direct reflection on the benefits of immigration. He says to the audience:

> Et moi, je trouve que c'est une très bonne nouvelle. […] On devrait remercier l'immigration pour tous les cadeaux qu'elle a faits à la France. [audience cheer and applause] Bien sûr. Et on devrait remercier l'immigration pour les cadeaux qu'elle a faits à l'*équipe* de France. Voilà. Chaque vague d'immigration a porté un cadeau à l'équipe de France depuis les années cinquante, depuis les Polonais. Raymond Kopa, capitaine de l'équipe de France. C'est un cadeau ça. Deuxième vague d'immigration, la vague d'immigration italienne. Michel Platini, capitaine de l'équipe de France. C'est un cadeau ça. Troisième vague d'immigration, la vague d'immigration maghrébine. Zimadime Zimdame. [audience cheers] C'est un cadeau ça. [looks to the ceiling and raises one hand in the air] Merci, Zizou[120] Christ. La vague d'immigration africaine. Capitaine de l'équipe de France, Alou Diarra. C'est un cadeau ça. Évidemment. (*Tout sur Jamel*, 2011)
>
> And I think that it's very good news. […] We should thank immigration for all the gifts it has made to France. [audience cheer and applause] Of course. And we should thank immigration for the gifts it has made to the French *team*. There you go. Each wave of immigration brought a gift to the French team since the fifties, since the [arrival of the] Polish. Raymond Kopa, captain of the French team. That's a gift. Second wave of immigration, the wave of Italian immigration. Michel Platini, captain of the French team. That's a gift. Third wave of immigration, the wave of Maghrebi immigration. Zimadime Zimdame. [audience cheers] That's a gift. [looks to the ceiling and raises one hand in the air] Thank you, Zizou Christ. The wave of African immigration. Captain of the French team, Alou Diarra. That's a gift. Obviously.

This segment is less explicitly humoristic in nature apart from a couple quips. This is perhaps because he feels the need to communicate his sentiments on a subject that is highly meaningful and personal to him in an unambiguous manner that is less vulnerable to misinterpretation. Furthermore, these are views that he has stated in numerous mediums and interviews. When asked by Daphné Roulier if he thinks that France is currently (the filmed interview was uploaded to YouTube in 2022) far removed from what could be seen as an almost utopic moment in French history for ethnic minorities in 1998 after Zinedine Zidane scored the winning goal for France

[120] Zinedine Zidane is commonly and affectionately referred to as "Zizou" in France.

during the World Cup, momentarily forcing France as a nation to recognize the benefits of immigration and a racially and culturally diverse society, Debbouze responds:

> Non. Franchement, non. Je pense qu'on fait une publicité…Je pense qu'on a besoin de la peur pour faire vendre. Et c'est un super argument, que ça se vend comme des petits pains. Et qu'il faut passer son temps à rassurer la vieille dame. Ce que j'appelle la vieille dame c'est cette France qui a besoin qu'on la rassure et qu'on lui dise qu'on ne va pas vous voler votre sac à main, mais vous porter vos courses. [laughs] Tu vois ? Et, euh, à toutes les campagnes présidentielles, on nous sort le même argument. Et on se sent visés de la même manière. Et ce depuis Valéry Giscard d'Estaing. [laughs] Moi, je n'ai rien connu d'autre. Donc, on nous nourrit ça depuis toujours. Et on sait qu'on est les dindons de la farce et que c'est faux, que l'immigration est une très bonne nouvelle pour la société, qu'elle rapporte des milliards d'euros à la France. Et je trouve que c'est un manque de respect terrible pour cette frange de la population qui est venue aider ce pays à lutter contre l'obscurantisme, à l'aider à se rebâtir et aujourd'hui à le nettoyer. (LCP – Assemblée nationale 15 :17-16 :15)
>
> No. Frankly, no. I think that they are putting out publicity…I think that they need fear in order to sell. And it's a super argument. It sells like hotcakes. And we have to spend our time reassuring the old lady. What I'm calling the old lady is this France that needs us to reassure her and to tell her that we aren't going to steal your purse, but rather bring you your groceries. [laughs] You see? And, umm, during every presidential campaign, they bring out the same argument for us. And we feel targeted in the same way. And this has been going on since Valéry Giscard d'Estaing. [laughs] I've never known anything else. So, they've been feeding us this since forever. And we know that we're the butt of the joke and that it's false, that immigration is very good news for society, that it brings billions of euros to France. And I find that it is an enormous lack of respect for this marginal group of the population who came to help this country to fight against obscurantism, to help it rebuild itself, and today to clean it.

We see in this interview quote not only that what Debbouze says on stage about the benefits of immigration are truly his own views, but also why he feels the continual need to defend and validate immigration and multiculturalism in France. He is countering the negative rhetoric surrounding immigration that is habitually circulated amongst the population.

One of the most thought-provoking aspects of *Tout sur Jamel*, is the way in which Debbouze frames the material of the show and sells it to his audience, all the while inviting them into his ethnically diverse comedic world. Even before he enters the stage, flashes of light reveal

to the viewer the decor. We see signs that say “hammam,” a sign for the Barbès-Rochechouart metro station, a house number indicating 56, and a street sign marked “18ème arrondissement, Boulevard de la Chapelle.” Once all the stage lights are turned on and Jamel is fully in view, the spectators can see that the decor represents a street scene in front of a stone building with a large door and windows. The signs indicate that this represents Barbès, the district of Paris where Debbouze was born and raised until the age of three, and that is known for its racial and ethnic diversity. We are indeed inside Jamel’s world. After running to the front of the stage he yells, « Bonsoir, la France ! » (*Tout sur Jamel*, 2011) / “Good evening, France!” It is quite typical for stand-up performers to begin their shows in a similar way, addressing their audience with the name of the city where they are playing. However, Debbouze does not say “Bonsoir, Paris” even though he is performing at the Casino de Paris. Perhaps aware that this is being filmed for DVD distribution and will reach a larger audience, he opts for “la France” instead of “Paris.” However, this is also an indication that the content and messages contained within are addressed to the French nation and all of its citizens. Then, before leaving the stage to greet a chosen audience member, he says, « Allume la lumière pour voir la tête des convives. » (*Tout sur Jamel*, 2011) / “Turn up the lights so we can see the faces of the guests.” By referring to his audience as guests, he is establishing a relationship with the crowd where he is host (standing in Barbès, the place of his birth) and the audience are guests that he has invited into his world. This creates an interesting power dynamic. Firstly, he is the master of his home (the stage), and the audience, as visitors, are to owe respect, courtesy , and even gratitude to their host. Secondly, his place of belonging is secured since he is *chez lui* (at home) and the audience, as guests, are placed in a much less stable, transitory position.

Here, the Bakhtinian carnivalesque role reversal is made clear. The "fool" figure of Debbouze (the *Bouffon de Trappes*), has the upper hand over his audience members, possessing the right to speak freely and present the opinions and worldviews that he sees fit. In speaking of the Western European medieval and renaissance tradition of the Feast of Fools, Bakhtin summarizes the carnivalesque by writing, "Another essential element was a reversal of the hierarchic levels: the jester was proclaimed king, a clownish abbot, bishop, or archbishop was elected at the "feast of fools," and in the churches directly under the pope's jurisdiction a mock pontiff was even chosen" (81). Furthermore, Debbouze's term, *"convive"* (guest) reminds us of the language of Derrida when he speaks of the guest and host roles (and their ambiguity and reversibility) involved in his theories of hospitality and its relation to immigration. In his seminar, "Question d'étranger: venue de l'étranger" of January 10, 1996, as published in the book, *Anne Dufourmantelle invite Jacques Derrida à répondre: De l'hospitalité*, Derrida states,

> Selon la chaîne qui nous est maintenant familière (*hosti-pet-s, potis, potest, ipse,* etc.), la souveraineté du pouvoir, la *potestas* et la possession de l'hôte restent celles du *paterfamilias*, du maître de maison, du « maître de céans », comme l'appelle Klossowski. Et l'on traduit le même mot de deux façons, tantôt par « étranger », tantôt par « hôte ». (41)
>
> According to the chain that is now familiar to us (*hosti-pet-s, potis, potest, ipse,* etc.), the sovereignty of power, the *potestas* and the possession of the host remain those of the *paterfamilias*, of the master of the house, of the "master of here," as Klossowski calls it. And one translates the same word in two ways, sometimes with "foreigner/stranger," sometimes with "host."

Despite the fact that Debbouze does not use the exact language of Derrida, "convive" expresses the meaning of "guest" and can be seen here to correspond to Derrida's theoretical role of "guest." As we have seen, the word "guest" in the context of history of immigration in France also connotes the Maghrebi guest workers who helped rebuild France in the post-WWII period, many of whom later stayed in France permanently. Examples from *Le ciel, les oiseaux et…ta*

mère! and the "Made in France" sketch from this chapter demonstrate that Debbouze as well as many other French citizens of Maghrebi origin are still widely seen as immigrants or "guests" in the "host" country of France. Therefore, referring to his audience—which is multicultural, but largely Franco-French or "white," as shots of the audience show—as "convives," or "guests," while he stands at home on the stage made to represent his birthplace, turns the tables on the (largely Franco-French) audience, and reverses roles and power dynamics for the duration of the show. As Judith Still notes in discussing Derrida's notion of the "hôte" and its potential reversibility:

> The advantage of the French *hôte* is its reversibility—its hint in the direction of the Klossowskian guest as host of the host. This is one line to follow when thinking about the real make-up of the nation (rather than fantasizing about its purity), and about those 'guests' who might have a right to be here, who, if not doubly present should be at least singly present. Should be no more *sans* than the rest of us, if truth were to be told. (96)

This would, in fact, appear to be the message that Jamel promotes and delivers to audiences throughout the entirety of his show.

At the very end of *Tout sur Jamel*, after the slide show of family pictures, Debbouze returns to address his audience of "guests" one last time. He says, « Avant de partir, j'aimerais juste dire une chose parce que sincèrement j'ai vraiment la meilleure place d'ici. C'est la vérité. Il y a des gens de toutes les origines. Vous ne voyez pas, vous. Mais surtout de toutes les générations. Et vous entendre rire au même temps, je vous jure que ça fait chaud au cœur. Vive la France ! » (*Tout sur Jamel*, 2011) / "Before leaving, I would just like to say one thing because, honestly, I have the best seat from here. It's the truth. There are people of all backgrounds. You don't see it. But especially, of all generations. And hearing you all laugh at the same time, I swear that it warms my heart. Long live France!" I would argue that it is only after effectuating performer-audience role reversals in the way that he does, presenting his views on the positive

traits of a multicultural France in the body of his show, and then projecting that image of a culturally diverse France on to his audience, that Jamel Debbouze can end his performance with his spirited cry of "Vive la France!". The France that he lifts up in this final utterance is not the France of republican ideology or of "purist" fantasies, it is rather the ethnically diverse, culturally rich melting pot of contemporary France where he has found his place.

Conclusion

In speaking of the figure of the fool as well as of the court fools of Western European traditions of the Middle Ages and Renaissance, Georges Minois, writes:

> Le fou du roi est là pour faire rire. C'est sa fonction première. Mais il ne s'agit évidemment pas d'un simple clown. Si le rire qu'il provoque est si important, c'est qu'il porte avec lui ce qui manque le plus dans l'entourage d'un roi : la vérité. Coupé de la réalité par les flatteries, les craintes, les mensonges, les intrigues de son entourage, le souverain n'apprend la vérité que par son fou—surtout la vérité pénible, celle qui blesse, celle dont un homme sensé et tenant à sa situation n'osera pas faire part. (205)
>
> The king's jester is there to make people laugh. That is his primary function. But he is obviously not a simple clown. If the laughter that he provokes is so important, it is because it carries with it what is missing the most in the entourage of a king: the truth. Cut off from reality by flattery, fears, lies, his entourage's intrigues, the sovereign only learns the truth through his fool—especially difficult truth, that which hurts, that which a sensible man who cares about his position would not dare to say.

As we can see in the examples provided in this chapter, this is precisely the function that Jamel Debbouze's fool persona carries out in contemporary French society. The fool that he plays on stage and screen should not be dismissed as a simpleminded figure who makes audiences laugh because he lacks the mental capacity to hold views and opinions on society and politics, as some might believe. On the contrary, the persona is a type of subterfuge used to slyly convey his perspectives and messages to audiences that might not be receptive to what he has to say. He speaks his own truth and exposes hidden or ignored truths tucked away in the crevices of the

collective national consciousness. These truths are not always easy to hear. It is difficult to find out that one has hurt, forgotten about, excluded, or discriminated against individuals or segments of the population. However, Debbouze has managed to accomplish such a task and to take the sting away with laughter. In doing so, he has endeared himself to audiences, accomplished his dreams, and paved the way for others to follow in his footsteps.

Conclusion

"Joking indeed is a paradoxical affair, being at once the toughest and the frailest form of human intercourse." (5)

Enid Welsford
The Fool: His Social and Literary History

In reference to the carnivalesque mode, which can characterize most, if not all, of the works under consideration in this dissertation, Bakhtin writes:

> In fact, carnival does not know footlights, in the sense that it does not acknowledge any distinction between actors and spectators. Footlights would destroy a carnival, as the absence of footlights would destroy a theatrical performance. Carnival is not a spectacle seen by the people; they live in it, and everyone participates because its very idea embraces all the people. While carnival lasts, there is no other life outside it. During carnival time life is subject only to its laws, that is, the laws of its own freedom. It has a universal spirit; it is a special condition of the entire world, of the world's revival and renewal, in which all take part. Such is the essence of carnival, vividly felt by all its participants. (7)

This quote highlights the fact that the carnivalesque mode, and by extension comedic genres to which it can be applied, rely heavily on its audiences in order to create and interpret meaning. As Bakhtin states, there are no footlights that separate performer from audience as is the case in theatre performances. The audience, their laughter, their active engagement with the performers and performance, and their critical reception of the creative content, are vital to the very essence of comedy. Today, the comedic genre that most closely reflects this is perhaps that of stand-up, in which the performer breaks down the fourth wall to establish a direct rapport with their audience, audience reaction can in theory influence the directions that the performance takes[121],

[121] For this reason, Sophie Quirk, in her work, *Why Stand-Up Matters: How Comedians Manipulate and Influence*, qualifies stand-up as a "democratic" art form. (141-142)

and improvisation—or an improvisational feel—that requires a certain synergy with the audience characterizes the entire performance.

However, for the majority of other comedic genres that are prevalent today, barriers have been placed in between performer/performance and audience. Or to echo Bakhtin's language, footlights of enormous dimensions now separate these two components whose cooperation and symbiosis are so important in creating comedic meaning. The genre of the one-person show functions much like that of a play where spectators are expected to remain seated, quiet, and reserved. Film comedies, television sitcoms, and most other comedic genres prevalent today are consumed through screen, eliminating any possibility of true interaction between performer and audience. In her seminal work on the figure of the fool, *The Fool: His Social and Literary History*, initially published in 1935, Enid Welsford bemoans the situation that film comedy presents by depriving audiences of a direct relationship with onscreen performers. She writes:

> Nevertheless in this, as in other matters, modern inventiveness has introduced some startling changes, and broadcasting and the cinematograph seem likely to complete a process begun for good or ill by the printing press—the process of isolating author from audience, art from reality. […] Charlie Chaplin cannot wink at spectators, nor can the spectators suggest witty repartee or communicate emotion to Charlie Chaplin—the audience has been deprived of even the slightest share in the act of artistic creation. When, therefore, we reach this latest part of the Fool's long history we are confronted with a novel and to my mind somewhat disquieting situation—will this flickering out of improvisation be extinguished altogether, will the public mind, in this as in other graver matters, be reduced to a state of completely passive receptivity, and what will be the effect on our civilization? (xiii-xiv)

Welsford's reflection which dates from an earlier period in the history of cinema may strike us as odd in the 21st century, as we have become quite accustomed to consuming culture and entertainment by means of screen. Nonetheless, she offers up valid observation and critique that have enduring effects on our current relationship to comedy and the carnivalesque mode.

I would like to conclude this dissertation by placing my research and the comedic works that constitute its primary material in the hands of the reader and spectator for critical reflection. As Bakhtin and Welsford point out, when it comes to comedy, reception and some manner of active engagement with the material are of crucial importance. However, as has also been implied as well as explicitly stated, today more than ever before there unfortunately exist barriers between comedians, their output, and their audiences. Not only do technology and the prevalence of screens actively prevent audiences from fully engaging with comedians and comedy, but a number of attitudes and situations regarding our relationship to comedy too often hinder us from putting in the time and energy necessary to critically engage with it. Over the course of my research for and thinking about this dissertation project, it has come to my attention that comedy faces some unique obstacles in its reception that more "respectable" narrative and performance genres do not necessarily always have to contend with. I would like to detail some of these obstacles with the goal of encouraging my readers to not only be aware of the critical importance of the reception of comedy, but also to work to move past some of its barriers. Some of these hindrances to the reception of comedic works that I can identify include prevalent attitudes on comedy as "light" and unworthy of critical attention, the question of offense, and the fact that comedy is deceptive.

Firstly, current prevalent attitudes and pedagogical practices teach us that comedy is a "light" genre. This would imply that it is unworthy of critical thought. When we are having a bad day or are preoccupied by our troubles, more often than not, the advice that we receive from our loved ones is to watch a comedy. It is implied in doing so that we will relieve our worried minds from stress because the material that comedy presents is light, formulaic, devoid of serious issues, and that laughter will carry us to a place of no burdens. It is not my intention here of

depriving anyone of their most trusted form of stress relief. However, if I achieve anything with the material presented in my main chapters, it is hopefully the awareness that comedy does feature serious issues and that the flip side of the coin of laughter is tears and struggle. To accept the attitude that comedy is simply light, inconsequential material, and to consume comedy in such a passive manner exposes one to many risks. Comedy regularly features stereotypes and taboo subjects. To watch this material in a nonchalant, flippant way could quite possibly influence viewers to unquestioningly accept the stereotypical or taboo material as it is presented at face value, without pausing to take into consideration the ironic tone and intent that is often hiding behind the façade of merriment. This uncritical manner of consumption could also lead to a normalization of stereotypes and taboos. Furthermore, comedy does often present important social critique, messages regarding social change, and viewpoints that might not commonly be heard but that are worthy of consideration. When the spectator consumes passively, they are likely to let these more serious aspects pass them by. To complicate the situation, the vast majority of Western pedagogical practices seem to have internalized this attitude that comedy is light fare and incompatible with critical reflection. It is quite rare to encounter courses on comedy in institutions of secondary or higher learning—not unheard of, but still quite rare. If one does hold an academic interest in humoristic subjects, it is generally up to this individual to pursue these interests on their own and in their own time. As stated in the introduction of this work, comedy and humor still remain quite peripheral in many intellectual and academic fields[122]. This disassociation between humor and academia only serves to perpetuate the idea that

[122] I must take this opportunity to thank my advisors and other members of my home department for not only allowing me to pursue this "off the beaten path" dissertation topic, but for encouraging my interests.

comedy and deep critical thought are not quite compatible. This is something that must be overcome.

The second factor that can lead to an impediment of critical reception of comedy lies in the very real question of the potential offensiveness of comedy and audience reactions to this. Often this can be tied to the question of stereotypes or simply to the relatively limited restrictions regarding freedom of speech that comedic space provides. Throughout this dissertation project I have tried to refrain from talking about humor's potential to offend, not because I do not recognize this as a veritable possibility, but rather because I recognize its extremely subjective nature. It is quite easily imaginable that one person who identifies as a member of a group that is seen as targeted by a joke or a comic presentation of a stereotype will take offense, while another person in the same position will remain unscathed or will even find humor in it. It is also imaginable that an individual will initially be offended by a joke or jocular representation but with time and reflection will change their mind, or vice versa. The reasons behind this can appear inexplicable, but it is probable that this stems from the fact that when one speaks of offense, one speaks of strong emotion[123]. While humor and laughter usually have the effect of lowering

[123] As a personal anecdote, I must say that as a white male I never felt strongly offended by any of the material that I encountered during research for this project, as I did not feel personally targeted. Although the material presented by Pierre Péchin and Michel Leeb did at times make me feel uncomfortable. However, as a gay man I do remember experiencing extreme offense at a *Saturday Night Live* sketch from the early 2000s that I watched when I was much younger, and am unfortunately unable to locate and have a somewhat hazy recollection of. The sketch presented a parody of a made-up reality television competition show entitled something along the lines of *Who Wants to Be America's Next Dumb Gay Guy?* and featured stereotypes of gay men as vapid, superficial, overly dramatic, and affected. Upon watching this sketch, I immediately had a visceral reaction, as if someone had punched me in the stomach. I felt hurt and betrayed by a television show and comedians that I loved and admired. I vowed to never watch *SNL* again, although after a year or two I did go back to watching it. For years I had forgotten about this incident until a few years ago when it came back to me in a flash. I spent some time reflecting on what I could remember of this sketch and came to the conclusion that the sketch that had so strongly hurt and offended me years ago, was actually a brilliant piece of comedic

affective barriers, when one feels the strong emotion of offense, the opposite occurs and affective barriers come up. In this case, the immediate reaction is generally to reject the comedian or their comic work that offended and to cease any further engagement with the material. Obviously, this serves as a hindrance to reception and critical reflection of the work. Offense as a strong emotion and reaction is valid and must be considered when analyzing or critically assessing comedy. However, it is also true that offense, given that it is a strong emotion, can cloud logical and critical reasoning. This is a highly personal and subjective matter, and should be dealt with (or not) on an individual basis and how the individual who has been offended sees fit. It is necessary solely to point out that this is a factor that can affect reception and that can result in a spectator's unwillingness to engage with and critically reflect on certain comedic works.

The third—but not final, seeing that this is not an exhaustive list—possible hindrance in the reception and critical reflection of comedy is the fact that comedy is deceptive and tricky. It often takes on the appearance of something that is direct, uncomplicated, and insubstantial. However, this only serves to conceal the fact that it is innately complex, multi-faceted, and functions simultaneously on multiple levels. One can think of the pun as the ultimate example of this phenomenon. On the surface, it appears to be the simplest form of a joke and often results in

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gold. I had the realization that what was being lampooned and parodied in the sketch was not actually gay men, but rather common stereotypes of gay men as were so commonly propagated by American reality television of the early 2000s. This was not meant to be an insult, but rather a critique and indictment of the ways in which reality television of the time period represented gay men. I cannot say for certain what triggered my revelation. Perhaps it was the time that had passed and the fact that my strong emotions surrounding my initial viewing had dissipated, allowing me to take a closer and more critical look. Perhaps it was the fact that I was older, wiser, and much more secure in who I was and in this particular aspect of my identity. I cannot say for sure. I bring this up solely as a personal anecdote. Because it is so personal and subjective, I would never dare use it as a sort of example for others to follow, or theoretical model as to how to "overcome" feelings of being offended by comedy. It is simply an example of how subjective this phenomenon is and how emotions and perceptions can possibly change in any number of directions over time.

underwhelming reactions. However, if one takes the time to consider the construction of a pun, one realizes that its defining characteristic is that it features a word that is accomplishing work at the same time on different levels, creating various meanings, interpretations, and a great deal of ambiguity. Obviously, other joke structures and humoristic genres feature even more complexity than this. Yet, these jokes and different comic varieties trick the spectator into believing that they are simple and direct. This can often result in an audience's unpreparedness or at times unwillingness to delve deeply into the material and effectuate the work necessary to unpack its hidden complexities. I would also add here that the phenomenon of laughter can also coax people into false conclusions that do not naturally lend themselves to the work required to reflect deeply on comedy. Laughter is and is felt to be the end result of a joke set-up. The end would indicate that nothing comes after it. The joke or humoristic performance has done its job. By laughing, the listener of a joke or audience member has the impression that they have also accomplished their work and that they can now carry on with normal activities. However, I would suggest that laughter should not signal the end, but rather mark the starting point for reflection. One must question why they laughed and at what. This begins the critical thought process necessary for interpretation and analysis of humor.

These obstacles to the reception of and critical reflection on comedy constitute only a very partial list that is compiled based on my current musings on and personal experiences with the topic. I would encourage the readers of this work and any spectator of comedy to be aware of these hindrances and of the potential risks and pitfalls that they pose to anyone who wants to benefit to a fuller extent from their consumption of humoristic material. While it is not always possible to take on a fresh perspective on something that feels familiar, to change one's habits regarding the ways in which they watch and listen, or to free oneself from preconceived and/or

received notions when it comes to their relationship with humor and laughter; oftentimes doing so can pave the way for a more engaged and enriching experience with humor. As both Bakhtin and Welsford strongly suggest, our engagement and participation as attentive, thoughtful, and active spectators is crucial to the processes of world imagining and reimagining that lie at the heart of the comedian's work. Without our attention, consideration, and reflection, Smaïn's struggles during his early years to emerge as a groundbreaking comedian would mean nothing; Fellag's calls for respect and dignity for the peoples who were pushed aside during France's and Algeria's tumultuous colonial and postcolonial periods would fall upon deaf ears; and Jamel Debbouze's fight to secure a rightful place for young people of ethnic minority origin in contemporary French society would go unnoticed. I therefore encourage my readers to not only watch and listen, but to truly engage with and reflect upon the material that is analyzed in these chapters as well as with the work of younger French ethnic minority comedians who are breaking barriers and voicing new points of view in live venues, television, film, and other media outlets.

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