

# The Death of French Socialism: Abd al Malik’s “Occupy Wall Street” Poetical Rap

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## Abstract

Abd al Malik is an important public figure in contemporary France whose multifaceted art as a rapper, poet, novelist and filmmaker keeps urging the French nation to be more cohesive in the face of current challenges such as integration and terrorism. This article takes stock of the unequal distribution of wealth between different socio-geographical groups as a fundamental cause of postcolonial discontent and examines the polymorphic treatment of *money* as a topic in Abd al Malik’s poetry, rap lyrics, as well as in connection with other genres such as autobiography and film. In a particular socio-political climate marked by an association between crime and immigration in Front National rhetoric, I analyse how Abd al Malik strives to de-essentialise the immigrant through a complete exposure of his own personal life, recounting in full detail his religious journey from superficial Christianity to radical Islam to Sufism—and his concomitantly evolving relationships with money. Additionally, this article aims at scrutinising the interesting paradox that, on the one hand, Abd al Malik’s writings draw upon anti-capitalist thinkers and movements such as Alain Badiou and *les indignés*/Occupy Wall Street, while on the other hand, he advocates in favour of adapting into the French context a form of philanthropy usually akin to a North American, capitalist model of society. I show how at the heart of this paradox lies the centrality of religion added to a firm belief in reconceptualised French values, which has led Abd al Malik to actively promote a form of *spiritualité laïque* [secular spirituality] *à la française*.

## Introduction: Rapping about Money in Contemporary Postcolonial France

Être et avoir  
Être ou avoir  
Penser un autre modèle de société  
Et le pacte se renouvelle  
Entre le collectif et l’individuel.

Abd al Malik, *Le Dernier Français* (28–29)

[To be and to have  
To be or to have  
To imagine a different model of society  
And the social compact renews itself  
Between the individual and the collective.]<sup>1</sup>

The *banlieues*, France's underprivileged neighborhoods/ghettos located in suburban areas and characterised by high concentrations of immigrants and French citizens of immigrant origins, have come to be identified with unemployment, discrimination and violence. While the question of *statistiques ethniques* [ethnic statistics] has long been taboo in France as being opposed to the sacrosanct idea of *égalité* [equality], it is noteworthy that the position of the French government in this respect has shifted in recent years, with a view to better addressing the complex reality of French society. This bolder approach has culminated in the publication, in March 2016, of contrastive statistics showing that while youth unemployment was identical (22%) for "French people without immigrant origins" and for "French people with immigrant origins from elsewhere in Europe", this percentage skyrocketed to 42% for "French people with African immigrant origins" (Cusset et al). Numerous other studies and "testings" have demonstrated that it was more difficult, in France, to be hired if one's name was Mohammed as opposed to Martin or Michel (Negrouche), and/or if one's mailing address was located in a *banlieue*, as employers might have concerns about one's ability to arrive on time given notorious transportation difficulties to and from said *banlieues*. Far from easing this situation, the economic crisis has increased the pressure on the job market and fuelled some anti-immigration sentiment, to the point that young people of North-African descent are now significantly *emigrating* from France to places such as Dubai and Abu Dhabi, where their "double culture" *will be* an asset. One may legitimately ask why such "double culture" could not be an asset in France as well. In other articles, I have pointed to France's monolingual and monodiscursive trends,<sup>2</sup> which French Minister of Education Najat Vallaud-Belkacem seems to have begun to address for the first time in 2016 by promoting Arabic as a language of instruction alongside French at primary school level, despite strong opposition from the political right ("Najat Vallaud-Belkacem"). Nonetheless, while examples of integration in France are numerous and need to be showcased more, it would be foolish to disregard the diffuse sentiment of *haine* ['rage', literally 'hatred'] which has pervaded *banlieue* youth for a couple of decades (cf. Kassovitz's emblematic 1995 film *La Haine*). Stemming from a "no-money, no-hope" type of situation, this diffuse rage has turned into actual hatred against France and French values, as evidenced by the recent terrorist attacks performed not by outsiders, but by young people who had been raised within the French school system.

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<sup>1</sup>All translations are my own. *To be* and *to have* are the two major conjugation verbs (auxiliaries) in French. Moreover, the association between the two in a set phrase has been popularised by Nicolas Philibert's 2002 documentary *Être et avoir*. By deliberately breaking "être et avoir" into "être *ou* avoir" (emphasis added), Abd al Malik is able to create immediate reader response.

<sup>2</sup>Cf. the notion of *accented literature* which I have developed in both "Postcolonial Islam" and "Carving out a Place for Minority".

In this context, a certain kind of rap has been a natural outlet for *haine*. In fact, several terrorists in recent years, across Europe, had been rappers before they became terrorists, including ISIS British beheader “Jihadi John”, Denis Cuspert from Germany, Jérémie Louis-Sidney from Strasbourg (“Opération antiterroriste”),<sup>3</sup> Chérif Kouachi, one of the Kouachi brothers of the Charlie Hebdo attacks, and, most recently, Rachid Kassim who, before going to Syria and sending orders from Syria to launch the latest 2016 terrorist attacks against France, recorded a rap album, while still in France, titled *Rap attentat* (“Rachid Kassim”). In their songs, these rap artists have typically vigorously denounced what they considered the flaws or ‘vices’ of Western culture (i.e., to a large extent, consumerism)<sup>4</sup> and urged their audience to convert to Islam. This Islamic and anti-consumerist rap is in sheer opposition to another kind of rap which, on the contrary, draws on the semiotic repertoire of a certain hyperbolic consumerism (video clips shot in North America fraught with guns, bling-bling, wealth gained through questionable means, shiny cars and hot, submissive women)—see for instance Booba’s popularity amongst the youth, with emblematic titles such as his 2008 “Izi Monnaie” [“Easy Money”].

In this article, I turn my attention to Abd al Malik, a French rapper-writer-filmmaker born in 1975 of Congolese parents and who grew up in a *banlieue* of Strasbourg, France. In addition to his rapping activities, Abd al Malik published in 2012 *Le Dernier Français* [*The Last Frenchman*], a collection of poems which includes some of his rap lyrics as well as some original poetry. The particularity of these writings is that while they constantly critique the consumption society (cf. the epigraph), they could also be summed up by the slogan “faire du lien” [“more relationships”, or “connecting people”] which Abd al Malik has repeatedly used in TV shows as well as in *Télérama* (Bénabent and Pascaud).<sup>5</sup> As the author puts

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<sup>3</sup>Fragments from Louis-Sidney’s rap video clips are still available on YouTube (“Premières images”).

<sup>4</sup>Examples of this are Jérémie Louis-Sidney’s rants against organ trafficking, children trafficking and *les code-barres* [barcodes], with a possible pun with *les barres de béton* [concrete blocks] as a reference to the projects. He meant his rap to be like a flash of “high beams” and a “lighthouse” (with a definite pun on the word *phare*) to warn his listeners and guide them towards faith.

<sup>5</sup>Olivier Bourderionnet contends that the fact that Abd al Malik’s art has been “largely embraced by the Parisian elite” and French “mainstream audience” raises issues of “cooptation” and “authenticity” (1); “the media”, says Bourderionnet, “in the post-‘riot’ and pre-[2012] election context, were bound to see in Abd al Malik a very compelling ‘story’” (4). The authors further interprets Abd al Malik’s collaboration with Juliette Gréco and Jacques Brel’s pianist Gérard Jouannest as a “symbolic gesture of allegiance to French institutions”, “docility” and “deference to the culture of the elite” (7). While Abd al Malik’s hybrid yet deliberate inscription into the French chanson tradition is undeniable, I take issue with Bourderionnet’s conclusions, in that reducing Abd al Malik to a ‘story’ of integration used by journalists and politicians is very limiting. In a French nation which built itself on the principles of harmony and consensus (one French language—one discourse of Frenchness), I follow Jacques Rancière’s theoretical shift analysing postcolonial cultural studies in terms of disagreement and dissonance. I stress the central, multifaceted omnipresence of accent in Abd al Malik’s prose, rap and poetry and consequently develop the notion of *accented literature* understood as both ‘linguistic variety’ and ‘discursive variety’ (e.g. Abd al Malik’s constant reference to Aimé Césaire’s notion of *négritude* and his avowed preference for the figure of Malcolm X over that of Martin Luther King, in *Qu’Allah bénisse la France*, 58).

it in *Le Dernier Français*, “Il faut [. . .] une nouvelle Révolution française. Non violente, pacifique” (218) [“What we need is [. . .] a new French Revolution. Non-violent and peaceful”]. France, in other words, says Abd al Malik, crucially needs, in these challenging postcolonial times, “une révolution des regards” (218), i.e. a revolution of the gaze, a revolution of how the different components of French society look at each other. This topic clearly echoes Abd al Malik’s Islamic faith and Sufi beliefs in universal love. In fact, a lot of his poetry puts the emphasis not only on the extremely difficult living conditions in the postcolonial *banlieue*, but also on interpersonal relationships. However, this change in “gaze” and this increase in interpersonal relationships across social groups are not easy, self-evident or self-implementing, as barriers need to be overcome and every French person is called to become a “hero” in that sense. It is of paramount importance to note that for Abd al Malik, what needs to happen first is a revolution in *everyone’s* relationship with money. Accordingly, in Abd al Malik’s work, money appears as a central, multi-faceted postcolonial theme. I will show that he crucially develops this theme in his poetry as a changing relationship: at a time when Front National rhetoric tends to associate immigration with money-motivated crime, everyone’s relationship with money, including the immigrant’s relationship with money, is here treated as an itinerary, which conveys the idea that everyone is on a journey—and thus serves to powerfully de-essentialise the immigrant (who may, incidentally, not even be an “immigrant” since one or two generations, but may still be regarded as such). In the process, I will also examine the ways in which Abd al Malik conducts, through poetical means, a thorough critique of the modern politico-financial system; it is, eventually, the French relationship with money that Abd al Malik brings into question. I will argue that he proposes no less than an urgent redefinition of certain aspects of ‘Frenchness’, with a view to strengthening and bolstering the French national compact currently in peril.

### **Writing under the Banner of Anti-Capitalism: Abd al Malik’s New French Revolution**

Throughout his works, Abd al Malik keeps mentioning two *maîtres à penser* [mentors] who played a significant role in his own journey, namely Sidi Hamza and Stéphane Hessel. While Sidi Hamza was the Moroccan spiritual leader who introduced Abd al Malik to the principles of Sufism (after he had first converted from Catholicism to a radical version of Islam),<sup>6</sup> Stéphane Hessel (born in Germany in

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<sup>6</sup>The term *radical* is here used on purpose to describe the conservative Tabligh movement as going back to the roots of Islam, which is the etymological meaning of *radical*. It led Abd al Malik to not shake hands with women and made him at odds with the widespread French practice of “la bise” (greeting by kissing on the cheek), as is evident in the film *Qu’Allah bénisse la France*, when after a concert a female fan of the rapper asks him, in a most sincere tone, “Est-ce que je peux te serrer la main, ou te faire la bise?” [“May I shake your hand, or kiss your cheek?”], in reply to which the rapper turns around and says “no”, leaving the female fan quite disturbed and disappointed (46:57). While it must be stressed that there is no “bad” vs. “good” versions of Islam, but on the contrary a broad spectrum of Islamic ideologies and modes of life, Abd al Malik’s involvement with

1917) was a French political figure who embodied, until his death in 2013, the idea of resistance. Having been a *Résistant* [French Resistance fighter] against Nazi occupation, Hessel became more famous later in his life through his vocal sympathy towards Palestinians and undocumented immigrants in France (*sans-papiers*). In 2010, right before the Occupy Wall Street movement began the following year, he published a pamphlet entitled *Indignez-vous!* [*Time for Outrage!*] in which he invited the younger generation to not get accustomed to the violence generated by the current capitalist system, but to stand up against it. Hessel's call to resist has taken hold in countries like Spain, through the *Indignados* movement, and Greece, during the EU debt crisis. In a less obvious way, however, it has also been relayed by French artists with significant media visibility such as Abd al Malik.

Hessel's influence is evident throughout *Le Dernier Français*. In the poem titled "La Voie" ["The Way"], Abd al Malik first beads together syntagm after syntagm in a surrealist mode reminiscent of automatic writing; he jumps from one item to the next, drawing on phonetic or semantic similarities. For example, he skips from *champs* [fields] to the homophone *chant* [song] (phonetic association), then from *chant* [call] to *appel* [appeal] (semantic association), with a climactic double reference to both Sidi Hamza and Stéphane Hessel:

Et donc les champs de blé / [. . .] les chants de paix / les chants de guerre  
contre soi-même / l'appel à la prière / l'appel du 18 juin / l'appel des anciens—  
**Stéphane Hessel** / les chants des cygnes / les chants des signes / [. . .] l'Orient  
et l'Occident / le noir et le blanc / [. . .] Israël et la Palestine / [. . .] avoir le  
courage d'être soi / et d'aimer l'autre quoi qu'il en soit / Merci à toi **Sidi  
Hamza** de m'avoir mis sur la Voie. (138–39; emphases added)

[So, the wheat fields / [. . .] and peaceful the songs / and the warrior songs  
against oneself / the call for prayer / the appeal of 18 June / the appeal coming  
from the older generation—**Stéphane Hessel** / the swan songs [*les chants des  
cygnes*] / the songs of the signs [*les chants des signes*] / [. . .] the Orient and  
the West / the black and the white / [. . .] Israël and Palestine / [. . .] to have  
the courage to be you / and to love the other person despite any differences /  
Thank you **Sidi Hamza** for showing me the Way.]

This excerpt is meaningful for several reasons. First, it performatively enacts the hybridity of culture—in Leslie Adelson's sense—,<sup>7</sup> as the setting framework is Islam (cf. the "call for prayer" and "war against oneself", which is the true meaning of jihad), yet is preceded by lines which clearly evoke the very revolutionary Christian motif of the Sermon of the Mount: compare Abd al Malik's phrasing, "[des]

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Islam became *almost* "radical" in the current, popular sense as well. In the autobiography *Qu'Allah bénisse la France*, he reports that he was solicited to commit a terrorist attack against a French symbol: "C'est à cette époque que Majid et moi [. . .] fûmes contactés par des frères qui avaient une vision pour le moins 'explosive' de la propagation de l'islam: [. . .] 'On est prêt à faire sauter la préfecture, joignez-vous à nous [. . .]'" (110–11) ["It is around that time that Majid and I were contacted by brothers who had, literally, an 'explosive' approach to the propagation of Islam: 'We are about to blow up the Préfecture [an administrative building], will you join us?...'"].

<sup>7</sup>Cf. Adelson's characterisation of any given country's culture as the construction of a house, e.g. the *Turko-German house*.

chants [. . .] cachés aux sages / aux intelligents / et révélés aux enfants / aux tristes aux paumés” (137) [“songs [. . .] that were hidden / to the wise / to the clever / and revealed to children / to the sad and to the lost”] with the actual biblical verse in Matthew 5:3: “Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven” and Matthew 11:25: “At that time Jesus said, ‘I praise you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because you have hidden these things from the wise and the learned, and revealed them to little children.’” Furthermore, the theme of “loving the other person despite any differences”, which equates this new, peaceful French Revolution Abd al Malik is calling for—*la révolution des regards*—, echoes other important quotes impregnated with the principles of Sufism, such as: “Vive la République! Et vive la France arc-en-ciel, unie et débarrassée de toutes ses peurs!” (176) [“Long live the Republic! And long live the rainbow France, united and freed from all its fears!”]; or this other magnificent evocation of multi-coloured diversity: “Tu m’as dit ‘Le Noir l’Arabe le Blanc ou le Juif sont à l’homme ce que les fleurs sont à l’eau” (211) [“You said to me, ‘Blacks, Arabs, Whites, Jews are to man what flowers are to water”]. The reference to “the appeal of 18 June”, Charles de Gaulle’s appeal of 18 June 1940, serves to introduce the idea that Abd al Malik, albeit of immigrant origin, is indeed, hyperbolically, “the last Frenchman”, i.e. the last person to still believe in France’s values of liberty, equality and fraternity. France’s state of affairs, marked by the rise of far-right anti-immigration sentiment, is a dead France, a France that no longer believes in its motto engraved in the front of its public buildings—a motto now *lettre morte* [dead letter]. Equally as importantly, I suggest, and interlinked with all of the above as this should shock readers and make them react/resist, the excerpt also participates in the creation of a network of signifiers that lays the groundwork for the inscription of Abd al Malik’s work into anti-capitalist, *indignée* literature.

This network of signifiers does overlap with other writings by Abd al Malik, for instance *La Guerre des banlieues n’aura pas lieu* [*The War of the Ghettos Will Not Take Place*], a powerful novella in whose appendix the author actually names *Le Petit Panthéon Portatif* by leftist political philosopher Alain Badiou as one of his favourite readings. One of the things Badiou is known for is his theoretical distinction between three kinds of popular riots, introduced in *Le Réveil de l’Histoire* [*The Rebirth of History*]: *émeute immédiate* [immediate riot], *émeute latente* [latent riot] and *émeute historique* [historical riot]. The entire book *Le Réveil de l’Histoire* amounts to a criticism of the capitalist political system as we know it, as Badiou denounces the politico-economic elite ruling the modern world, an elite which he derogatorily and wittily calls, in an untranslatable portmanteau word, “des satrapes-nigauds” (10).<sup>8</sup> This direct reference to Badiou in *La Guerre des banlieues n’aura pas lieu* thus paves the way, in *Le Dernier Français*, for Abd al Malik’s deep sympathy for the people (*le peuple*) over money.

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<sup>8</sup>The pun is based on the phonetic similarity of the words *satrape* [satrap, i.e. Ancient Persian ruler] and *attrape-nigauds* [scam, trap for naïve people]. It thus designates technocratic modes of governance. With this figure of speech, Badiou argues that capitalism is presented, to the people who are naïve and docile enough to believe it, as the only possible mode of governance.

This emphasis on people and *the* people is the reason why the poet, even though he advocates “a new French Revolution” that is entirely peaceful, also devotes a lot of attention, in *Le Dernier Français*, to the revolutions of the Arab Spring (largely against corruption) that were not entirely pacific but were achieved through a mix of peaceful and violent means. The poem “Jasmin et Chrysanthèmes” [“Jasmine and Chrysanthemums”], for instance, directly refers to the Tunisian Revolution (a.k.a. *la révolution de jasmin*) while the second flower in the title, albeit not explicitly explained, is traditionally associated with All Saints’ Day in French/catholic cemeteries. Juxtaposing the two flowers in the title may therefore be interpreted as a tribute to all the dead victims of the bloody repressions conducted by corrupt elites. The verb *dégager* [to get out] used by Abd al Malik in the following quotation, is an unequivocal reference to the people’s slogan against former Tunisian President Ben Ali:

Le peuple devient ouragan une fois conscient de lui-même  
Le souffle de la liberté ne peut être contenu qu’un temps  
[. . .] Égoïstes et dictateurs sachez que la rue est invincible  
[. . .] Alors dégage va voir ailleurs Ici vous avez déjà tout pris pillé le peu de  
fruits  
[. . .] Ce vendredi c’est l’homme au pistolet d’or qu’on enterre  
Hier c’est l’homme du 11 septembre qu’on jetait à la mer.  
(43, lines 3–5, 7, 13–17)

[The people becomes hurricane once it is conscious of itself  
The wind of liberty may only be temporarily contained  
[. . .] All ye selfish individuals and dictators, know that the street is invincible  
[. . .] So, get out of here [*dégage*], get lost somewhere else, here you already  
took all you could take, plundered whatever little fruit you could find  
[. . .] This coming Friday, it is the man with the golden pistol<sup>9</sup> who is getting  
buried  
Yesterday it was the man of September 11 who was thrown into the sea.]

Some other poems chastise the wrongs of Western democracy, which Abd al Malik considers driven by money and corrupt as well. Examples include the poem “Des élections ou mini-traité de politique intérieure” [“On Elections; A Mini-Treatise on Domestic Politics”] and the eponymous “Le Dernier Français”. In the former, the poet describes Western democracy (specifically here, French democracy through references to ex-President Nicolas Sarkozy) as ‘fake democracy’, i.e. a system in which the sole goal is to first get elected and then to do whatever it takes to remain in power:

Il y a les candidats investis  
il y a les candidats à l’investiture  
il y a les espérances de votes  
et le bruit des casseroles  
il y a les porteurs de valises

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<sup>9</sup>A circumlocution for erstwhile Libyan leader Gaddafi.

il y a les casseroles dans les valises  
il y a les sondages  
et les scandales (donc)  
il y a les retournements de situations  
il y a ceux qui se retournent dans leurs tombes  
(33, lines 1–10)

[Some candidates are committed people  
some candidates are committed to being elected  
There are vote expectancies  
And the noise of scandals  
Some are carrying suitcases  
There are scandals inside those suitcases  
There are polls  
and scandals, then (of course)  
Some situations get overturned  
Some people are turning over in their tombs]

Without a doubt, the phrase “carrying suitcases” (full of money) harks back to the 2002 *affaire de Karachi* (Karachi judicial case) and to the Court’s suspicions that Sarkozy was somehow involved in this corruption-based scandal. Later in the poem, Abd al Malik continues his charge against the unhealthy relationship between politics and money/corruption when he states: “[il y a] ceux qu’ont perdu d’avance / il y a ceux qui perdurent d’avances” (34) [“Some have lost in advance / Some are not losing because of cash advances”]. As for the “polls”, they are hints to the controversy that arose when it became public knowledge that President Sarkozy, during his term, had regularly commissioned expensive polls to gauge his own popularity. Abd al Malik describes this practice as scandalous because polls are ironically useless to the people and yet paid for by the people! In this context, the English translation of *espérances de vote* does not do justice to the powerful paronomastic play on words between *espérance de vie* [life expectancy], which is the usual set phrase, and the actual wording used in the poem, *espérances de vote* [vote expectancies], which breaks up the collocation, displacing the French language. Using another *v*-word (*vote* instead of *vie*) is a way for the poet to criticise that politicians are running after votes and not after life, *vie*, i.e. the people’s interest. The way Abd al Malik addresses French politicians is therefore extremely serious and sounds like a strong warning: “Et la jeunesse interpelle: / Ô vous dont la fin n’est plus bien loin / faites donc attention à ce que vous nous transmettez” (29) [“So the youth is calling out: / Ô you all whose end is in sight / Why aren’t you more careful about the values that you are transmitting?”].

The fact that French politicians are the ones targeted in the circumlocution “Ô vous dont la fin n’est plus bien loin” (emphasis added) is a strong statement on the part of Abd al Malik, particularly at a time of increasing abstention in recent French elections—people not caring any more to cast their vote as they have grown ever more tired of always hearing the same speeches and seeing so little change (cf.,

for example, the numerous *plans banlieue* announced by each and every successive newly elected administration to try and improve the situation in the *banlieue*) (Pinard). For Abd al Malik, his new, peaceful French Revolution does indeed mark the end of French politics in the sense that this ‘revolution of the gaze’ will be performed by the people and for the people, circumventing traditional reliance on the government; it is a revolution which entirely relies on the people and not on the government anymore. As such it puts the responsibility on the people. Given the extent to which Front National ideology has already seeped into French society—Marine Le Pen’s party is now able to present itself as *le premier parti politique de France* [the first political party of France]—, fighting capitalism, racism and discrimination in twenty-first century France has indeed turned into a heroic venture: “Ce n’est plus simplement l’Histoire que nous devons écrire, mais la Légende” (Abd al Malik, *Le Dernier Français* 151) [“It is now not just History that we have to write, but Legend”].

### **Redemption for All! An Urge to Redefine French Conceptions of People and Money**

Ever since the 2007 presidential elections between Ségolène Royal and Nicolas Sarkozy, *la sécurité*, law and order related to the topic of immigration, has remained a sensitive issue both in social discourse and political debates (Borredon and Goar). In order to fight against right-wing essentialising preconceptions according to which immigrants or French-Maghrebi teenagers would be more prone than *Français de souche* [French born and bred] to become delinquents and remain delinquents for the rest of their lives, Abd al Malik keeps telling his own story, both in his poetry and in his 2004 autobiography *Qu’Allah bénisse la France* [*May Allah bless France*]. Abd al Malik’s life, just like anybody’s life—which is what he wants to demonstrate—, is and has been a journey, an itinerary: he himself has not always been the popular rapper who is now sought after, post-Charlie Hebdo attacks, for the unifying message he may deliver to the French Republic. Likewise, he has not always claimed that it is better to be than to have, as can be heard as well in his 2014 filmic adaptation of *Qu’Allah bénisse la France*. Much to the contrary, his relationship with money (and theft, and the French nation compact) has greatly fluctuated over time. The very detailed description of his own person’s itinerary relative to money, then, serves as a call to French people of all backgrounds to see positive potential in everyone—in every young delinquent, whether *Français de souche* or *issu de l’immigration* [of immigrant background]. As human beings, all have an equal right to not be imprisoned in their identity as ‘criminal’ but to be considered as being on a path towards redemption.

Regarding his own journey, Abd al Malik offers a detailed account of its different stages. It is important to note that the theme of Abd al Malik’s relationship with money runs parallel to and mirrors that of religion, as the two themes follow a co-eval progression. Beginning with the first stage of the journey, i.e. the early teenage years, the poet uses graphic depictions linking one’s relationship with money (e.g.

stealing or drug dealing) with the harsh living conditions of the *banlieue*. In his poignant poem and rap song “Soldat de Plomb” [“Toy soldier” or “Child soldier”], he tells us for example that, “J’avais juste 12 ans / les poches remplies d’argent / j’avais déjà vu trop de sang” [“at age 12 / my pockets were full of money / and I had already seen too much blood”]—and too much gun violence (*Le Dernier Français* 183). *Argent* [money] is also made to significantly rhyme with *sang* [blood]. This stage corresponds to one of moral and religious blurriness and confusion, linked to postcoloniality, as Abd al Malik states in his autobiography *Qu’Allah bénisse la France*:

Toutes ces activités [les vols] étaient tellement courantes chez les gamins de la cité qu’on n’y voyait absolument aucun mal. [. . .] [Quant à moi,] j’étais une racaille plus futée que les autres, avec une conception toute personnelle de la spiritualité: le genre à prier Dieu afin qu’il me permette non seulement de me faire plus d’argent, mais également de ne pas me faire prendre par la police. [. . .] Pour moi, [. . .] la distinction entre bien et mal était demeurée très floue, il s’agissait plutôt de savoir ce qui ‘fait du bien’ [. . .] ou ce qui n’en fait pas. (22, 32, 60)

[All of these [stealing] activities were so frequent amongst the kids of the ghetto that we didn’t see anything wrong with it. [. . .] [As for me,] I was a more clever kind of thug than the others, with a very personal conception of spirituality: I would pray to God to help me not only make more money, but also help me not get caught by the police. [. . .] For me, [. . .] the distinction between good and evil had remained very blurry; what was more important to me was the question of what-does-good-to-me [. . .] and what does not.]

In a way, it seems as though theft is seen by the young Abd al Malik as a means of repairing a colonial wrong in the postcolonial era, to the point that it becomes some kind of normal activity. The lexical field of *robbery-as-work* thus gives its structure to the whole first chapter of his autobiography, as the following quotations demonstrate: “Nous considérons [nos opérations illégales] le plus sérieusement du monde comme notre métier, notre gagne-pain” (35) [“We would consider [our illegal activities] most seriously, as our job, our source of income”]; or:

“Non, les gars, y a école. J’‘travaille’ que le weekend et pendant les vacances scolaires!”, disais-je fièrement, et tout le monde éclatait de rire. Ils étaient apparemment impressionnés que je parvienne à mener de front une scolarité dans un collège privé et une activité délinquante régulière. (29)

[“Nope, guys, I won’t go with you this time—it’s a school day! You know I only ‘work’ over weekends and holidays!” I would proudly say, and it would make everyone burst out laughing. The others were impressed, I think, by my ability to remain at the same time an excellent student and an excellent delinquent.]

Abd al Malik as a teenage boy will thus go to school on certain days and go to ‘work’, i.e. steal, on certain other days. This theme of robbery-as-work is reminiscent of Albert Cossery’s 2000 novel *Les Couleurs de l’infamie*, where a number of

passages present stealing as totally legitimate acts of revolution against a locked society controlled by bourgeois people and from which *banlieue* people are excluded. The act of stealing is thus presented as the creation of an alternate system, parallel to the existing bourgeois system, in which one also has to climb up the rungs of the success ladder. It is just a different success ladder: “Je devais absolument passer par là [apprendre à conduire une voiture volée] si je voulais devenir comme eux *une personnalité de prestige, un gradé de la délinquance*” (34; emphasis added) [“I absolutely needed to go through this [i.e. learning how to drive a stolen car] if I wanted to become, like them, a *VIP, a high-ranked delinquent*”].

To signify the status of high-ranked delinquent which he indeed reached, Abd al Malik enumerates in his autobiography some external signs of richness that were important to him at the time: “Je m’habillais avec les dernières Nike ou Adidas à plus de sept cent francs la paire et portais les joggings Fila ou Ellesse les plus chers, ceux qu’on ne trouvait même pas en France et qu’il fallait se procurer en Allemagne ou en Suisse” (34) [“I would wear the latest Nike or Adidas trainers which were worth more than seven hundred francs and I would wear the most expensive Fila or Ellesse outfits—those that could not even be found in France but you had to travel to Germany or Switzerland in order to buy them”]. In the next quotation, I suggest that the sentence “Il fallait montrer à tous que l’argent n’était plus un problème pour soi” (35) [“We had to show everyone that money was not a problem for us any more”] could be interpreted as a postcolonial statement of *revanche sociale* [social revenge] in the sense that the *banlieue* youth that started life with a disadvantage has finally made it from a purely materialistic point of view. While Abd al Malik seems to dismiss this broader postcolonial statement through his description of such delinquency money as inherently marked by self-focus and self-interest, I would still argue that it may be true perhaps at the level of the collective unconscious. Note that in the film *Qu’Allah bénisse la France*, Abd al Malik makes us see his own self not just as a thief, but as a drug dealer, and it is interesting that the proceeds of the drug dealing activities are used not so much for personal gain as for the greater good of his music band: sadly, in a locked society, the only way Abd al Malik finds to purchase the music equipment necessary to get his nascent rap band, NAP (New African Poets), off the ground, is by dealing drugs. Still, more generally on self-centeredness, in the autobiography we read:

Flamber : tel était bien l’unique objectif. Il fallait montrer à tous que l’argent n’était plus un problème pour soi. [ . . . ] Mais il n’y avait rien de Robin des Bois dans notre activité, nous n’étions absolument pas animés d’une volonté de justice sociale. Toutes nos opérations illégales étaient menées à notre strict profit. (35)

[Spending was our unique objective. We had to show everyone that money was not a problem for us anymore. [ . . . ] There was nothing of a Robin Hood mentality in us, though, as we couldn’t have cared less about social justice. All our illegal ventures were completely self-motivated and self-centred.]

Abd al Malik thus continues:

Nous avons pris l'habitude de traîner dans une discothèque [. . .] , *Le Paradise*. Cette boîte avait la particularité de n'être fréquentée que par les pires délinquants de la ville : des dealers, des tireurs, des voleurs à la roulotte, à l'étalage, à l'arrachée [. . .]. Cette boîte était un repaire et de nombreux coups y étaient montés. On y dépensait des fortunes pour flamber, chacun rivalisait de champagne et de whisky, accompagné de filles que ce genre de vie excitait. (35)

[We also began to regularly hang out at a night club [. . .] , *Le Paradise*. This night club had the specificity of being attended by only the city's worst delinquents: drug dealers, [all kinds of] stealers, shop-lifters. . . [. . .] This nightclub was a hub for criminals, and a lot of crimes were planned and devised there [. . .]. We would spend fortunes there, just to show off. Everyone looked at how much the other people were spending in champagne and whiskey, in order to spend more—and everyone had to be accompanied by the kind of girls that go with this kind of lifestyle.]

This reference to showing off money earned through delinquency is an important topic in the autobiography, as it gets semiotically translated into the 2014 film adaptation. In a memorable slow motion nightclub scene marked by electro music and where alcohol literally overflows, the actor playing Abd al Malik suddenly notices Rachid—an acquaintance who has not paid him back some money he owes—surrounded by *meufs* [chicks] and drinking champagne. The young, pre-conversion Abd al Malik gives him a severe beating, overturning the table and scaring the 'chicks' away. These elements set an atmosphere in which money occupies a major and central place, and reinforce teenage Abd al Malik's stature as a *dur*, a 'tough guy' (16:38).

In the midst of it all, it must be noted that the young Abd al Malik is portrayed as retaining his humanity, as is powerfully exemplified by the fact that he remains a child throughout. Indeed, his mother's omnipresence in the background generates a strong, and to a certain extent humorous, contrast between, on the one hand, his actual toughness and richness as known only to himself and his peers, and, on the other hand, the very limited extent to which he can display his wealth in front of his mother. As he recounts in the autobiography *Qu'Allah bénisse la France*: "De plus, ma marge financière était plus limitée, l'image d'enfant exemplaire que je devais présenter à ma mère m'obligeant à opérer clandestinement" (36) ["Moreover, my financial leeway was limited, because the image of a perfect child which I needed to always present to my mom forced me to do everything secretly and discretely"]. Rich as he was as a teenager, he therefore still had to ask for pocket money so that his mother would not suspect his stealing activities. He thus writes, "Ce qui me dérangeait le plus était d'avoir à lui demander de l'argent de poche dont je n'avais nul besoin" (36) ["What disturbed me the most is that I was obliged to ask her for pocket money although of course I did not need any of it"].

This insistence on his humanity-despite-delinquency, and thus on everyone's perfectibility and the possibility of redemption, is a crucial point. In Abd al Ma-

lik's journey specifically, religion played a crucial role in his changing relationship towards money. In this striking itinerary, he first passed from a most superficial and blurry practice of Catholicism (cf. the already quoted "I would pray to God to help me not only make more money, but also help me not get caught by the police") to radical Islam. As we see in the film, this led him to burn the music equipment which he had bought through drug dealing money in an act of self-inflicted *auto-da-fé* (44:50). This stage of radical Islam brought, for sure, extreme clarity in terms of morality (good vs. evil) but also entailed a mental division of humanity between good people and evil people. However, this was not the end of the journey for Abd al Malik, as he then passed from radical Islam to Sufism, or 'Islam *per se*' as Abd al Malik would call it given that Islam is a religion grounded in peace. Sufism is indeed what enabled Abd al Malik to focus on *being* rather than *having*, as highlighted in the epigraph of this article. Indeed, this is what we can read in "L'Alchimiste" ["The Alchemist"], a poem in *Le Dernier Français* devoted to Sidi Hamza, the Moroccan spiritual leader who introduced him to Sufism, changing his heart as an alchemist would do, and "raising him from the dead" ("J'étais mort et tu m'as ramené à la vie", 211): "Je disais 'J'ai' ou 'Je n'ai pas' Tu m'as appris à dire 'Je suis'" (211) ["I used to say 'I have' or 'I do not have' You taught me to say 'I am'"].

If Abd al Malik, therefore, was on a journey to become a believer in *being* rather than *having*, his poetry is a call to all French people to give delinquents a chance for redemption, regardless of their ancestry. Abd al Malik's entire literary production (both poetical and autobiographical) works towards de-essentialising the immigrant (or thought of as 'immigrant'). As I have already suggested above, this makes Abd al Malik, hyperbolically, 'the last Frenchman', i.e. the last person to still believe in France's values of liberty, *equality and fraternity* (emphasis added). In other words, Abd al Malik presents himself (and all the people who, like him, uphold equality but especially fraternity, and resist far-right ideology) as the incarnation of the Republic. In the postface to *Le Dernier Français*, titled "Après l'indignation" ["After Feeling Outraged"]—a reference, again, to Stéphane Hessel's *Indignez-vous!*—, Abd al Malik reminds his readers that "à la source de l'identité française" ["at the source of French identity"] lies "le refus d'asservissement" (218) ["the refusal to be enslaved"]: "Le refus d'asservissement s'élève aujourd'hui, à nouveau, dans le contexte d'une société financiarisée, collectivement orientée vers une vie matérialiste et consumériste" (218) ["This refusal to be enslaved is being heard again, today, in the context of a financialised society, collectively oriented towards a materialist, consumerist life"]. It is this *société financiarisée* that needs to be overcome, as the author states clearly in the following passage reminiscent, in part, of Badiou: "À 'l'Ancien Régime de la société financiarisée' il faut substituer la 'Société de l'homme de foi'" (219) ["We need to substitute the 'Ancien Régime of the financialised society' with the 'Society of the man of faith'"].

The repetition of the syntagm *société financiarisée* brings me to my last point, which is that, in the end, for whoever reads carefully, Abd al Malik challenges

'Frenchness' as much, if not more, as he claims to embody it. Specifically, I argue that what he challenges here is French conceptions of *money*. It is often asserted in "culture shock" book series that the French stereotypically have a much different relationship with money from, say, Americans. Sally Adamson Taylor, author of *Culture Shock France: A Survival Guide to Customs and Etiquette*, notes in her 2004 edition that salary in France is often taboo, and advises to never ask a French person about their job right away (153–55). In her 2007 edition, an entire chapter is devoted to "the color of money." Taylor claims that in France, money is a uniquely private thing. In fact, there is nothing comparable in France to what happens in the United States, for example, where money freely seeps into the public sphere (with benches or even individual bricks of a building being named after their donors, and the same goes for scholarships in higher education). In the United States, sponsorship is the way through which many social and artistic projects come into existence, find sustaining support, and are eventually able to work towards better integration and better representation of diverse ethnic groups in society. Historically, philanthropy has been one important way in which North America has tried—and relatively succeeded, although the effort is of course ongoing—to de-ghettoise its own ailing society.

A news segment broadcasted on the *Journal télévisé de 20h* by France 2 on 9 September 2016, took stock of this cultural difference by noting that in 2010, only 7% of the wealthiest people in France had donated money to causes. Even though this percentage jumped to 12% in 2015 according to the statistics provided, the final comment underscores that "la générosité française reste difficile à comparer à celle des Américains les plus aisés" ["French generosity still bears no comparison with the generosity of the wealthiest Americans"]. What is more, it matters to parse what this statistical increase in 'French generosity' actually represents. As reported by *Journal télévisé de 20h*, a significant motive behind these donations were the fiscal deductions granted by the current fiscal system: "Ils sont de plus en plus nombreux, et de plus en plus généreux, grâce notamment à l'exonération fiscale à hauteur de 75% de leurs dons" ["They are more and more numerous, and more and more generous, especially thanks to the fact that 75% of their giving can be deducted from taxes"]. Also, typical beneficiaries include foundations such as the Fondation de France, the Institut Pasteur, WWF France or Universities which are thus able to fund some of their research. In other words, very importantly, this is a kind of philanthropy which could be described as macro-institutional—quite different from the kind of philanthropy envisioned by Abd al Malik, which, on the contrary, is a micro-local kind of philanthropy, creating real connections between individuals across boundaries.

As I have mentioned earlier, the film *Qu'Allah bénisse la France* revolves around the idea that at a certain point in Abd al Malik's young adult life, drug dealing appeared to be the only way to raise funds to purchase the necessary music equipment for his nascent rap band. The consequences for him were intense fear and death amongst his close friends—cf. the intense scene in the film when he is so scared that he wets his pants while running away from a drug-related shooting

(39:55), and also the dilemma scene when he receives a trash bag full of ‘dirty money’ (52:19) to start his first musical record. In other words, because of the lack of a genuine philanthropic culture in France, Abd al Malik, the Sufi rapper now revered for his art and for his peaceful, republican message, had to deal drugs in order to become who he is now. As the spectator watches the film, it is poignant to realise how Abd al Malik’s successful career as a renowned French artist rests on a foundation made up of selling drugs and feeling utterly terrorised.

It comes as no wonder, then, that the coda of *Le Dernier Français* (i.e. the fifth and final point of “Après l’indignation”—“After Feeling Outraged”) is completely devoted to the concept of French philanthropy. Significantly, the French words *philanthropie* [patronage] and *mécénat* [sponsorship] are repeated no less than twenty-one (21) times in the last seven pages of *Le Dernier Français*:

À l’économie financiarisée, prédatrice et injuste que nous connaissons doit ainsi succéder une économie philanthropique, qui aime l’homme et ambitionne de le servir. [. . .] Il faut pour cela réintroduire, renouveler la notion de mécénat. [. . .] L’État comme agent économique ne peut et ne doit plus porter, encadrer et financer l’intérêt général. Celui-ci doit devenir le souci de tous, l’apanage de la société civile [. . .] Pourtant le mécénat est à ce jour une pratique marginale en France et en Europe. Les grandes organisations financières ont aujourd’hui l’opportunité historique de remédier à cet extraordinaire rendez-vous manqué. (229–35)

[To the financialised economy that we know, predatory and unjust, must succeed a philanthropic economy that loves and ambitions to serve humanity. [. . .] To this end the notion of sponsorship must be reintroduced and renewed. [. . .] The State, as an economic agent, cannot be and should not be any more the framework, purveyor and financial care-taker of the people’s general interest. The people’s general interest needs to become everybody’s business in society, not the government’s business [. . .]. Nevertheless, to this day, sponsorship has only been a marginal phenomenon in France and in Europe. [. . .] What an extraordinary historical missed *rendez-vous*.]

I argue that this section in pamphlet form comes at the very end of the book, i.e. after the collection of poems and rap lyrics itself, because the writer wants to leave the reader with the powerful idea that young people in the *banlieue* should not be tempted to deal drugs and perhaps die for their dreams because there is ‘no money around’. Certainly, it is a fact that French people pay comparatively more taxes than Americans (and are, thus, in a certain way, forced to give); it is equally correct to say that this is the way a selection of social and artistic projects in France have been historically created and helped. Nonetheless, despite higher taxes in France, Abd al Malik encourages French people to not consider that their entire ‘giving for the year’ has been done after paying their taxes. He wants people to engage with a second form of giving which is voluntary, and, importantly, puts people in relation with each other (which tax-based redistribution of wealth arguably does not): philanthropy. In Abd al Malik’s view, philanthropy may add a powerful “*spiritual*” dimension (235, emphasis added) to the act of giving—in line with a *spiritualité*

*laïque* [secular spirituality] that would in effect trump current sterile French debates regarding whether French secularism is pro- or anti-“freedom of religion”—in short, islamophobic.<sup>10</sup> To some extent, then, Abd al Malik is advocating the end of a certain kind of de-humanised, de-responsibilising socialism. In doing so, he is indeed calling for no less than another French Revolution: a revolution of one’s rapport with money, a revolution from private to public—a sort of Americanisation of ‘Frenchness’, with *Americanisation* for once positively understood, benefiting all segments of French society, including especially the population of the *banlieue*. This amounts, in Abd al Malik’s own words, to a “révolution culturelle [et] sociétale” (234) [“cultural and societal revolution”].

After all the successive failures of the French government’s numerous *plans banlieue*, the time has come, says Abd al Malik, to not rely on politicians any more (cf. the already-quoted “[your] end is in sight”), but on the people—through philanthropy as a form of direct democracy. This is so important, according to Abd al Malik, that he puts his push for inter-ethnic French philanthropy on an equal (if not greater) footing with the push for “la croissance verte” [“green energy”] and “le développement durable” (235) [“sustainable development”], undoubtedly at the heart of the earth’s survival.<sup>11</sup> Similarly, French philanthropy is for Abd al Malik what may save contemporary postcolonial France from chaos. Put differently, it is through the death of French socialism that French society may receive new life.

### **Conclusion: Creating Interpersonal Relationships (Reinvigorated Sociality) through Poetry/Literature**

Abd al Malik’s audience is unique in that he is popular both in his native *banlieue* and in *bobos* circles (*bourgeois bohème*, i.e. left-voting upper-class). His art is thus a unique way of creating social link—connecting people just through this very fact. As we have seen, his call for French philanthropy is an ambitious one and aims at only one goal: creating social cohesion, again, across the different segments of otherwise ghettoised French society.

Additionally, some poems and rap songs in *Le Dernier Français* describe very crudely postcolonial violence such as mugging, e.g. “Prière de Rue” [“Street Prayer”], which dramatically and pathetically fuses together two variations of the victim trope: on the one hand, the topic of Muslims struggling to find appropriate places to worship and, on the other hand, that of an old lady fiercely attacked for her purse and violently hitting the pavement with her forehead—different kinds of ‘bowing to the ground’, i.e. ‘street prayer’. *All are victims*. To some extent, Abd al Malik’s writings may be characterised as a confession of, and atonement for, his

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<sup>10</sup>“Pour une spiritualité laïque” [“For a secular spirituality”] is Abd al Malik’s subtitle for his pamphlet published one month after the Charlie Hebdo attacks, in February 2015, titled *Place de la République: Pour une spiritualité laïque*.

<sup>11</sup>Cf. “Plus encore que la nécessaire ‘croissance verte’ ou que l’avènement inéluctable d’un ‘développement durable’, l’affirmation d’une fonction de mécène [. . .] doit contribuer à l’avènement d’une nouvelle économie” (234, with an emphasis on “plus encore que”: “even more than”).

past criminal actions. However, what makes this confession so complex is the fact that Abd al Malik never condones crime, but explains it in its postcolonial context (e.g. police blunders and extremely harsh living conditions in the *banlieue*). In another poem “Saigne” [“Bleed”], the same event is poetically narrated from the perspective of three different characters: the young Black person who is about to die, the policeman who is about to shoot him, and a witness who is an acquaintance of the victim. The fact that *all* points of view are made to matter through this poetical account is meant to create, once more, ‘social link’ and mutual understanding, even when the points of view seem to be utterly irreconcilable.

Finally, the considerable amount of literary energy which Abd al Malik puts into describing *exactly* through which processes his pockets became so ‘full of money’ as a teenager—such as the *exact* places where he stole money from people—is, I would suggest, in itself indicative of the daring nature of his project. At a time when delinquency from the *banlieue* tends to separate people and trigger increasing far-right voting, it is as though Abd al Malik on the contrary seeks to establish contact, through literature, with his own former victims, in a perspective of true *apaisement* [healing] and reconciliation. In today’s France, craving for reconciliation and healthier forms of *vivre-ensemble* [living together], all of these elements—including a redefinition of French philanthropy, not in a neoliberal way, but rather as an interpersonal, hence spiritual *projet de société* [vision of society]—contribute to making Abd al Malik a crucial social figure at the junction of literature and politics, fundamentally reconfigured as non-mediated interpersonality.

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