

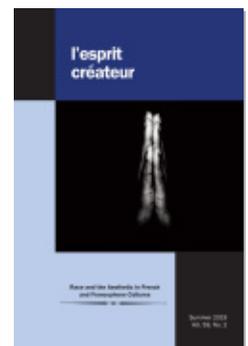


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Audiovisual Approach to French Universalism and
Difference-Consciousness

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L'Esprit Créateur, Volume 59, Number 2, Summer 2019, pp. 120-133 (Article)



Published by Johns Hopkins University Press

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/esp.2019.0020>

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Abd al Malik's "Meta-French" Perspective: An Audiovisual Approach to French Universalism and Difference-Consciousness

Katelyn Knox

THE COPIOUS INK SPILLED categorizing the musical works of Abd al Malik, one of France's most well-known artists whose corpus unfolds between and across multiple media (rap, spoken word performances, poetry, novels, and film), has left a critical lacuna: a sustained engagement with the relationship between his musical aesthetics and universalism. In this article, I fill this gap by taking an audiovisual approach to exemplary works from three of Abd al Malik's more celebrated albums—*Gibraltar* (2006), *Dante* (2008), and *Scarifications* (2015)—to reveal how their lyrics, musical aesthetics, and videos develop a "meta-French" perspective. My term "meta-French" draws its inspiration from Casey Hayman's formulation of "meta-blackness" in the African-American context.¹ "Meta-blackness," as Hayman formulates it, is what results when "subjects raced as black *make use of blackness as it is culturally circulated* to raise questions about conceptions of blackness and the assumptions that underlie it" (Hayman 130). Central to "meta-blackness," then, is attention to how African-American authors deploy, signify on or repurpose "technologically mediated" (Hayman 130) images and sounds associated with blackness in the United States and, in so doing, draw attention to blackness's mediation.

In the present volume dedicated to race and the aesthetic in the French-speaking world, studying the medium of music seems to hold enormous promise, not least of which is multiplying points of entry into the field of critical race theory, which is seemingly dominated by the visual.² In the case of Abd al Malik's oeuvre, an audiovisual approach allows access not only to the figurative and literal layering of the senses, but also to the interplay between them as articulated in and through his music. Abd al Malik's "meta-French" perspective—developed through language, sound, and sight—is the vantage point through which his musical works channel their listeners' figurative gaze and ears towards reigning notions of Frenchness, the assumptions on which they rest, and the mediation responsible for perpetuating them. Sighting and sounding the *décalage* between colorblind universalist rhetoric and difference-conscious lived experiences, the songs I study in this article cultivate both double-vision and double-hearing. As Tsitsi Jaji reminds us, visual and aural doubling

and *décalage* are precisely the technological mechanisms that produce “stereo” images and sound that seemingly create depth and volume out of flat surfaces.³ As I illustrate below, Abd al Malik’s music probes the relationship between surface and depth both musically and visually, ultimately seeing and hearing Frenchness (and its diversity) “in stereo,” to reprise Jaji.

At the center of what I term Abd al Malik’s “meta-Frenchness” stands the thorny issue of “difference-consciousness,” defined in terms of not only race and ethnicity, but also class, geographical origins, and education, among other factors. Often characterized as antithetical to French republican universalism—which officially eschews race, ethnicity, and religion as politically salient categories—difference-consciousness in Abd al Malik’s œuvre functions otherwise. First, his lyrics and music suggest that despite its claims to the contrary, difference-consciousness is, in fact, always already part of French republican universalism.⁴ Second, his œuvre cultivates a figurative double-vision, asking whether these very claims of difference-blindness in fact allow one narrow particularism to masquerade as universal. These are ideas he has reinforced in interviews: “so long as we haven’t realized that diversity is part of French identity, [...] we’re telling ourselves that a Frenchman, after all, is a white man, Christian, who’s between 25 and 45. And everything that doesn’t fit that description is tossed aside.”⁵ Far from outright rejecting French republican universalism, however, Abd al Malik’s works herald explicitly recognizing this difference-consciousness as its fullest expression.⁶

This attention to French republican universalism’s (color)blind spots unfolds as much through his works’ content as it does through their medium and form. First, and most obviously, Abd al Malik constructs this meta-French perspective across multiple media. To date, his corpus includes six literary works, five solo albums of varying genres, a feature-length film, and one stage slam performance.⁷ This multimodality also operates at the level of individual works: not only has Abd al Malik translated his own works from one medium to another, for instance by publishing select song lyrics in his literary works (see *Qu’Allah bénisse la France* [2004] and *Le dernier Français* [2012]), but his literary works often situate themselves between genres and media. *Camus, l’art de la révolte* (2016), for example, interweaves slam texts, photographs, and autobiographical narrative snippets, while Stève Puig terms *Le dernier Français* a “mixed-form essay-rap-poem.”⁸

While outwardly belonging to only one medium, his musical works, too, draw from and build on cultural works from multiple media, raising larger questions about how conversations about universalism unfold within and between distinct yet interconnected aesthetic modes. Even from his earliest

days, when he belonged to the group “New African Poets” (N.A.P.), Abd al Malik has always presented his music as both music and literature, straddling what Pim Higgsinson has called the “racial score”: the way Western philosophy has cognized literature and music along racial lines.⁹ Additionally, Abd al Malik’s musical works cite and “remix” (Puig 132) a vast corpus of high and low cultural patrimony, much of which comes from French-language traditions. Nowhere has this practice been more remarked than in scholarship about his second and third solo albums, *Gibraltar* and *Dante*. Even the most cursory glance at his song and album titles (*Dante*, “Roméo et Juliette,” “Céline”) already indicates the sheer volume and range of these references made in passing. In his lyrics, too, one finds references to authors such as Ronsard, Baudelaire, Rimbaud, Sartre, Camus, Malraux, and Pagnol, and philosophers such as Derrida, Deleuze, Guattari, among many others. Elsewhere, Abd Al Malik cites and lyrically reworks what are now heralded as ‘canonical’ works of *chanson française*; notable examples include “Les autres” (Jacques Brel’s “Ces gens-là”), “Fleurs de lune” (Françoise Hardy’s “Fleur de lune”), “Paris mais...” (Claude Nougaro’s “Paris mai”), and “Circule petit, circule” (Jacques Brel’s “Regarde bien, petit”).

Whether praised or decried, neither this feature of Abd al Malik’s rap aesthetics nor his tone—especially his embrace of French republican universalism—passes unremarked in scholarly or popular criticism. Comments about his musical aesthetics and citation practices range from celebrations of his “intello”¹⁰ rap style to claims that he merely espouses a “culture Wikipédia.”¹¹ Others read these citation practices through racialized lenses, suggesting that through them Abd al Malik desperately tries to position himself as “un bon immigré, un bon noir, un bon banlieusard, civilisé, ‘évolué’ comme on disait dans les colonies.”¹² Taking a step back from these assessments of Abd al Malik’s music, however, reveals that they rely on and reinforce the norms from which he supposedly departs. In many ways, what one ‘hears’ or ‘sees’ in Abd al Malik and his music seems to depend on how one listens or looks. As Olivier Bourderionnet rightly points out, “the logic behind this rather normative intellectual approach [to Abd al Malik] betrays a desire to confine ‘authentic’ rap discourse to a conventional angry narrative whose subversive power may be limited as well.”¹³

The audiovisual approach I deploy below to unpack Abd al Malik’s widely discussed sampling and referential practices and his larger musical aesthetics gives them new resonance, allowing me to show how they draw from and build on French cultural patrimony and how ‘Frenchness’ is mediated, all the while participating in this same process. As outlined above, behind the copi-

ous critical and popular assessments of Abd al Malik's work lie implicit questions about why and how he (a rapper) can cite and sample the wide range of literary, philosophical, and popular musical works one finds in his *œuvre*. Scholars of sample-based hip-hop, whether in the U.S. or France, have asked how artists recontextualize old sounds to make new sonic meanings. Many scholars of U.S. sample-based hip-hop have imbued sampling as a practice with archival significance, arguing that through it, hip-hop producers and artists situate their work within larger lineages, effectively constructing and reinforcing a hip-hop sampling "canon."¹⁴ As Jennifer C. Lena illustrates, certain genres (R&B, funk, and soul) and artists (notably James Brown and George Clinton) account for the majority of hip-hop samples.¹⁵ When rap music traveled to France, sampling remained a key aesthetic feature, even if French rap artists drew from a much different range of sources including soul, funk, zouk, reggae, and even provincial French styles.¹⁶ Abd al Malik's citing and sampling aesthetic choices are similar to those found elsewhere in French rap. Steve Cannon, for instance, documents how one commonly finds "references to francophone musical sources such as Bobby Lapointe, Jacques Dutronc, Gainsbourg and Renaud."¹⁷

Abd al Malik's *œuvre* samples jazz and *chanson française* musical aesthetics as signifiers of a larger idealized postwar intellectual culture in which existential dialogues transcended any one medium. On *Gibraltar* and *Dante*, rarely does he take a self-reflexive approach to these vast references. One notable exception, however, comes in his song "Césaire," which itself raises larger questions about the visibility of black artists and the way sampling practices might be heard. As outlined above, scholars typically read sampling through the lens of lineage. Examined in this way, this self-reflexivity about the very choice to cite the "great black poet," as André Breton famously called him, seems to betray a certain set of anxieties about the legacies of politically committed and aesthetically pioneering black authors.¹⁸ Even if Abd al Malik positions himself as continuing the work Césaire started (quite literally, as he performs Césaire's poem "Dorsale bossale"¹⁹ at the end of the song), he nevertheless underscores that the connection between their projects is literary and aesthetic first, before it is ideological: "Moi, laminaire, je reprends le flambeau avec mes flows, avec mon cœur, avec ma bande."²⁰ Elsewhere, the lyrics acknowledge an indebtedness to *négritude*'s results while simultaneously distancing Abd al Malik's "meta-Frenchness" from *négritude*'s political commitments: "Tout cela est tellement loin pour ma génération, comment voulez-vous qu'on s'en souviennne / [...] / Lorsqu'on trouve normal d'être libre et debout, eux se sont battus pour la fierté d'être soi" (Abd al Malik, "Césaire").

Additionally, the song's repeated refrain that precedes each chorus ("quant à moi c'est par le mot, le mythe, l'Amour et l'humour qu'au cœur du vivant il s'agissait de s'installer" [Abd al Malik, "Césaire"]), a reworked version of Césaire's oft-cited reflection on poetry itself offered in *Tropiques* (1945),²¹ again recuperates Césaire as a poet and pioneer in French literary aesthetics. The great pains Abd al Malik takes lyrically to characterize Césaire as a poet first betray an underlying apprehension that difference-consciousness in critical realms might cause racialized artists' legacies to overemphasize ideological commitments and minimize aesthetic innovation.

Sonically, too, "Césaire" suggests a *décalage* between *négritude*'s poetics and politics and those of "meta-Frenchness." Here, the literary and musical aesthetics of the chorus are illustrative. Unlike in the verses, where Abd al Malik only twice references blackness in passing, in the three-line chorus blackness becomes the central focus: "Noir comme un département de l'humanité / Noir comme pour l'universel son singulier / Noir comme s'il s'agissait d'aimer" (Abd al Malik, "Césaire").²² Two sonic features set this chorus apart from the rest of the song. First, despite the song's somber subject matter (Abd al Malik's reflections immediately following Césaire's death), its overall musical aesthetic is anything but somber. Instead, the dominant, staccato flute and saxophone, supplemented by a regular kick and snare backbone rhythm, create a light and upbeat aesthetic. When the chorus begins, however, the instrumentation and tone immediately change. The staccato flute recedes to the background, supplemented by a funky keyboard, lending a fuller, more contemplative feel. Rhythmically, two features distinguish this chorus from the verses and lend a feeling of *décalage*: first, a clap track subdivides the rhythm of the first and third bars, heightening the listener's attention to the rhythm. And yet whereas the chorus itself consists of four bars, the lyrics make up only three lines. As a result, the anaphorized word "noir" falls on different beats in each bar, creating a sense of instability and sonic *décalage* linked explicitly to the chorus's inquiry into blackness. Ultimately, "Césaire" works through the literal and figurative visibility of blackness as well as the latter's impact on the legacies of authors raced as black. In so doing, the song echoes the critiques Abd al Malik has offered in interviews regarding the way discussions of Césaire's ideological legacy often overshadow those of his literary innovations (Dicale).

This same attention to the relationship between difference-consciousness and universalism in and through cultural patrimony found at the level of Abd al Malik's corpus also plays out at the level of individual songs. For instance, "HLM Tango" explores the relationship between an implicitly white, urban,

bourgeois French listener and the explicitly ‘othered’ HLM inhabitants.²³ The song’s first two lines establish the theme of visibility and profit from the flexibility of the pronoun “on” to present the act of coming to know oneself through the gaze of another as a universal French experience. Abd al Malik raps: “On est près, voire plus de 60 millions, mais on ne voit que soi / Alors que c’est dans le regard de l’autre finalement qu’on devient soi.”²⁴ Here, the lyrics place Abd al Malik’s song in conversation with foundational philosophies about “le regard,” including Sartre’s formulation of “being for others,” Du Boisian double-consciousness or Fanonian “seeing oneself in the third person.”²⁵ Yet the subsequent lyrics’ rhetorical questions—directly addressed to an implicitly white “tu”—reveal that the privilege to gaze (and the experience of seeing oneself as an “other”) is not universally shared in France. In fact, not only is this power to gaze unequally distributed, but its very existence evades the critical awareness of those who possess it. Abd al Malik first asks his audience to acknowledge their gaze (“Et ce noir ou ce rebeu que tu croises dans la rue, quel regard lui portes-tu?” [“HLM Tango”]) before then examining) the various permutations difference-consciousness routinely takes, including race (“rebeu” and “noir”), religion (“le voile” and “la kippa”), and geographical belonging (“HLM,” “la tess,” “la banlieue,” and “la cité”).

This superficial scopic encounter also extends beyond individual, interpersonal interactions in “HLM Tango.” First, the song’s lyrics draw connections between these ways of looking and collective notions of belonging in France (“être Français sur le papier ne suffit pas si dans tes attitudes, y a pas la même reconnaissance aussi”). Second, the song’s last verse considers technology and media’s roles in perpetuating these superficial visual encounters, noting that the mediated images shown on television screens “ne reflètent en rien la réalité qu’on connaît.” The song’s musical aesthetics, too, which sample and loop two sections totaling twenty seconds of Imogen Heap’s futurist-sounding electro pop song “Have You Got It in You,” add an additional layer to this visual inquiry. Several features of this looping enhance the song’s commentary on the relationship between mediated images, national identity, and difference. Sampling non-tango music in a song entitled “HLM Tango” recasts the intimate, tango dance style as a guiding metaphor that counterbalances the song’s critique of mediated images put forth through its musical aesthetics and lyrics. Abd al Malik’s version of Imogen Heap’s song adds drum and percussive tracks not found on the original; its high-pitched synth sixteenth notes recall transmission signals, lending an even more technological feel to the song. This tango dance metaphor, which suggests the rhythmic coming together and distancing of physical bodies, stands in stark

contrast to the mediated images safely observed at a distance through television screens.

The most powerful inquiry into seeing and hearing Frenchness “in stereo,” however, comes in Abd al Malik’s “Saigne” (*Gibraltar*), which, through the story of a traffic stop that ends in a police officer tragically (and potentially accidentally) killing the black driver he pulled over, considers how difference-consciousness subtends what is seen and heard (or not) in contemporary France. Musically, Abd Al Malik’s “Saigne” seems at first listen to be a straightforward imitation of “Robert le Diable” by Jean Ferrat—itsself, a musical adaptation of Louis Aragon’s canonical poem “Complainte de Robert le Diable,” lamenting Robert Desnos’s premature death.²⁶ Yet after their respective first verses, both songs diverge in significant ways that complement the very different stories their lyrics tell. While Ferrat’s first verse is musically sparse, the second through fourth verses progressively build to a celebratory musical climax by shifting from A minor to the relative C major and by adding fuller instrumentation including sweeping strings and plucked guitar arpeggios. This triumphant tone, however, instantly evaporates at the end of the chorus when Ferrat delivers the word “saigne”—the lyrical reminder of Desnos’s death. Though Abd al Malik’s “Saigne” begins almost identically to “Complainte de Robert le Diable,” it never builds toward a celebratory tone; instead, two main ‘movements’ define Abd al Malik’s song. In the choruses and first verse, “Saigne” most closely resembles the first verse of Ferrat’s original; its flute and bass clarinet recreate the same plaintive feel, appropriate for the verse in which the driver laments his own death. In the second and third verses, by contrast, the wind instruments drop out completely. In their place a standup bass track lends a jazzier feel—a less mournful backdrop for the two witnesses’ testimony.

The lyrics and vocal delivery in “Saigne,” like its musical aesthetics, play with repetition, doubling, reverberation, pauses, and audible hesitations not found elsewhere in Abd al Malik’s œuvre, asking its listener to hear what is said, what is not, and the role difference-consciousness plays in both. The song’s lyrics exploit the flexibility of the pronoun “je” both as a signifier of universal experiences and as the most intimate of racially inflected of particularisms. In the chorus that opens the song, Abd Al Malik establishes “je” as a signifier of universal humanity, articulated through a set of existential questioning:

Derrière le statut, le vêtement, la couleur de peau
N’est-ce pas qu’on est tous semblables?
Les mêmes préoccupations
Qui suis-je, où vais-je, que n’ai-je, m’aime-t-il, m’aime-t-elle?

Remarkable though is the difference between the sonic qualities of the first and subsequent choruses of “Saigne.” Significantly, only one voice delivers the first chorus, seemingly positioning it as a highly particular, individual reflection. In the subsequent choruses that intervene between the three protagonists’ accounts of the events leading to the driver’s death, however, the vocal track is doubled, reinforcing the universal dimension of the chorus. Ultimately, the chorus’s single and doubled vocal tracks reinforce the tension between “je” as a signifier of universalism and particularism, simultaneously.

As outlined above, the chorus with which the song opens immediately makes race and class visible as sources of difference-consciousness in contemporary France, yet the first verse—the posthumous account that will never be “heard” in the fictional song’s diegetic world since the driver has already died by the start of the song—resists revealing the driver’s racial identity until relatively late. The driver recounts expressing extreme reluctance to drive without license plates and reports that the mechanic insists that “Vous êtes parano m’sieur, je vous arrangerai ça demain, y aura plus de problème.” It is only in this moment that the black driver reveals his race to the song’s listener: “et moi, et moi je l’ai cru avec ma tête de noir.” This line’s tone of regret implicitly attributes his initial hesitance to drive without license plates to his racial positionality and opens larger questions about the role it played in the traffic stop and shooting. Yet, crucially, to our knowledge the black driver never explicitly voices such concerns about his racial positionality in the song’s diegetic world when speaking to the mechanic. As a result, the song’s main focus becomes precisely this *non-dit* and its relationship to difference-consciousness.

The second verse, by contrast, tells a much different story, inverting the scopic and sonic dimensions of race presented in the first. Whereas the victim’s perspective slowly builds toward examining the relationship between his race and the fatal traffic stop, the mechanic’s story highlights how attention to race permeates the French colorblind universalist context. Race immediately visually defines how the mechanic interacts with his customer; he thinks, “encore un de ces nègres qui va me prendre la tête.” These latent racist expectations, however, bear little resemblance to how the interaction plays out; to the mechanic’s great surprise, he discovers that the young man is “plutôt courtois / Même franchement carrément sympa.” Yet the use of “même” and the doubling of the adverbs (“franchement,” “carrément”) emphasize the way latent stereotypes shape how the mechanic perceives his client. In the mechanic’s surprise, one hears echoes of Frantz Fanon’s discussions of how recognizing and celebrating racial exceptionalism only fuel the racist norms from which they supposedly depart.²⁷

An audiovisual approach to this verse reveals two interrelated *décalages* that cannot be resolved given the evidence presented in the song: what the driver says, what the mechanic hears, and how vision and stereotypes shape his perception. The mechanic's account of how and why the driver left the garage without license plates differs significantly from that of the driver. Whereas the driver, as we heard earlier, insists that he would have refused to drive without license plates were it not for the mechanic's reassurance, the mechanic instead shifts responsibility to the driver: "Mais il voulait absolument partir de suite, voir sa fille, je crois / Ils sont très famille les blacks vous savez." Not only do these lines foreground the mechanic's casual racism (the idea that family is more important to individuals raced black than to others), but their *décalage* from the driver's account raises more questions than they answer. Ultimately, the evidence the song's lyrics present—the driver's and the mechanic's accounts—makes establishing any objective 'truth' impossible. Yet it is precisely this impossibility that cultivates double-hearing and double-vision in its listeners, challenging them to consider how *perception*—how one sees and hears the same events—cannot be divorced from pre-existing stereotypes.

Far from suggesting though that racist ideas neatly track with racial positionalities—in other words, that only those in the majority can have racist ideas—the song's final verse complicates these discussions. More explicitly than the mechanic, the police officer, who tells his story in the third verse, does acknowledge racism in others around him, albeit in couched terms. For instance, he admits that "Bon, c'est vrai qu'il y a des collègues qui sont pas cool" and later vehemently differentiates himself from his overtly racist partner, who "arrêtait pas de me dire qu'il voulait se faire du bougnoule." In so doing, he substantiates the black driver's unvoiced fears that France's color-blindness might be an illusion, heard in his "tête de noir" comment. But here Abd Al Malik adds a layer of ambiguity to the conversation. Specifically, "Saigne" never explicitly reveals the police officer's racial positionality. Instead, it only announces his geographical origin: the Antilles. What is more, the song attributes the police officer's racism—which he does not see in himself—precisely to this geographical context, where seeing "ces Noirs et ces Arabes qui foutaient la merde quoi" incites him to become a police officer. The song's lyrics thus open up the possibility of racism as universal—that is, people of any races can hold racist ideas, act in racist ways, and participate in larger racist (and white supremacist) systems—in France.

In the same way as the *décalage* between the mechanic's and driver's accounts analyzed above deftly cultivates double-vision and double-hearing

and illustrates how pre-existing ideas shape perception, so too does the interplay between the police officer's and driver's account of the traffic stop and (accidental) shooting. Specifically, the police officer's account foregrounds a racist subtext that seeks at all costs to overwrite itself. Whereas the black driver admits that he was likely exceeding the speed limit, the police officer's description amplifies the driver's speed and deploys adverbs implying erratic and unpredictable behavior on the part of the driver: "[un gars] qui roule comme un dingue parce que, parce qu'il doit l'avoir volé en plus / Il s'est arrêté brusquement, bizarrement." The doubling of "parce que" and the audible hesitation as Abd Al Malik delivers the line suggest the force with which the police officer's delusion of difference-blindness attempts to shield itself from scrutiny. In fact, this very same conjunction puts the police officer's testimonial in direct conversation with the driver's account, revealing how this difference-conscious subtext is actively overwritten in ways the driver easily predicts: "Les policiers diront que le coup est parti tout seul, que je me débattais quoi / C'était censé être un simple contrôle parce que / Sur la route je roulais un peu trop vite mais..." Ending the first verse with the conjunction "mais"—opening another *non-dit*—leaves the black driver's narrative in suspense, further insinuating that difference-consciousness might have played a role in the traffic stop. Ultimately, "Saigne" cultivates double-vision (the distance between the mechanic's immediate race-consciousness and his vehement assertion of larger French society's colorblindness) and double-hearing (what lurks beneath the *non-dits*) to ask how pre-existing ideas, especially ones steeped in difference-consciousness, shape perception.

Outwardly, Abd al Malik's most recent album, *Scarifications*, marks a radical departure from his jazz and chanson aesthetics on *Gibraltar* and *Dante*. Produced by Laurent Garnier, *Scarifications* marries rap with electronic dance music (EDM) and returns to a more mainstream beat-driven vocal rap delivery style, rather than the "speech-effusive"²⁸ delivery that characterized *Gibraltar* and *Dante*. Yet several thematic and aesthetic threads unite these musical projects. First, similarly to the other albums, Abd al Malik 'samples' and reworks existing French cultural patrimony, though to a lesser extent than on his earlier albums. Second, this album continues Abd al Malik's inquiry into difference-consciousness in France, especially race, through sonic and scopic lenses. As I discussed above, even if songs' lyrics on *Gibraltar* and *Dante* evoke visual technologies (such as the television screen), this sense nevertheless remains purely figurative. *Scarifications*, on the other hand, not only probes figurative visual encounters through its lyrics, but also literally stages such encounters through music videos that accompany three of the

songs: “Allogène (j’suis un stremon),” “Tout de noir vêtu,” and “Daniel Darc.” As Emily Q. Shuman has convincingly shown, the videos “undermine the capacity of vision to fixate and incorporate the body into preexisting schemas,” including racial ones, finally “push[ing] the materiality of surface to its extreme: its dissolution.”²⁹ Taken alongside the album title, which evokes skin-deep markings that produce permanent, visible marks, the music videos call into question the relationship between visible, surface-level difference and notions of Frenchness and alterity.

Adding attention to sound and language to Shuman’s excellent visual analyses reveals additional layers of meaning through the *décalages* between what one sees and hears. For instance, the first and final verses to “Daniel Darc” lyrically rework the eponymous artist’s “La taille de mon âme.”³⁰ Musically, Abd al Malik’s version is much slower and sparser than Darc’s original, causing it to feel much more plaintive than Darc’s upbeat original. Most of the lines Abd al Malik delivers come directly from Darc’s original (“Si tu savais mes mains, rien / Si tu savais mes reins, rien”³¹) and maintain the end rhyme found in those lyrics. Yet in the sixth line, Abd al Malik adds in difference-conscious lyrics not found in Darc’s original (“Si tu savais ma peau, rien”) which disrupts the otherwise regular end rhyme (“cœur/yeux,” “mains/reins,” “cris/nuits,” but here “jambes/peau”). This reworking causes its listener to hear double: not only the way Abd al Malik’s lyrics add difference-consciousness, but also how this addition disrupts the otherwise stable rhyme. The music video, too, adds additional layers to these differences. Notably, whereas the viewer hears Abd al Malik’s vocal track, Abd al Malik does not sing in the video; rather, he only mouths the word “rien,” creating a *décalage* between what is seen and heard. The intro and outro are the only times the viewer sees Abd al Malik ‘in stereo’ (that is, with depth); in the rest of the video, his figure is merely a pulsating hollow shell at times resembling a 4-D ultrasound and at others a pin-art-like skin composed of thousands of white spheres that blow off into the distance. That the only time we see Abd al Malik ‘in the flesh,’ so to speak, he merely mouths the word “rien,” negation par excellence, complements the way the larger song probes the relationship between surface and depth, being and nothingness, difference-consciousness and universalism.

In another song on *Scarifications*, “Tout de noir vêtu,” which features former N.A.P member Matteo Falkone and Wallen, each musical element, voices included, serves an important rhythmic function that ultimately comments on blackness in contemporary France. Notably, the lyrics’ triplet delivery adds a polyrhythmic feel, rubbing up against the song’s other rhythmic ele-

ments such as its kick drum, clap track, and pulsating synth sounds. The lyrics position blackness as an immediately remarkable characteristic, likening it to irremovable clothing: “C’est comme si tu portais un vêtement que même si tu voulais tu ne pouvais enlever.”³² Yet in performing the chorus, the singers align their vocal stress to the song’s main pulse, causing it to fall on the first syllable instead of the final one, where it would normally fall in French: “C’est comme si tu portais un vêtement que même si tu voulais tu ne pouvais enlever.” These songs’ audio—whether through rhythm, rhyme or musical composition—then reinforce the *décalage* their lyrics consider.

As I have illustrated above, Abd al Malik’s musical works, especially those found on *Gibraltar*, *Dante*, and *Scarifications*, trouble the relationship between difference-consciousness, colorblindness, and Frenchness in contemporary France. Drawing from and reworking existing media, especially postwar music, philosophy, and literature, his musical works situate themselves within much larger, intermedial inquiries into universalism writ large. Through literal and figurative sight and sound, his songs (and accompanying music videos) construct a “meta-French” perspective, asking his audience to listen to and look at not just difference-consciousness and colorblindness, but also the *décalage* between them. Accessing these layers of meaning through an audio-visual approach as I have illustrated here can offer productive points of departure from which to multiply critical race theory’s analytical perspectives.

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Notes

1. Casey Hayman, “‘Black Is... Black Ain’t’: Ralph Ellison’s Meta-Black Aesthetic and the ‘End’ of African American Literature,” *American Studies*, 54:3 (2015): 130.
2. For two canonical examples, see Nicole R. Fleetwood, *Troubling Vision: Performance, Visuality, and Blackness* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 2011); Alessandra Raengo, *On the Sleeve of the Visual: Race as Face Value* (Hanover: Dartmouth College P, 2013).
3. Tsitsi Jaji, *Africa in Stereo: Modernism, Music, and Pan-African Solidarity* (Oxford: Oxford U P, 2014), 11–12.
4. Maurice Samuels comes to a similar conclusion in *The Right to Difference: French Universalism and the Jews* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 2016), asserting that “the universal and the particular have not always been as opposed as they now appear to be” (5).
5. Scott Sayare, “A Rapper and Poet Pushes for a New French Identity of Inclusion,” *The New York Times*, August 24, 2012, <https://z.umn.edu/4867>. This claim that universalism might, in fact, be a particularism masquerading as such recalls Mireille Rosello’s formulation of “tactical universalism” and Tyler Stovall’s assessment that, in the interwar period, “one should consider French universalism not just as a noble ideal not always perfectly applied in practice, but as a kind of whiteness, serving to mask the dominance of one group.” Mireille Rosello, “Tactical Universalism and the New Multiculturalist Claims in Postcolonial France,” in *Francophone Postcolonial Studies: A Critical Introduction*, Charles Forsdick and David Murphy, eds. (New York: Routledge, 2003); Tyler Stovall, “National Iden-

- tity and Shifting Imperial Frontiers: Whiteness and the Exclusion of Colonial Labor After World War I,” *Representations* 84:1 (2003): 53.
6. In this way, my reading of Abd al Malik’s works parallels Jennifer Fredette’s conclusions about postcolonial postmigratory new media activists like Rokyaya Diallo, who, she claims, in refusing “difference-blindness” do not reject “French republican norms *tout court*,” but instead “call for their fullest realization.” “Difference-Conscious Critical Media Engagement and the Communitarian Question,” in *Post-Migratory Cultures in Postcolonial France*, Kathryn Kleppinger and Laura Reeck, eds. (Liverpool: Liverpool U P, 2018), 25.
 7. Abd al Malik, *La guerre des banlieues n’aura pas lieu* (Paris: Le cherche midi, 2010); *Qu’Allah bénisse la France!* (Paris: Albin Michel, 2004); *Le dernier Français* (Paris: Le Cherche Midi, 2012); *L’Islam au secours de la République* (Paris: Flammarion, 2013); *Place de la République: Pour une spiritualité laïque* (Paris: Indigène Éditions, 2015); *Le face à face des cœurs* (Paris: Atmosphériques, 2004), CD; *Gibraltar* (Paris: Atmosphériques, 2006), CD; *Dante* (Paris: Polydor Records, 2008), CD; *Château Rouge* (Paris: Barclay, 2010), CD; *Scarifications* (France: [PIAS] Le Label, 2015), CD; *Camus, l’art de la révolte* (Paris: Fayard, 2016).
 8. Stève Puig, “Redefining Frenchness through Urban Music and Literature: The Case of Rapper-Writers Abd Al Malik and Disiz,” in *Post-Migratory Cultures in Postcolonial France*, 132.
 9. Pim Higginson, *Scoring Race: Jazz, Fiction, and Francophone Africa* (Rochester, NY: James Currey, 2017).
 10. Bertrand Dicale, “Abd Al Malik droit dans son rap,” *RFI Musique*, November 13, 2008, <https://z.umn.edu/4868>; Elsa Vigoureux, “Les enfants du hip-hop et de Derrida: Les intellos du rap,” *Le Nouvel Observateur*, May 18-24 (2006), 90–93.
 11. Mehdi Maïzi, *Faut-il réhabiliter Abd Al Malik?*, podcast audio, NoFun (2015), <https://soundcloud.com/nofunshow/faut-il-rehabiliter-abd-al-malik>.
 12. Pierre Tévanian, “Pierre écoute un disque de slam... et vomit,” *Les mots sont importants.net* (2009), <http://lmsi.net/Pierre-ecoute-un-disque-de-slam-et>.
 13. Olivier Bourderionnet, “A ‘Picture Perfect’ Banlieue Artist: Abd Al Malik or the Perils of a Conciliatory Rap Discourse in French,” *French Cultural Studies*, 22:2 (2011): 11.
 14. See Russel A. Potter, *Spectacular Vernaculars: Hip-Hop and the Politics of Postmodernism* (Albany: State U of New York P, 1995); Tricia Rose, *Black Noise: Rap Music and Black Culture in Contemporary America* (Hanover: U P of New England, 1994); Joanna Demers, “Sampling the 1970s in Hip-Hop,” *Popular Music*, 22:1 (2003): 41–56.
 15. Jennifer C. Lena, “Meaning and Membership: Samples in Rap Music, 1979–1995,” *Poetics* 32:3–4 (2004): 305–6.
 16. Christian Béthune, *Le rap: Une esthétique hors la loi* (Paris: Éditions Autrement, 1999), 194–95.
 17. Steve Cannon, “Paname City Rapping: B-boys in the Banlieue and Beyond,” in *Post-Colonial Cultures in France*, Alec G Hargreaves and Mark McKinney, eds. (London: Routledge, 1997), 132–33.
 18. André Breton, “Un grand poète noir,” *Cahier d’un retour au pays natal* (Paris: Bordas, 1947).
 19. Aimé Césaire, *Moi, laminaire* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1982).
 20. Abd al Malik, “Césaire.”
 21. “La poésie est une démarche qui par le mot, l’image, le mythe, l’amour et l’humour m’installe au cœur du vivant de moi-même et du monde.”
 22. In numerous interviews, such as one given on CNews following *Dante*’s release, Abd al Malik claims that at least the first of these lines comes directly from Césaire, but he does not cite his source.
 23. Imogen Heap, *Speak for Yourself* (United States: RCA Victor, 2005), CD.
 24. Abd al Malik, “HLM Tango.”
 25. Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness: An Essay on Phenomenological Ontology*, Hazel E. Barnes, trans. (New York: Philosophical Library, 1956); W. E. B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (New York: Modern Library, 2003); Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, Richard Philcox, trans. (New York: Grove Press, 2008), 2–3.

26. Jean Ferrat, *Ferrat chante Aragon* (Paris: Barclay, 1971), Vinyl LP; Louis Aragon, *Les poètes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1960).
27. In *Declining the Stereotype* (Hanover: U P of New England, 1998), Mireille Rosello comes to a similar conclusion about racial stereotypes more generally: that attempts to combat them by proving them “false” erroneously assumes that the “truth” of a stereotype lies in its correspondence, or not, with some objective reality, when, in fact, “the ‘truth’ of a stereotype—its identity—cannot be found in what is said about the ethnic group but in the specific features of the statement itself” (37).
28. Adam Krims, *Rap Music and the Poetics of Identity* (Cambridge: Cambridge U P, 2000), 50–51.
29. Emily Q. Shuman, “‘Tout de noir vêtu’: Skin and Surface in the Rap of Abd al Malik,” *French Cultural Studies*, 29:3 (2018): 211–16.
30. Daniel Darc, *La taille de mon âme* (France: Sony Music, 2011), CD.
31. Abd al Malik, “Daniel Darc.”
32. Abd al Malik, “Tout de noir vêtu.”