



Authorship, Impersonation
and the Republic: Outing
*Ali le magnifique*¹

“Sauf que le vrai, le faux: aucune importance dans la vraie vie comme à l'écran. Seul compte l'effet: on y croit ou non, tu es raccord ou tu ne l'es pas.”²

Paul Smaïl, purportedly the author of *Ali le magnifique*, distances himself from his literary invention by including his own persona as a character in the novel, primarily as a novelist whose previous publications Sid Ali (the book's main protagonist) reads and weaves into his internal monologues, and secondly by making a cameo appearance, à la Hitchcock, in the closing pages. The message is clear, clearer, at any rate, than that of the author's 1997 publication, *Vivre me tue*,³ where, despite its classification as “novel”, both author and character share the name Paul Smaïl. So Smaïl is not Sid Ali; *Ali le magnifique* published in 2001 as the fourth novel of “Beur writer” Paul Smaïl, is not autobiographical. Despite the built-in impossibility of taking the text autobiographically, however, there is perhaps no way of reading *Ali le magnifique* without in some way actualising, and responding

to, its first- person protagonist as a credible persona. In turn, that persona inhabits, however fictitiously, however problematically, a real, or perhaps hyper-real, version of the locality of a France hurtling unguided towards the year 2000, and whose views, voice, and vision of the national scene offer a unique perspective on contemporary France. For, as the novel unfolds, it becomes clear that the sketchy plot of Sid Ali's apprenticeship and career in serial-killing, like the author's disclaimers as to the fictionality of his enterprise, comes, to an extent, either before or after the fact – as pretext, or as graft. Sid Ali B., the eponymous protagonist, in a scenario echoing a real murder trial, is writing from a Lisbon jail where he has been arrested for the murders of three of his four victims, all women he has killed by asphyxiation with plastic bags. From prison, he narrates the events that lead to his incarceration but in so doing, he reconstitutes the verbal dexterity and plurilingual (Sid Ali's range of reference extends across classical French, contemporary Verlan, Arabic, and the American/English of the pop and advertising global cultures) texture of an internal world, a fantasised and largely self-aggrandising autovision (the schizophrenic condition his analysts detect) writing itself into the diegetic world he inhabits, and, equally, fascinating the novel's readers. Like the various psychoanalysts and authority figures who stumble to make sense of his life, or the sensationalist media which distorts his story to fit the "True Crime" mould of the popular press, the rambling narration positions its readers (often directly by addressing us as "tu" or "vous") into interpretation, and just as often misinterpretation, hooking our desire for the character as much as it incites our posited inability to comprehend Islamic, North African and Beur cultural references. For Sid Ali, and ultimately for the readers of the novel, the constructed mediated and corporate nation-space (there are allusions to Guy Debord's spectacular society) that he inhabits is transformed into the theatrical arena in which his existence acquires its meaningfulness (as explanation, justification, but also field of intervention). Railing against the dehumanising and culturally morbid effects of French attitudes to ethnicity in particular, while at the same time fetishising the value of the logo and celebrity, the character's mental world becomes an ambivalent, layered and

complex “being-in-the-nation” that, through repetition and familiarisation, reaches a sort of knowability by accretion that constructs, for its readers, if not a self, an avatar – a persona and position that is adopted by readers as they participate in the realization of his performative monologue.

And yet all is far from clear. While this brief summary of the contents of *Ali le magnifique* conveys a sense of the character-driven dynamic of the novel’s thematic interest in French national identity and the reading strategies it uses to bring these to life, it neglects to mention one important fact, namely, the fact that Paul Smaïl does not exist, and is in fact a pseudonym adopted by the established white French author, Jack-Alain Léger, who goes on in later publications to engage in debates about his act of literary impersonation. What is clear, even from the paratext of the novel, is that *Ali le magnifique* raises questions from the outset about authority, reading fiction and the national context. Alluding to the canonical French authors Molière and Stendhal, who, in “darker and less free days” were obliged to temper more scandalous comments by characters with disclaimers in brackets – for example, “C’est un scélérat qui parle” (*ALM*, 9) – the “avis”, or prefatory notice, claims fiction’s right, notably that of the novel since Cervantes, to construct “a realist fantasy” (*ALM*, 10). This right, “the fundamental freedom of the novelist”, although imperiled by an alliance of extremisms including spectacular society and religious fanaticism, is endorsed by the author’s claim that it is “recognized by the Constitution of the French Republic, of which I am an honourable citizen”. Presented as a recommendation on how the contents of the novel should be read, this advice, retrospectively, might also stand as a cornerstone of Léger’s later defence in how to respond to his use of the pseudonym, Paul Smaïl, as the designated author of the text. To the extent that his later publications (*On en est là, Tartuffe fait Ramadan* and *A contre Coran*)⁴ frame the novel within Léger’s assault on France’s tolerance for what he sees as Islam’s growing hold over the country, he claims the authority from the nation’s Republican heritage to draw on the literary realism of the novel in defence of France’s secular values, under threat by contemporary forces of darkness.

For Léger, the politically correct and communitarian attitudes informing France's apocalyptic retreat from the values of the Republic is nothing less than a capitulation to fascism. The national context, for Léger, is mobilized in terms of France's "exceptional" claim to secularism and Republican citizenship, in particular the consequences of a resolutely integrationist approach to immigration and ethnicity and its gradual erosion by multicultural and communitarian models insinuating themselves into the fabric of political, mediatic and popular cultures from across the Atlantic (as well as arguably informing the national race riots beginning in Clichy-sous-bois in November 2005). In this respect, the arguments of Léger's essays and his defence of his fabulated Beur author, while expressed more vehemently and perhaps performed more dramatically through ethnic drag, are nothing new, little different to the spate of anti-communitarian publications clustering around the millennium by the Defenders of the Republic, and sharing the despairing cynicism of Léger's refrain "On en est là? On en est là". Léger claims that unfavourable critical reaction to the revelation of his identity came from the press and the critics, while readers (and those he cites are predominantly North African French) identified with the authentic voice of his character and his exasperation with a society that continues to label second or third generation immigrants as anything other than French citizens. Peopled by a chorus of presumably real Arab friends (but including the fictitious author Smaïl and the literary character Ali) who intervene to back up this worldview, Léger's essays both echo the "Avis" to *Ali le magnifique* in claiming the freedom of high literature to remain as fiction, and at the same time, somewhat insistently, appeal to the authority of this "focus group" of "critical friends" (to use two very unLégerian terms) in guaranteeing the authenticity of his access to Beur mentalities and their shared distaste for religious fanaticism and political and mediatic tolerance of its excesses.

This strategy, while providing a form of journalistic documentation informing his writing, intersects with Léger's Republican defence of equality in contradictory ways: on the one hand it implies that anyone can create a meaningful beur character irrespective of their actual identity (much as, say, Flaubert wrote

as a woman in *Madame Bovary*), on the other, the backing group of “authentic” Beurs suggests that community experience and support are just as essential in authorizing his impersonation. The logical resolution (and political and critical dead-end) of Léger’s strategy, I would contend, is that had he published the “Beur texts” (and he is partial to making an analogy with fine art and the notion of painters’s phases or periods) under his own name, they would necessarily have been dismissed as lacking in authenticity – unauthorized, inappropriate, and partially informed about the facets and facts of immigrant lives in France. Moreover, the narrative impact of the character Sid Ali’s ability to code-switch between classical and traditional French references and the slang of (what CNN refers to as) the “Arab Street”, and the demonstration that ethnicity is no hindrance to a fully-fledged “French” education, would have been lost. In other words, Léger’s passing as a Beur in *Ali le magnifique* and the other three texts by Smaïl, as much a “period” in his creative evolution, might equally be considered as possessing the central elements of the literary hoax, whereby an author’s identity is fabricated in order to confuse or confirm public perceptions of appropriate authorship, representation, identity and veracity.

In this essay, I argue that national context, fictional authority and reading are, indeed, key factors in understanding the controversy surrounding the authorship of *Ali le magnifique* as Smaïl. However, rather than filtering these questions through the Republican model used by Léger himself, I read the text of the novel at its word, both against the grain of the author’s later pronouncements and the criticism of his decision to publish anonymously, attempting a response to the text as *both* a novel by a Beur author called Paul Smaïl *and* a literary hoax perpetuated by a Republican, secular essayist called Jack-Alain Léger. Beginning with a consideration of how to respond to the literary hoax, drawing on recent Australian work on the “genre” and its centrality in the evolution of national literature through modernism and postmodernism, I suggest that considering *Ali le magnifique* as a hybrid text (a process of displacement creating a “unique field of encounter, interaction, interpenetration, inter-constitution between an author, a work, a reader and a world”)⁵

instigates a way of challenging predominant notions of French universalist belonging as the only frame within which the novel might be read. This procedure results in an interpretation of national identity in the text as more complex, multiple and ambivalent than Republican frames of debate allow, and ultimately opens into questions about how desire operates in the text as a queering and creolizing dynamic, a momentum that produces a reading against the grain, at once parallel to the debates about authorship, ethnicity and national identity but introducing unpredictable itineraries of allegiance which effectively read Léger out of the novel regardless of his later revelations.

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Writing just before the publication of *Ali le magnifique* – and before Léger's cover is blown – Ziad Elmarsafy situates Smaïl's earlier corpus within the contexts of contemporary debates about the nature of French citizenship, reading the author's ontology in terms of the notion of a "histrionic sensibility", a "fictitious, theatrical or televised" selfhood,⁶ which functions as "a shrewd social strategy" (11) in post-worlds where acting and self-performance have greater impact than any form of authenticity. Elmarsafy concludes his insightful reading of Smaïl's first three publications by demonstrating the intersections of this strategy, both textual and survival, with national concerns:

Paul Smaïl is a test case, asking how a society whose identities are based on acting will deal with him. This is what makes both his work and existence scandalous. Notwithstanding his compulsive "escapes" from Paris (the first time to bury Daniel, the second to avoid attending the publication of *Vivre me tue*, the third time to accompany Myriam to Spain, where he felt right at home) and the many Arabisms that punctuate the text (*Hcbouma! Hafif!*), the narrator's identity is French. The real threat that he poses is encapsulated in his name, Paul Smaïl, a very

French present rooted in a distant Moroccan past, conceding nothing to the hysterical divisions that French society projects onto him. His extreme – almost ridiculous – self-consciousness signifies his awareness of the gravity of his undertaking: the slow, methodical construction of a self that his spectators will have to, *bon gré mal gré*, take seriously. At the close of the twentieth century, *francité* is better defined by its putative outsiders who, instead of reiterating the conciliatory lament, “We are like you,” are now asserting the threateningly obvious: *We are you.* (11)

Elmarsafy’s analysis – in particular his elucidation of Smaïl’s “systematic unravelling of socially sanctioned opposites – French vs. Arab; Left vs. Right and so on” and his construction of a world, where “anything is possible except individuality” (6 of 14) depends on theories of performativity and acting already, and his conclusion points to the extent in which post-global societies are navigated much as a virtuality by constructed personae. But of course, Smaïl is not a part of French society, late twentieth century “*francité*”, for the simple but important reason that he does not exist, at least not within the same ontological strata as the author and his readers. Caught by the hoax, there perhaps is a sense in which Elmarsafy’s analysis can no longer hold any sense when Léger’s name is substituted for that of Smaïl – what would it mean to claim that a white “*français de souche*” is like, or part of, France? That is not to say, however, that his argument should be discarded. On the contrary, by adding a further clause and modality to his statement, Elmarsafy’s account of the texts as bearing witness to an ethnic revolution in the constitution of “Frenchness”, if anything, more interesting: “A white French author asserts that France’s putative others now constitute French society, as much the true heirs of its values and heritage as its more traditionally configured populations”. Indeed, this premise, leading to a claim for the fundamental freedoms of the said white French author, is not central to the conclusion reached by Margaret Majumdar in the later (post identity disclosure), and very different reading, she makes of Smaïl’s texts.⁷ Positing that the

intertextualities (Cervantes, Stendhal) and polyphony inherent in Léger's imposture render his texts hybrid, Majumdar concludes:

Au lieu d'un processus qui circonscrit le droit à la parole, qui en limite les modalités, qui nie la possibilité de la contradiction et de la résistance, l'hybridité s'exprime dans ses textes par une libération de la parole et des voix déplacées. En fin de compte c'est la liberté qui prime – liberté de se mettre à la place de l'autre, liberté de résister à la médiocrité de la société actuelle, liberté de vivre une authenticité existentielle et liberté, enfin, de créer des fictions. (16-7 of 18)

If then, it is ultimately a representative of the white French population who is responsible for advancing the kind of paradigm shift Elmarsafy detects in the Smail corpus, his free choice in acting as *porte-parole* is coupled with a responsibility that, as Majumdar adds, is undertaken in the service of a traditional lineage of Republican and literary freedoms. Majumdar herself points to the danger of overly celebrating hybridities of this nature, whenever "l'expression d'un idéalisme fraternal" serves to "denier la voix des dominés" (3). Issues of hegemonic domination, silencing the other and the exercise of power, as raised by Majumdar's concerns, are recurrent mainstays of the literary hoax, particularly when it relates to identity-switching or ethnic passing.

In Australia, perhaps the land of the literary hoax *par excellence*, a recent mapping of the genre⁸ argues that, despite the differences between controversies, "the significant overrepresentation [...] of writers claiming or fabricating an indigenous or non-English-speaking cultural identity surely suggest that [...] questions of cultural and racial difference, rather than sexual or gender difference [...] preoccupy those who feel themselves to have "lost out" in the cultural changes wrought in the late sixties and first half of the seventies in Australia, or, more pertinently perhaps, able to mobilize effectively that rhetoric of loss"(xi). Maggie Nolan and Carrie Dawson go on to identify "common and pressing concerns about the nature of authenticity and

attendant fantasies of originary wholeness and certainty” as key effects, arguably informing controversies involving both Indigenous identities (such as Mudrooroo/Colin Johnson and Roberta Sykes) and ethnic belonging (as with John O’Grady’s invention of Italian immigrant “author” Nino Culotta or Helen Darville’s self-fashioning as Ukrainian-Australian writer Helen Demidenko). Rather than falling into polarized positions, which either condemn or celebrate impostures, the tendency of Nolan and Dawson is, drawing on Diana Fuss’s work on “identification” as “the detour through the other that defines the self”,⁹ to point towards more complex dynamics working in acts of literary impersonation and imposture which “call all of our identities into question” (xvii). In the Australian context, national narratives that promote cultural diversity and a long history of white attempts to regulate Indigenous identity provide for circumstances where investment in identities, the politicized relations between silence and voice, and narratives of loss and recovery inform the appropriations and fantasies of those writing as other. Examples from Nolan and Dawson’s collection include David Carter’s consideration of the performative aspect of an Italian voice as a niche branding exercise that outweighs authentic embodiment,¹⁰ and Maureen Clark’s discussion of the Mudrooroo imposture as an act where the “inwardly generated concept of self must be outwardly negotiated in the public domain”.¹¹ In the former instance, both authorship and market collude in “recognizing” the literary joke perpetuated by an Italian take on Australian mores in *They’re a Weird Mob*. In the latter, the narrative appropriation of Aboriginal identity in Mudrooroo’s *Wild Cat Falling* is “constituted and performed within the racist framework of identity and belonging in Australia – a formulation that continues to divide and demean us all”.

Equally, France’s narratives of forgetting and remembering, and dynamics of division and national reconciliation, as historians such as Braudel and Ross¹² have illustrated, inform the public space symbolically and discursively in potent if different ways. If a French politics of cultural belonging has focused more on integration than diversity, it nonetheless secures both identity (a concern with origins, authenticity and tradition) and identification

(the work of social assimilation, the sameness inherent in equal citizenship) as central concerns of the national space. Within these contexts *Ali le magnifique's* impersonation of a Beur author might begin to be understood. Building on Ross's elucidation of the drive towards modernity and the national handling of the Algerian war as stories France wanted to "keep apart", but which were intrinsically linked, (8-9) it could be suggested that an opposite momentum has more recently developed in French consciousness, a tendency equally tenuous, to consider concerns about safeguarding France's Republican heritage against "American" multicultural frames of reference as able to encompass and explain more suspect or racist fears of ethnic "invasion" or "dilution" by immigrant cultures and practices. In other words, the French story is increasingly one whereby appeals to the unique and indivisible (and unmediated) relation of the citizen to the state, under threat from communitarian practices and political correctness, become the only legitimate frame of reference in all debates about ethnicity and race, to the extent that racisms might be defended provided they show true Republican credentials, and anti-racisms attacked if informed by unFrench values and motives.

Certainly when writing as himself, Léger appears to be completely aligned with this hegemonic doctrine: he is keen to lend the authority of the valid Republican defense to his critique of Islam. Far from espousing racist politics, his aim is to shield the immigrant population from excessive "Islamicisation", either as propounded by those who profess to be community leaders, or through conflation of ethnicity and religion by mainstream commentators. When he writes "Le Pen, Tariq Ramadan, même combat", (TFR, 113) Léger's intention is to create a slogan that encapsulates his belief that a collective lack of vigilance in maintaining solid Republican principles of indifferentiation has led to a tolerance of Islamic extremism, and a resultant ghettoisation of the kind directly advocated by the "Front national". Read from this perspective, *Ali le magnifique*, in its portrayal of Sid Ali's rage at being caricatured and pigeon-holed, misunderstood and "dumbed down" to the level of the media circus around him, together with Paul Smail's performative

mastery of literary deftness and perspicacity, can, perhaps should, be read as a defence of an equal claim to French classical values irrespective of origins, a practical demonstration of the Republican virtues of freedom and integration that Léger holds dear. Intention, however, is not all – and so much less, I would argue, when an author, be it through imposture or impersonation, for motives of profit, playfulness, fear or loathing, refuses to put her or his authentic signature to a text. Whatever the reasons, Jack-Alain Léger's decision to attribute *Ali le magnifique* to a fabricated author named Paul Smaïl opens the way for it the novel to be read at its word, *as if* written by another. The abandonment of conventional authorial responsibility inherent in the hoax, it might be said, opens up a fissure between author and text which creates possibilities for a reading that, rather than remaining taken in, takes up the challenge, sees through the imposture, plays along, or catches out. Choosing, for example, to respond to the Smaïl texts as both "romans beur" and as parodies of the "genre" as Touriya Fili does,¹³ is a valid way of responding to the displaced discourse and refusing the mendacious terms of the pact proposed by the hoax text, since, as Fili points out, "[l]a reprise des discours de l'autre est non pas une simple thématisation qui réduit l'autre à un pur prétexte du discours du sujet mais une perpétuelle interprétation qui évolue avec le désir que "je" a de l'autre" (14 of 16). Let us then, as Michael Finnigan had it, begin again.

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Ali le magnifique is a novel by young beur novelist Paul Smaïl that, in the French context, offers a remarkable shaping of the self in terms of the interpellations of globalised consumerism, and of brand-new nationalisms insofar as nation-stated imperatives are increasingly aligned with, if not subsidiary to, the interpellations of the human market (the market in the human). The protagonist, Sid Ali, responds to the dehumanizing society around him, not with the trite and slightly passé invective of Republican values, as found, say in the vitriolic and self-aggrandising essays of Jack-

Alain Léger, but with an inventive, if dangerous, form of hybrid self-fashioning. Sid Ali's worldview straddles urban chic, classical French references, the North African and Islamic background references and cultural inheritance with which he enjoys ambivalent and partial allegiances, and the ubiquitous mediated world, increasingly Anglophone, Europhone, of the brand as value. New models for understanding citizenship and ethnicity in contemporary France underpin Smail's retheorisation of national identity as performative, iterative, selectively negotiated and subject to the competing individuation and identifications of its inhabitants. His imaginative construction of a character with competing allegiances and multiple identifications provides a model that stands in direct antithesis to the stale one-size-fits-all notion of undifferentiated citizenship increasingly unsustainable as France wakes up to the reality that persistent policies of integration, like some elaborate state literary hoax, produces narratives of belonging read increasingly in terms of imposture, suspicion and disbelief when confronted with global realities of multiple identifications and transcultural allegiances. Sid Ali performs a decoupling of ethnicity and identity through a series of killings across the country, each embedded within national and transnational structures of being, doing and valuing, and raising questions about the kind of ethics informing France's conventional Republican landscape

Sid Ali's psychic and affective existence plays itself out on the stage of mainstream French public consciousness, embracing fame in his meteoric, although entirely imagined, rise to replace PPDA as the nation's favourite television presenter. Key among the characters in the novel, and looming larger in Sid Ali's mind-space, are the same personalities who occupy, in the strong sense of the verb, the heads of the French media world which Smail's readers inhabit – Isabelle Adjani (with whom he imagines a romantic complicity based on their shared Arabic heritage); politicians including Jacques Chirac (who is caricatured with reference to perhaps his most disastrously misjudged public remark about immigrant smells as "Chi-Chi les Odeurs"); soccer star Zinedine Zidane (who acts as photogenic double for Sid Ali, advertising Dior *Eau sauvage* on billboards) and "naturalised"

English actress Jane Birkin (whose publicity appearances citing her love for Calais and its “*minicroisières pour l’Angleterre*” (*ALM*, 136) are contradicted by sightings of her taking the Eurostar train). The effect of Sid Ali’s psychic integration into this post-real France – “l’effet du hyper-réel” – is compounded by an animation of the logo and the brand (from Nike, Versace and BMW to Banta Orange, le FNAC and Galeries Lafayette, the curious *mélange* of the global and national that makes up the French city-centrescape) to the extent that where Flaubert’s characters inhabited a world of objects, Smâil’s (anti-)hero is defined, and defines himself and his world, even morally, through his relations with the logo and its putative values. In what is his most persistent celebrity fantasy, Sid Ali imagines himself interviewing Chirac on the evening news, holding him accountable for his inexcusable racist comment:

– Monsieur le Président, est-ce que je pue?

– Excusez-moi ...?

Putain! La chetron à Chichi: vert, il est vert! Non, votre poste couleurs n’est pas déréglé: vert! (*ALM*, 292-3)

The refrain following his successful humiliation of the President, “Je vous étonnerai toujours”, which recurs across key chapters, usually rounding off one of Sid Ali’s imagined successes, is addressed at a France (as viewership, readership) which cannot accommodate, far less accept on screen, *his* “chetron” outside the parameters of its limited purview of who speaks for the nation. As Ted Stanger points out in his intercultural critique of contemporary French society, despite the tokenism of one or two black anchorpeople on television, “Pour l’essentiel la France officielle reste blanche”,¹⁴ with few examples of political or commercial success-stories to inspire its non-white citizens. Yet, as anthropologist David McMurray argues, the official face of France is increasingly coming under pressure from an “extraordinary plenitude of all things Arab in French *popular* culture”,¹⁵ to the extent that “the irrepressible creativity of the maligned and marginalized multiethnic banlieues may be the best bulwark against a dominant French cultural discourse that seeks

to deny the most important feature of French popular culture; namely that it is heterogeneous to the core”(37-8). As new myths for the new millenium take root, myths about the doctrine of Republicanism in crisis and French exceptionalism looking unexceptional, myths such as the post-World Cup “explosion of joy” that opens John Ardagh’s *France in the New Century* (and which Sid Ali denounces as a media fabrication), it seems inevitable that the implications of these national reconfigurations will work their way through into hybrid and challenging fictionalisations such as Smail’s novel, as well as receiving more complex and transcultural theorisations along the lines of the “multitudinous” thinking of theorists such as those of the Italian writer Sandro Mezzadra. For Mezzadra, whose writings have been published in the alternative French review *Multitudes*,

les migrations voient s’exprimer des processus de désagrégation des systèmes traditionnels d’appartenance, qui rendent insoutenable – analytiquement et politiquement – l’image du migrant si courante dans la littérature internationale sur les migrations: celle du migrant comme sujet <traditionnel>, totalement embedded dans des réseaux familiaux et communautaires, face auquel se détache [...] l’individu occidental.... [L]e/la migrant(e) [...] vit un rapport complexe et contradictoire avec l’appartenance, quelle qu’en soit la définition.¹⁶

Sid Ali’s auto-imbrication within the dominant French cultural scene, his infatuation with the ubiquitous and predominant signs and symbols of France’s global brand, enact the complexity and centrality of national belonging in ways unassimilable within official contexts, as his, and his peers’, performative multitudinous identities are persistently misread, misrecognised – or unread, unrecognised by the agencies of enforced integration, the state cadres (teachers, police, clerks, media, politicians) who, perpetuating Saidian thinking, mistranscribe names from the Arabic or conflate the Maghreb (meaning West) with the Orient. Whether determined by an underlying Le Penism or a “politically correct” and cool

Universalist assimilation, the white French gaze is revealed in the novel as incapable of coming to terms with the multiplicity of a character whose command of the French language is more complete, range of literary reference more vast, participation in the national consumer space, and manners more refined than their own. Emblematic of his troubling effect, his *trouble-fête* affect, Sid Ali's identity fluctuates depending on his situation, becoming, playing the part each context requires. For example he substitutes his brother Aziz's passport for his own and the photograph is recognised as more realistic, or he performs a stereotypical rentboy for the white clients he and his friend Rabah pick up, calling themselves interchangeably Abdelhaq, Abdelali, Abdelhaqli – always “Abd”, or “serviteur” – while the clients themselves acquire constructed “double prénom” names (Jean-Somethingorother) in Sid Ali's monologue of reversal. His identity destabilized by the identifications he makes, Sid Ali has no point of anchorage to the national script, no “natural” allegiance to Republican values, to the extent that, as he writes, “mon moi volait en éclats” (*ALM*,163).

From this brief survey of the national context informing Smail's novel, primarily in the form of Sid Ali's scathing critique, inventive reinscription and general rant about the direction of contemporary France and its embodiments in the socio-cultural imaginations of its inhabitants, it seems to me that three issues emerge as central to any fuller reading that can be made of the text, and which lend themselves to further enquiry. First, the protagonist's self-realignment as French *and* Arabic (and one might extend this list through the accretion of the other roles and identities which he performs or enacts) profoundly destabilises the integrationist doctrine which still informs Official France's thinking on citizenship and belonging, in that he maintains difference while claiming equality. Sid Ali is, acts, embodies Frenchness – if anything his ability to critique the nation and its tenets marks him within the very French form of belonging by “contestation”, somewhere between (or beyond) Renaud Camus's lament for the lost “delicatesse” of French society and Denis Robert's call for a revolution against banalisation in *révolte.com*. Yet, Sid Ali's particular brand of Frenchness is a new model, one

which, like the new Helly Hansen bubble jacket range which he fetishises, “existe en noir et en blanc” (*ALM*, 45). His obsession with dressing in white sportswear is a sign which dazzles psychoanalysts towards misreadings. In response to their poised questions about the habit he enjoys pointing out that, rather than sign of wanting to erase his ethnicity, there might be some mileage in the interpretation that white is the colour of mourning for Muslims, in his case for mourning for himself. The response?

Il en reste bouche bée. Comme assommé. N'est-ce pas? Je justifie mon QI: je suis d'une grande intelligence. Et je lui ouvre des horizons. [...] Désormais, chaque fois qu'il aura à soigner un jeune rabza habillé en blanc il essaiera de suggérer au gamin qu'il porte symboliquement le deuil de quelqu'un. (*ALM*, 50)

The fact of Sid Ali's national existence – his occupation of, investment in, performance of, even his mourning for – both French and Arabic identities individuates him, and in so doing positions him problematically, notably for those “de Souche” characters in the novel who have most experience of Arabic culture. Cécile Renal, his literature teacher with whom Sid Ali finds immense grounds for empathy, mutual respect and shared understanding, dies probably because of her insistence to misname him as just “Ali”, dropping his princely particle, and her suspicion of his desire to parent her mixed race grandson, provide a father for him within the cultural context of his own, however ambivalent, understanding of the Islamic family. The brutal murder and implied rape of Rénal suggest one logical outcome of these underlying securitarian fears and fantasies, the unreconcilable relation with otherness, informing French institutions, as Sid Ali becomes the “voyou” that he's always somehow seen to be. What hope then, what scope if any, for national accommodations of identitarian issues can be gleaned from the descent into violence and destruction which determine the fate of “Ali le magnifique”, the final soubriquet with which Rénal (dis)honours the protagonists?

The ensuing three murders are recounted in quick succession and almost despite the narrator as the novel nears its climax. Each occurs through asphyxiation of the victim with a different brand of plastic bag as Sid Ali circumnavigates France's rail network. The victims, far from randomly chosen, each display levels of incivility, lack of cultural finesse or unreflected, mass-mediated debility which lead Sid Ali to dispose of them. Here, the protagonist's identity seems less implicated in performativity – not so much a dichotomy between doing and being – as in valuing. Sid Ali's own relation to consumer France is demarcated from theirs, less by a conventional snobbism than by the emphasis he puts on the quality of the products he fetishises – each is the market leader, the “top de top”, and they invest his identity with a form of value that transcends that allocated to him within the national script rather than reduce to him to the level of mass-produced logo. The brand of each plastic bag chosen comments on his perception of the lesser value of the victims, and their rightful place in the consumer hierarchy. Donata, the Italian whose poor command of French, lowest common denominator thinking and fake Louis Vuitton handbag bears a VL insignia rather than the LV mark her as an annoyance, is, for example, ironically dispensed of using a Prada bag. Might it then be, that plastic-bag killing, for Sid Ali, more than a performance or authentic “geste”, becomes a moral judgement, an ongoing commentary on the debasement of value permeating the degenerated “société de spectacle” he sees around him? At the level of the character himself, who shows no remorse – the novel's internal dénouement affords Sid Ali a blissful weekend with his ideal Portuguese lover before contemplating a possible release from prison on a technicality – this question is unresolvable. For Paul Smail, his author, one might posit that the brutal and exaggerated monstrosity of his creature's actions is emblematic of the intractability of Republican France in adapting to the new model of multiple identification and hybrid allegiance that Sid Ali represents.

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Or one might not. Moving on from this crypto-reading of a novel by an author who does not exist, yet not exactly discarding its discovery of a radical agenda, quite different to the secular and integrationist rhetoric informing its author's recuperations of his hoax, it becomes clear that far from controlling Smaïl and the meanings of his texts, Jack-Alain Léger's fabulation, as with any fiction according to the Frankenstein-like tendency of creation, develops a set of dynamics that escape his control. The (entirely invented) critic responsible for the reading above (let us call her, for argument's sake Michelle Finnigan, imagine for her a biography as a bilingual postdoc in cultural studies at Concordia of mixed Haitian and Canadian-Irish descent), works towards producing a sets of meanings that spiral beyond authorial intention. Her construction of a politics and psychology from within the text reflect as much her own frame of reference as the author's, one that understands the exceptionality and closure of French national discursive fields around ethnicity and identity, but acknowledges competing, Anglo-American and pan-European trends according to which the same questions give rise to different answers. Finnigan's response to Smaïl builds a case around the undecideability of Sid Ali's Frenchness and his problematic relations with national authority. In this respect, I would concur that the simulacrum that is *Ali le magnifique*, as with the Australian literary hoaxes referred to above, leaves its text wide open to reflecting and refracting a range of national and international perspectives and contexts. Fabricated authors perhaps depend on readerly fabrications, and it is interesting that each node of the Sid Ali/Smaïl/Léger triad is heavily invested in controlling the reception of the text: Sid Ali by positioning his reader as unversed in Arabic and Islamic cultures and typifying tolerant but misguided communitarian approaches to immigrants in France; Smaïl via the preface which insists on the authority of high literature to invent; and Léger, in his essays, by contextualizing his hoax within national concerns with the dilution of Republican values. Reading from outside these acts of textual policing however, Finnigan points to the ways in which an independent script might begin to insinuate itself within the interstices of the

construct. If Smaïl is to be taken as “real”, then so too can his worldview.

Where Finnigan stumbles however, precisely at the point where we left her analysis, is in accounting for the brutal “reality” of Sid Ali’s crimes, and in particular the misogynistic nature of his rapes and murders. However much these acts are framed as secondary to the character’s verbally inventive display, however ironised and rushed over within the text, they nonetheless represent the one verifiable and authentic aspect of the entire novel/hoax, given that they transpose the documented case of the “train-killer”, Sid Ahmed Rezala, as chronicled in French newspapers over 1999 and 2000. In a further attempt at enforcing reader positions, the antipathetic nature of Sid Ali’s crimes obliges us to respond to his case as forensic psychologists, irrespective of which diegetic level we read the novel on. Whatever position the character is made to represent (as Elmarsafy’s test case for French Republicanism or a model for a new multicultural France), the horrific crimes he has committed construct him as anti-hero, negative role model, at best questioning the relation between his acts and his discourse, at worst entirely invalidating his way of being-in-France. In conventionally authored writing this might well be the stuff of the literary, the tension and discrepancy between a protagonist’s princely qualities and his tragic flaw. Given the invested nature of the impersonation, however, its imbrication within the script of national debates on ethnicity and belonging in France, Sid Ali’s criminality, and requires fuller consideration.

For Léger, writing in *A contre Coran*, the cowardly retreat of Republicanism when confronted with Islamic attitudes to women and what he perceives as their enforced submission to men within the religion typifies France’s abandonment of secular values. Citing the cases of a doctor who was vilified for daring to speak out about “Muslim machismo”, Léger takes up the baton against the politically correct positions adopted by his critics by conjuring up an incestuous scenario where young Arab boys are first sexually molested by their frustrated mothers and elder sisters before, at the age of seven, being “repris en main par le père et les frères aînés et élevé alors dans le mépris de ces femmes qui

l'initièrent à leur insu dans le plaisir" (*ACC*, 112). To say so much, and to attribute rapes by young muslim men to this phenomenon, he goes on to claim, would mark him as an abominable racist, yet, by stringing together eight North African given names as a chorus of like-minded thinkers in support of his views, Léger goes on to question whether accusations of racism mask a capitulation to the sexist domination that he sees as routine in Islamic cultures:

Si ce sont eux qui me font part de leur souffrance: devoir toujours redouter ses pulsions de viol ou de violences, ce machisme instinctif qui leur fait honte parce qu'ils sont des hommes évolués, mais ce machisme dont ils ont gardé, indélébile, la trace mnésique dans la part archaïque du cerveau? Si ce sont eux qui en parlent, le font-ils parce qu'ils sont islamophobes, parce qu'ils sont racistes, parce qu'ils sont d'affreux franchouillards lepénistes? (*ACC*, 112-3)

It is young immigrants themselves, according to Léger's recurrent strategy, who both suffer as the consequence of the extremes of Islamic doctrine and French neglect to apply the same standards of secularism in responding to its excesses, and who are most vocal in condemning the tyranny that marks their life experience as unFrench, barbarous, unliveable. As their spokesperson, it is his task (and it is a task not dissimilar to the Australian hoax trope of "representing" Indigenous voices) to represent their aspirations, unshackled by the constraints and silencings which prevent their voices being heard in the public domain. The contradictions in the character of Sid Ali, on the one hand his sensibility to "la politesse", perspicacity and literary and linguistic dexterity attributable to his potential to assimilate French values, and on the other his ethnic destiny, fated to incarnate the misogynistic mythology Islam has inculcated in him, for Léger then, might make perfect sense as the tension inherent within battleground France as the nation struggles to secularise its immigrant population.

Of course Sid Ali, like the presumably more fully fleshed chorus of Beur friends in Léger's essays, never speaks entirely as

himself, is never able to articulate this position from his own perspective, but is mediated through his author's manipulation of a narrative and discourse chosen for him. To the extent that literary impersonation entails a process of identification, Léger becomes implicated in his character's actions and crimes: it is ultimately he who imagines, and in the execution of the text, commits the rapes and murders which his character enacts. Again, in literature designated to a living author, it would be a commonplace to say so, but both poles of Sid Ali, his aspirational citizenship and his criminality, are constructions of the person behind his invention. The mediating factor of Paul Smaïl, in this case, has the effect of justifying Léger's vision (as belonging to a Beur), while mitigating his part in the criminal imagination and dysfunctionality of the character's acts. Yet this is to reckon without desire and seduction, the essential components in any defense of literature as fantasy, and the dynamics that propel text forward, both as writing and in its reactualisation as read. Sid Ali, object of his own desire, of the nation's adoration in his fantasized scenarios of fame and fortune, in the attention he pays to branding his body to meet the specifications of the publicity campaign, in the slogans and repeated verbal tics ("Tu l'as dis tu l'as") and capacity to triumph in any verbal contest with the final word and a winning smile, functions as an exemplar of the hyperseductive. As much a logo as a persona, his narcissism airbrushes the character into the position of the luxury product, most notably desired by the white French men he seduces in his episode working as a male prostitute. To the extent that Léger succeeds in positioning readers of *Ali le magnifique* as sharing in this desire, the novel is propelled by an anti-hero trajectory, a familiar dynamic where the man with whom we are asked to fall in love reveals himself as "a bad'un".

More than picking up his position as the desired object of the novel's readers, however, I'd like to conclude by asking what it would mean to read Sid Ali as the creature of his author's sexual and political fantasy, and how, through the perversion of Paul Smaïl, a queerer understanding of its relation to French national debates might emerge. If the bibliography included in his essays can be trusted, the Smaïl affair, far from Léger's first venture into

literary fraud, represents the author's fourth incarnation as signatory. Publishing under the names of Melmoth in 1969, Dahsiell Hedayat throughout the 1970s, and under his own name from 1973 onwards, the invention of Paul Smail follows on from earlier impersonations and an earlier scandal involving the 1982 text *Autoportrait d'un loup* which Léger signed as himself. In his later essays, Léger discusses critical reactions to this text in terms of ongoing French debates about private and public attitudes to homosexuality. In particular, Léger's evocation of his sexuality as private and masked, his defence of a life(style) characterised as "solitaire quoique solidaire, ni victime ni fier, mais libre, revendiquant non pas un droit à la différence mais à l'indifférence, le droit au loup, le droit de me masquer à demi" (*OEEL*, 177) positioned him as an enemy of "gay" and the more communitarian approaches to homosexuality espoused by authors such as Dominique Fernandez. Repeating the same anecdote in both *On en est là* and *A contre Coran*, each time in relation to the Smail controversy, Léger, through his refusal to buy into the American model of coming out with regard to his sexuality, makes a direct link between the capitulative tendencies of modern French thinkers when faced with forms of communitarianism (read "fascism") that dilute in any way the universal humanism underpinning the Republic. In a passage in the latter of these essays (*ACC*, 63-65) that typifies Léger's invective against the dangers of such free-thinking, wishy-washy liberalism, he conflates the critics of the Republican way with Nazism, capitalism and above all American influence in ghettoizing people according to sexual preference, and thereby diminishing their status as human beings first and foremost.

Returning to *Ali le magnifique*, it might be suggested that the precedent of Léger's brush with sexual politics provides further confirmation of the novel's place in the thick of the battle against dark identitarian forces. Insofar as Sid Ali's undecideable sexuality attributes a further fundamental French right to the immigrant character, he personifies once more the call for equality of opportunity (he too has the right to be closeted) that Léger claims to articulate on behalf of the Beur population. Yet, rather than deploying the sexuality of Sid Ali as a way of revisiting once more

the confusing nexus clouding the character's status as both exemplar and criminal monster, it is perhaps more interesting to think through Léger's desire for the seductive fantasy figure he creates, a desire that he mentions in passing towards the end of *On en est là*. Conjuring up the depressive, fevered state he was in during the writing of *Ali le magnifique*, following the death of his mother aboard a Eurostar train, Léger evokes the period in these terms:

les 53 jours et nuits qui me suffirent pour écrire *Ali le magnifique*, fiévreux, rieur, en sueur, sans parfois débander, au sens propre du mot, pendant des heures, pleurant, mais de bonheur, sur mon clavier, me relisant en chantant, me branlant dix, douze fois par jour, éteignant l'ordinateur à six heures du matin, le rallumant à sept, et puis ne l'éteignant pas du tout, et dormant, assis devant mon écran ... comme un navigateur solitaire en plein océan. (*OEEL*, 255)

The sense of unsatisfied, or deferred, desire that emerges from this description explains much of the characterization of Sid Ali, from his own performance of the dominating phallic deity he enacts to correspond to the desires of his white male clients, to his hyper-seductivene line in banter, and the novel's final episode of fantasy fulfillment when Sid Ali finds true love with Manuel in Lisbon – an episode to which Léger ascribes an autobiographical precedent in *On en est là* (254). Léger also hints in this later text that his energy was not expounded in vain, since he has recently struck up relations with a reader of the novel, a certain Moustafa, attracted, although perhaps in strictly literary terms, to the author of a book that he understands better than any critic, as an “aboutissement, à jamais remis mais qui finit par constituer le livre justement” and a work situated “entre celle de Léger et celle de Smaïl et au-delà” (*OEEL*, 269). This deferral of authorial desire, the lack of finitude and sense of the beyond detected by Moustafa, it might be argued, offer appropriate responses to the forewarning placed in the notice at the start of *Ali le magnifique*, the appeal to a readership mature enough to allow a literary creation

to go on and assume a life of its own independent of its creator – just as with any work of fiction. Equally, however, the mediated chain of desire that Moustafa's very presence incarnates offers a way of accounting for the need for impersonation at the heart of the novel and its relation to Léger's political agenda. Why does Léger need Smail, if not as a mechanism for deferring, perhaps disowning, his own desires, desires perhaps not avowed, or avowable as himself, desires – less for another man (for that as we know, is a private matter) – than for otherness itself, and for otherness to come into being, for another politics, another way of thinking France? And that desire, to come into being at all beneath the pen of a politically frustrated Léger, painted into the corner of his Republican beliefs, can only emerge as monstrous, disowned, distorted and perverse.

There is no need, his preface tells us, for authorial control. The invisible hand, he asserts, ought to remain invisible, for we should remember that “Les propos tenus en monologue intérieur par le misérable héros de ce roman sont d'un dément, d'un schizophrène, purement fictifs et parfaitement délirants [.. et ainsi de suite ...]” (*ALM*, 9). As Smail, Léger goes on to “decline all responsibility” for erroneous readings made of the novel “chez un lecteur lisant mal, malveillant, ou simplement distrait”, but trusts that there is no need him to deploy ostensible distancing techniques such as adding “*C'est un scélérat qui parle*” each time Sid Ali's monologues appear. But what if, at every turn, we do remember that a fabricated authorship has been transposed between ourselves, as readers, and the living person whose vision the text embodies? If Léger declines all responsibility by inventing a fictitious writer, deflecting his desire through the persona of Smail, might it not be justifiable to resuscitate a reading made pre-Léger, the Finnigan version if you will, in the light of the real author's dereliction of his duty. Leaving Léger aside, where his subterfuge positions him as ultimately wanting to be, the misogynistic descent into criminality is less an illustration of the dangers of identitarian attitudes to sexuality or ethnicity than a mark of the author's denial, his inability to own a vision of anything other, other than the Republic agenda to which his official texts are so firmly wedded.

Seduced by the recurrent smokescreen of the narrator's auto-asphyxiating inventiveness (Léger wants him dead), the wordy and masturbatory fantastic of Sid Ali's rapid self-projection into stardom and celebrity, product-ivity and logoiised legitimacy, might not the novel's readers be fated to fundamentally misread, mishandle, misrecognise – not the different Frenchness of Sid Ali (who is after all, and despite the preface's protestations, we are frequently reminded in the Bashung song's refrain "le roi des scélérats à qui sourit la vie") – but the French-but-different literariness of his invented creator? Both Smail and Sid Ali have the canon at their fingertips, dipping in imaginatively across the text's adventure. In a sense, it is both who speak, as author and narrator, the words which lead readers into the concluding "confessional" section, with a caveat that confession is not what they have most inherited from Christianity but the mysterious sense of "intranquillité" – "un sentiment ringard, craignos, out, cocol un sentiment qui ne fait pas les bon scores, ni les bons audimats, ni les performances de *La France qui gagne*, la France gagnouse de Chichi-le-Mac!" (532) Smail's is a literary performance which troubles our consciousness of what constitutes the dominant Republican frame of French identity, undoes our faith in brand France (La République) and indicates, no doubt to the horror of his real life creator, what it might mean to be branded new French in international contexts, and with anchorages in and allegiances to both France and somewhere else, and who, as much as literary predecessors such as Stendhal, Pascal, Proust, Rimbaud or Omar Kayan, requires a complexity of reading, attention to style (as opposed to fashion), equal to the task, able to respond to the epic romanesque vision of millennial France as both fiction and contemporary commentary.

C'était joué d'avance. C'était foutu. Un crime, vite, que je tombe au néant de par la loi humaine! Des crimes qui fassent <horreur à la France>! Des crimes qui ne soient <pas d'un Français>! (ALM, 534)

Perhaps the biggest hoax of all is the one that Léger's fabulation reveals despite himself, the mythical requirement still holding a

nation to ransom, the enforced impersonation of Frenchness at the root of Republican thinking and required of its aspirants. As, Sid Ali and Paul Smaïl (if never Jack-Alain Léger) demonstrate, the impersonation, performance and contemporary relevance of France necessarily escapes the control of those who seek to impose the belief that the full value of citizenship, and by extension humanity, can only be available to those who renounce a part of their identity, who conform exclusively to national scripts of ethical and ethnic similitude at the expense of those parts of their history, belonging and desiring, identifications whether inherited, socially inscribed or chosen, with cultures other than French, a France of difference, la difFrance.

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Notes

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² Paul Sma l, *Ali le magnifique* (Paris: Deno el "J'ai lu", 2001), 173.

³ Paul Sma l, *Vivre me tue* (Paris: Balland, 1997).

⁴ Jack-Alain L eger, *On en est l a "Roman (sorte de)"* (Paris: Deno el, 2003); *Tartuffe fait Ramadan* (Paris: Deno el, 2003); *A contre Coran* (Paris: Hors Commerce, 2004).

⁵ Yves Citton, "Cr eolitures et politiques mebraniques", *Multitudes* 22, Automne 2005, 203-11, 205. Citton advances a theory of reading as creolisation, in as much as "Toute lecture [...] institue un terrain unique de rencontre, d'interaction, d'interp en etration, d'inter-constitution entre un auteur, un oeuvre, un lecteur et un monde. Tous, ensemble, s'interpr ent: ils ne prennent sens qu'en se pr tant, qu'en s'insinuant, qu'en se Volant, qu'en se r appropriant des bout de signification que chacun ordonne   as fa on." Citton's procedure, in particular his advocacy of a "mebranic politics" (questioning borders, the production of the unpredictable, an ethics of caution and a political sense of the self as a filter or site of passage and resistance) have informed my reading of *Ali le magnifique*.

⁶ Ziad Elmarsafy, "'Hath not an Arab eyes?': Paul Sma l and the Conformist Inferno", *SubStance*, 30.3 (2001) 88-100 and online as <http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/substance/v030/30.3elmarsafy.htm>

1-2. Elmarsafy's analysis centres around this concept of "histrionic sensibility", which he traces to its original use by Francis Fergusson, and further development by Roger Shattuck.

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