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DRÔLE DE FÉLIX: A SEARCH FOR CULTURAL IDENTITY ON THE ROAD

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Abstract: With the emergence of *la culture beur* in the 1980s – and the birth of a new type of filmmaking influenced by postcolonial politics, world cinema, the new hood films of the African-American community and its hip hop culture – questions of identity, multiculturalism and being mixed-race came to the fore. Since then, many films have tackled the representation of France’s ethnic minorities onscreen and attempted to move towards representing the dream 2007 presidential candidate Ségolène Royal expressed of a ‘Mixed-Race France’. This article will explore representations of ethnicity, gender and sexuality in *Drôle de Félix/The Adventures of Felix* (1999), through the figure of Félix, a homosexual, mixed-race (French-North African) man searching for his absent father and his ‘true’ identity. The film focuses on the demystification of imperialist absolutes and divisions to reveal what lies between, in the interstices. Through its focus on transgressive identity it transforms traditional representations to explore what lies beyond. This article interrogates the representational schema of *Drôle de Félix*, by exploring the cinematic stereotypes and taboos challenged and maintained in the film in comparison to traditional *beur* cinema and established ideas of Maghrebi-French characters in French cinema.

Theorising the Film

The second feature film from white French directors Olivier Ducastel and Jacques Martineau takes as its protagonist, Félix (Sami Bouajila), a thirty-something homosexual man of European and North-African descent who lives in Dieppe with his partner Daniel (Pierre-Loup Rajot). The film’s narrative begins after his (white) mother’s death; while clearing out her home, Félix happens upon a Pandora’s box of letters from his absent (African) father in Marseilles. As in

many films, the interracial parents are an invisible presence, although his interracial (non-productiveⁱ) relationship is visually explicit.

As queer filmmakers, Martineau and Ducastel refuse to replicate a totalising, essentialising agenda of identity and do so by focusing on the demystification of certainties and divisions to reveal what lies between boundaries, in what Gloria Anzaldúa (1987) calls the borderlands. They use Félix as a hybrid figure to undermine established concepts of identity. This problematises issues of essence, purity and the 'real.' As Anzaldúa writes: 'the rational, ...patriarchal and ...heterosexual have held sway...for too long' (1992: 143).

As seen from their back catalogue, Martineau and Ducastel are interested in telling stories about the lived experience of homosexuality, AIDS, family and love. The directors reject the American template of showing non-white characters as one-dimensional. Instead *Drôle de Félix* is a well-rounded portrayal of a mixed-race character who, in French cinema, would usually be portrayed as an urbanite rather than a provincial, a *beur* rather than a Frenchman.

Beur is *verlan* [French ghetto slang which works by inverting words] for *Arabe* [Arab], and was originally coined and used in the 1980s as political self-identification by second-generation North African youths living in the ghettos of Paris, Marseilles, Grenoble and Lyons, before being subsumed into the French language (it has been listed in the dictionary since 1984). The rejection of *la culture beur* came about when it began to be used negatively within the dominant culture.ⁱⁱ Since then new identity descriptors have emerged: '*les rebeus*' (*verlan* for *beur*); 'Maghrebi-French'; 'French-Maghrebi'; 'Franco-Maghrebi' (usually used for people of mixed parentage); 'Maghrebis in France'. As Carrie Tarr notes, 'the difficulty of naming this section of the population is indicative of their ongoing problematic status within French culture' (2007: 32). Here I will use the term '*beur*' for its original political context as it remained popular at the time of the film, as a descriptor of both ethnicity and cinema.

Beur has often been used to classify *métissage* [mixed-race], that is, a plurality of ethnic and/or cultural identity. Thus whether we read Félix as a Frenchman, a *beur* (as the audience might) or as an assimilated agent (due to the way the film frames him as part of white society) he still represents a hyphenated-identity and mixed culture.

The term *beur* contains a series of dual oppositions reflecting a postcolonial, hybrid identity which in light of Félix's sexual positioning becomes even more transgressive. His duality is something which he seeks to resolve by finding his father, but as the film shows (and

in contrast to the American ‘tragic mulatto’ cinematic stereotypeⁱⁱⁱ), his cultural duality and adaptability is a strength rather than a weakness.

Having recently been made redundant, Félix decides to embark on an adventure. The film traces his journey from Dieppe to Marseilles as he hitchhikes across France in search of his father. The spectator is positioned to identify with Félix as the camera keeps him in the centre of the frame, drawing the spectator into the drama. His road trip is a metaphor for introspection, self-exploration and revelation – as the personal nature of the film’s title suggests. And, like Agnès Varda’s tale of a female nomad, *Vagabond* (France) from 1985, the film promotes freedom of movement and expression without essentialism or sentimentality. It could be compared to the road movie *Easy Rider* (Dennis Hopper, USA, 1969) for its representation of a subculture’s search for meaning and identity (through the masculine body), or indeed, Manuel Poirier’s 1997 film, *Western* (France). The exposition of Félix’s mixed-race experience of marginalisation and social exclusion reflects the thematic concerns of the genres that combine in *Drôle de Félix*: the melodrama, the road movie and the western.

In accordance with Robert Warshow’s (1970) theory of the western, Félix’s is an existential quest for and exploration of individual masculine identity, as seen in the violence he witnesses (the racially motivated murder which happens at the start of the film), his assumption of responsibility and his reunion with his ‘father’ at the end of the film. *Drôle de Félix* can also be read as a western in John Cawelti’s (1971) theoretical terms.^{iv} Through the repeated depiction of assaults on Félix, the film concentrates on the necessity of violence in society and questions the quintessential moment when a man should express or reject violence. Félix suppresses his desire to act and is silenced, not because of his sexuality (gay) or disease (he is HIV+) but because of his ethnicity (the impact of racism leads him to fear both the murderers and the police).

The film has much in common with a western due to its relation to historical and national motifs. His father lives in Marseilles and so is assumed to be of Maghrebi origin. Marseilles was a French frontier and gateway to the colonies: the trading port of the Empire responsible for modern France’s accumulation of wealth through slavery and plantations. Elizabeth Ezra notes: ‘The coordinates of imperial geography designate Marseille a colonial outpost’ (2000: 146). Today it is France’s largest commercial port and the point of entry for many immigrants, as well as being home to a large interracial and intercultural community.

Félix's white mother's home Dieppe was key to France's position in Europe, as the country's premier port in the 17th Century, the launching point for North American colonists heading to New France, and the traditional point of entry for immigrants from Britain. The two frontiers form a vertical line across France linking its African trade to its European power and its formation as a modern nation, as symbolised by bi-ethnic Félix.

Drôle de Félix looks at the ideological tension of France's self-view, depicting it as a Wild West garden rather than desert – Félix actively avoids the major cities – where the capitalist individual is re-rooted into community. In this Hobbesian 'state of nature' he blossoms into a better citizen and correct values are upheld because there is a personal link between man, environment and nation as separate from government (though the family is a microcosm of the state). He is conscientious even in non-conservative contexts, e.g. after outdoor sex, Félix is careful not to allow the used condom to litter the forest.

The people Félix meets are introduced and sectioned into separate but related stories by intertitles. This style offers us a serialised version of his life on the road, thus structuring the film like a journal, and placing it in the modern context of the melodrama (also known as the 'woman's film'), as mirrored by Félix's favourite TV soap opera *Luxure et volupté/Lap of Luxury*. Intertitles such as, 'My Little Brother', serve to classify his new friends as members of his new family. Following generic road movie conventions, the people Félix meets represent this imagined (white, largely feminine – as in most mixed-race films, father figures are absent) family. There is a cross section of social types represented, as the foreign is made familiar, showing the national identity of France as multiple rather than fixed, an effect of deterritorialisation and reterritorialisation.

Félix contradicts the idea that having territorial rather than pure blood rights to citizenship precludes one from fitting into a universalist paradigm of Frenchness. Félix is visibly different but identifies with white French society (the dominant norm), as seen through his relationships. Unlike the terms usually linked to *beur* – Islam, fundamentalist, illegal – he is resolutely French and ordinary. With TV being his only religion, he is a paradigm of secular France. The film thus supports the French Republican Model of a universalist and egalitarian state based on liberty and brotherhood.

Representing Félix: Mixed Frameworks

Unlike traditional *beur* cinema which uses gritty urban spaces as its locus of aggression and transgression for the children of the diaspora, *Drôle de Félix* uses regional France as its theatre of demonstration. Still, there are obvious influences. In *Drôle de Félix* certain *beur* cinema themes are used to explore race relations and identity politics in contemporary France, such as self imposed exile, unemployment, colonial history, delinquency, absent father figures, the search for belonging, integration, interracial sex, racial violence and victimisation by the police.

Félix could be described as one of the *beur-goisie* (those who don't experience same level of cultural exclusion and geographical immobility as others).^v Like the mixed protagonist of *Les Témoins/The Witnesses* (André Téchiné, France, 2007), Mehdi (also played by Sami Bouajila), he is mostly pictured against beautiful landscapes rather than tower blocks. He is limited by his 'race' but not condemned by it.

This changes in Rouen, where Félix observes a racially motivated murder. He is attacked and warned off going to the police: 'you haven't seen anything. No one will believe an Arab anyway'.^{vi} He decides to go to the local police station anyway but sees a brown handcuffed man being led away by an officer and flees the scene. The moment raises issues of institutional racism and evokes the tensions between immigrant communities and the police, as seen in French films such as: *Métisse/Mixed-Race* (Mathieu Kassovitz, 1993), *La Haine/Hate* (Kassovitz, 1995), *Les Trois frères/Three Brothers* (Didier Bourdon & Bernard Campan, 1995), *Chouchou* (Merzak Allouache, 2003) and *Wesh wesh, qu'est que ce qui se passe?/What's Going On?* (Rabah Ameur-Zaïmeche, 2002), to name but a few. Félix's fear of going to the police reinforces the idea that 'the law is white' (Wright 1947: 44). However, his fear is located in his colour rather than his class, in contrast to the working-class *beurs* of *Rai* (Thomas Gilou, France, 1995), *La Squale* (Fabrice Genestal, France, 2000) and other films set in the *banlieue* .

These issues are vocalised in the 'sister' chapter of the film, via a debate on how to negotiate pro- *Front National* (FN) towns. White 'sister' Isabelle (Ariane Ascaride) (whose children all have different fathers) and brown Félix represent polar positions. She wants to drive on through Orange, a town which in the film (as in real life) had recently elected an FN representative, and jokes: 'Scared of getting lynched, like in Rouen?'. Félix insists: 'They elected the extreme right. We're boycotting'.^{vii} He sings a song in her car about a woman who is hanged, recalling lynching. Félix himself is, as David Marriott puts it: 'both victim and spectator –

spectator as victim – of lynching in a racist culture’ (2000: 4). He highlights the reality of what Paul Tiyambe Zeleza calls the ‘fires of postcolonial fury... raging across France, in the suburbs – the *banlieues* – of post-industrial squalor and the national psyche of racial and religious intolerance’ (2005: 1), and the effect that this political dynamic has on individuals.

References to lynchings and boycotts recall the American civil rights movement. The racial tension reaches its climax when Félix is involved in a car crash, representing the social and psychological trauma of racism. When the cars collide the driver insults Isabelle and calls Félix ‘faggot’ when he tries to intervene. Eager to get to the real reason behind the man’s brutality Félix objects, ‘why not call me a dirty Arab?’, and is assaulted. Sexual and racial oppression are presented in parallel in this exposition of intolerance.

As Abbas Fahdel (1990) suggests, the *beur* filmmaking aesthetic is a stylistic representation of claustrophobic living conditions (which Félix experiences internally and externally following the murder), and the desire to escape. *Beur* films often consider the desires of migrant communities to return ‘home’, whether that is a real home or a nostalgic idea. In *Exils/Exiles* (Tony Gatlif, France, 2004), a road trip movie also concerning the search for roots, a young couple raised in France journey ‘home’ from Paris to Algeria. In *Drôle de Félix* the geopolitical psychology of return shifts from Algeria to Marseilles, signalling Félix’s mixed-*French* identity.^{viii} His ‘return to origins’ occurs in France because France is his home.^{ix}

Félix has an exile’s soul, but also harbours a sense of a split self (signifying the postcolonial/mixed identity) which motivates his desire to know his origins: to return to the source, the father. Like the film *Head On* (Fatih Akin, Germany/Turkey, 2004), *Drôle de Félix* could be classified as exilic filmmaking, which Hamid Naficy describes as a form where transnational experiences translate as cinema. The film rethinks national identities as fluid and changeable; here, the exile is also a citizen, the Dieppe man is also Arabic, the *beur* is also French. As Peter Bloom writes, the *beur* is a ‘transnational, hybrid identity’ (2006: 132).

The nomadic theories of Giles Deleuze and Pierre-Félix Guattari can be directly applied to Félix’s journey as he moves from event to event along his journey of irrational desire and revolutionises those with whom he has intimate contact. Rosa Braidotti (1994) describes the nomad as a situated, postmodern, culturally differentiated subject who empowers the idea of homelessness and non-belonging as a sense of freedom. Félix is a nomad, wandering without a sense of belonging, an exile by choice. Braidotti insists that the idea of exile, employed as a

generalised metaphor for female experience, can amount to ‘an evasive tactic.’ The term *keur* has become just as evasive and general. However, it is this exilic point of view, this migrant Franco-Maghrebi feminised perspective which Ducastel and Martineau use to see France from a distance, as objectively as possible. This style is very much grounded and, to use to Braidotti’s term, *situated* in Félix’s sense of pain and humiliation, of culture as both determinate and determining.

The cinematic frame becomes Félix’s and the spectator’s site of reflection. The use of long takes and wide shots show Félix dwarfed by the natural expanse as he dances his way across France, his Arabic songs (he also loves rave music) piercing the provincial air, suggesting a positive future, a new political landscape, a new France. *Drôle de Félix* espouses Ernest Renan’s claim that ‘a nation is a soul, a spiritual principle’ (1994: 17), by showing the collective will that goes above and beyond individual cultural, linguistic and religious identity as each character becomes a member of Félix’s national family.

Félix’s journey south is a search for the roots of his (primarily visual) difference, located in the father. He seeks to understand his mixed nature through the figure who initiated the miscegenation in the primal scene and then abandoned the family. Donna Haraway describes miscegenation as ‘the bloodsucking monster at the heart of racist and misogynistic terror... (it is still a national racist synonym for infection, counterfeit issue unfit to carry the name of the father, and a spoiled future)’ (1997: 258). From Haraway’s argument we can extrapolate a history of anti-miscegenation, which denied Félix the name of *his* father.^x The fact that his parents remained in secret contact (evidenced by the letters he finds hidden in his mother’s house), suggests that they might have been separated by social prejudice rather than personal choice.

Félix primarily identifies with a white French ethnicity. He is mirrored in a Freudian sense by his lover (whose appearance bookends the film and who no doubt replaces Félix’s dead white mother as his main source of identification and definition) and the family he creates who (with the exception of his ‘father’) are exclusively white. However, he is still perceived as an Arabic man by white French society. This dual identity results in the shattering of the non-white imago by the mirror of white society, an experience of which Frantz Fanon wrote: ‘I am over determined from without... Black magic, primitive mentality, animism, animal eroticism, it all floods over me’ (1986: 126). The postcolonial Frenchman is positioned as acting as a blank

canvas for the white hegemony to deface with abject stereotypes of Otherness. Félix's sense of self is so fractured by this insidious and overt denial and denigration of non-white selfhood that he eventually cries to his 'sister': 'Do I look like I'm from Normandy?... Do I look like I've done something wrong? Do I look like a thief?... Do I look like a murderer?'.^{xi}

As the represented, Félix may seem to be the catalyst for events, but he is constantly being acted upon rather than acting (as is common in marginalised characters), to quote Haraway: 'The represented is reduced to the permanent status of the recipient of action, never to be a co-actor in an articulated practice among unlike, but joined, social partners' (1992: 312). This reflects his social position as both citizen and outsider. He is denied agency and acted upon by attackers, policemen, journalists, his 'sister', 'grandmother', 'cousin' and 'little brother'.

Haraway asserts the need for the represented to articulate their position: 'The represented must be disengaged from surrounding and constituting discursive and non-discursive nexuses and relocated in the authorial domain of the representative' (1992: 312). The road trip on which Félix embarks helps him to gain the confidence to act rather than just react, and confirms his self-definition as a Normandy local rather than an Arabic alien, an assimilation which may be read as problematic but which also illuminates and deconstructs ideas of nation.

In *Drôle de Félix* the road trip is narratively utilised as a method of communicating the social injustices felt by France's outsiders – its ethnic Others. At the same time, this journey forges a path to unity between the mixed man and his multiple selves allowing him to embrace and be embraced by his multicultural kin. As Richard Wright observed on issues of 'race', kinship and the American nation in 1941: 'The common road of hope which we all traveled has brought us into a stronger kinship than any words, laws, or legal claims' (cited in West, 1993: 11).

Félix's identity co-emerges with his kin and is shaped by the situations he encounters. His cross-cultural perspective allows the audience to recognise the homologies of experience that unite him with those he meets. This reveals their similarities as 'social partners' despite their differences, as well as the constructedness of cultural codes. Thus the film rejects so-called certainties for interstices, abandoning both colourblindness and racism for the cultural richness of diversity and the acceptance of difference. In this way it uses Félix to tackle powerful issues of cultural identity.

Imaging Sexual and Franco-Maghrebi Positionalities

Félix is an object of scopophilic pleasure for the audience. As he walks, as he reclines, as he sits entranced by his favourite soap, his face or body fills the screen. This device brings us into his story intimately, yet as spectators we retain a detached view. Diegetic and extra-diegetic voyeurs are seduced by his image; in one scene, we – along with his ‘grandmother’ – watch him undress through the slit of a door and gaze on his nudity.

Félix’s position as an object of desire coupled with his position as an object of hate within a context of lynchings and racism reflects his duality as a mixed man and evokes the visual-historical links between lynching and scopophilia. In a discussion of lynching in America and the family photos that whites took at those scenes, Marriott comments on the ‘spectacular place of black men in white scopic pleasure’ (2000: 6). Fanon asks, furthermore: ‘Is the lynching of the Negro not a sexual revenge?’ (1986: 159). The threat that Félix poses to the symbolic order is exemplified in these scenes which posit him as a sexual being, a potential danger to white patriarchy.

The misogynistic, racist discourse Félix illuminates in others reflects the traditional ‘mirror of confusion’ established by a visual history in which only the shade or shadow of the mixed/black/Maghrebi figure appears as ‘an image of hate, a hated image. A phobic imago, to use Fanon’s terms’ (Marriott 2000: 12). As John Fiske observes, black characters (particularly women) in American cinema have historically been stereotyped as ‘savage, infantile... hypersexual, and thus as “the primitive”’ (1994: 46). Many French films continue to perpetuate stereotypes or make non-whites absent from the landscape. This is challenged here by making Félix the primary site of identification as an idealised, figure that the audience can relate to.

Drôle de Félix re-imagines mixed-race/Maghrebi masculinity as a fraternal image, a positive reflection of the white self. Félix is not imagined as a shadowy threat (as in *Caché/Hidden* (Michael Haneke, France, 2005)), but as a fully realised family member – his ‘grandmother’ asks him to live with her and like all his ‘family’ members, doesn’t want him to leave her.

As a film made by two white Frenchmen, *Drôle de Félix* does maintain certain stereotypes (for example, the promiscuity, isolation and primitivism of the black, Maghrebi, gay or mixed-race man); he is framed as a sexual object, in harmony with nature. The taboos he

breaks – fictional incest, infidelity, theft – also locate him as a non-white primitive in contrast to his French name Félix which underscores his whiteness.

Drôle de Félix presents, at its core, a loving interracial relationship, however, the familial style of its chapters means that new interracial sexual encounters recall incest, a common trope of abolitionist literature (abolitionists argued that slavery produced ‘shadow families’ – the secret children of slavemasters and slave women – who might later have sexual relations one of the official white family members not realising they were related).^{xii} In Chartres, Félix meets his ‘little brother’ – a teenager called Jules who tries to seduce him. Jules is in awe of Félix, who brings him to a gay nightclub and steals a car so they can run away. Félix wants to act as an older brother to Jules, but Jules wants to sleep with him. In Ardèche, Félix flies a kite with his ‘cousin’ – a stranger he meets on the road –and has sex with him in a forest. In Auvergne, his ‘grandmother’ Mathilde (played by former music-hall star Patachou) spies on him as he undresses. Interestingly, he is objectified by these voyeurs rather than being stereotyped as hyper-sexual (as is traditional for the non-white character^{xiii}). Félix, meanwhile, once denies his lover Daniel sex in favour of watching his favourite soap. Thus racial stereotypes are inverted as white sexual desire is matched with non-white ambivalence.

The depictions of love scenes in *Drôle de Félix* are daring as these are both interracial and homosexual liaisons. Interracial sex has often been dealt with in cinema as a heinous act, especially in America according to the censor restrictions of the Hays code. From *Birth of a Nation* (Griffith, USA, 1915) to *The Human Stain* (Benton, USA, 2003), mixed-race people like Félix have been misrepresented as symbols of contamination, corruption and shame. As Lola Young notes: ‘It was believed that interracial sexual activity would lead to social, moral and physiological decay’ (1996: 88). In French cinema, miscegenation often leads to trouble for the agents concerned and is framed as non-normative, anti-social behaviour. For example in *Mauvaise foi/The Wrong Time* (Zem, France/Belgium, 2006), the mixed-race (French-Jewish/Maghrebi) pregnancy is presented as a threat to personal and public identity that will create tragic nomads – children with no home who exist in between cultures. The same fears are expressed in *Métisse*, a film which depicts the mixed mother as promiscuous and irrational (she has a black and a white lover and doesn’t know which is the father of her child), frames the pregnancy as potentially fatal and identifies the newborn baby as somewhat alien (it is never shown and is described as ‘pink with green stars!’).

Until he achieves self-acceptance in the ‘sister’ chapter, Félix, like mixed transsexual Dil in *The Crying Game* (Neil Jordan, UK, 1992), is needy, dependant and confused. They are both fetishised as childlike creatures. Félix loves the world of make-believe and indulges his desires in soaps, kite flying and taking a yellow brick road to Marseilles. Even his family is a product of his imagination. He makes rash, spontaneous judgements which imply a degree of psychological immaturity; for example, in one comical scene he decides to steal a car not realising that there is a baby in the back seat. This escapism allows him to evade the realities of racism, homophobia and the questions of identity that he faces as a mixed-race man.

The film’s formal techniques normalise homosexuality and thus move the spectator away from productions of queerness as hidden and perverse, to a celebration of love in its many forms. The love scenes with Daniel are all shot in the bright colours of daylight and, like the rest of the film, mostly outside; the *mise en scène* expresses the open and harmonious nature of his sexuality through natural light and landscapes.^{xiv}

Félix is HIV+ but this, like his sexuality, is not used for dramatic narrative drive; the banal repetition of his morning ritual – he takes his medication while watching his favourite soap – de-dramatises the disease's presence. HIV is here another part of life rather than a signifier of fear, death and the abject (as it is in *Les Témoins* when it is shown ravaging Mehdi’s gay lover). Félix's dynamic enthusiasm for life is not daunted by anything other than hate crime.

The racial strife he experiences is externalised and shown on TV as the police appeal for witnesses. In this public discourse on private oppression, Félix follows the hunt for the murderers along with the rest of France. What he experienced in dark, contained, private spaces is given light and the voice of authority in the public sphere. This visualisation gives voice to the existence of racism just as the film gives voice to the Maghrebi-French community, and the universal search for one’s own distinct voice.

The speedy resolution of the racist murder points to France’s determination to crack down on such incidents. It alters Félix’s internal feeling of being stripped of his power and rights as a French citizen and pacified as an unimportant ethnic Other. It gives him a sense of hope for the future, and confidence in the possibility of a fairer society. It also forces him to interrogate his problematic position as a French man.

He relives and relieves the trauma through his ‘sister’ Isabelle. In her company he vents his unexpressed anger at the denial of self he has experienced through many of his interactions

with the white community. It is with her that he finds the strength to admit to being the missing murder witness and reassert his identity as a co-actor. The memory of the murder becomes a Lacanian trauma which allows him to break free of illusion and discover the truth of his own self, needs and family.

This trauma becomes the vehicle for Félix's liberation, as he learns to express his pain: 'I was scared of everyone... I couldn't imagine myself explaining to them that some guy hit me because I look like an Arab. I was ashamed'. His feelings are rooted in a system of racial discrimination common to France and America, where as Cornel West outlines: 'large numbers of citizens see peoples of color, not as fellow citizens, but as "throwaways" (Watts) as robotic aliens... or worse' (1993: 11).^{xv} As Catherine Wihtol de Wenden writes, tensions ran high in the ghettos of 1990s France, leading to a 'general feeling among these populations that they were helpless and unable to change or leave their environment' (2006: 50). Félix feels shame because he believes that the system does not respect or even include him.^{xvi} Yet, when justice is done, he comes to find a sense of belonging and inclusion. His identity crisis allows him to reach a greater acceptance of himself and his in-betweenness.

The revolutionary nomadism in Félix – his boundless desire for a new future – comes to a close when he meets his 'father' (Maurice Bénichou) in Marseilles, a contemplative man of Maghrebi heritage. His 'father' tells him: 'I like to fish... Instead of being trampled on, I fish'. This comment could be read as framing the 'father' as a fisherman, a figure linking him to God the Father (reinstating 'the name of the father' and visually recalling the historical Jesus as a brown-skinned man). If so, it posits Judeo-Christian imagery (France) against a backdrop of Islam (the Maghreb), reflecting the complexity of theology and its commonality across differently constructed religions. This possible reading of the scene is interesting because it illuminates the 'truth' of French culture, as a mix of vastly different cultures, as embodied by Félix.^{xvii} The 'father's' comment also suggests that, like Félix, his way of dealing with living in a racist society is to escape to nature and the imaginary. The two men chat as friends (although Félix lies on the ground making his seated 'father' the dominant figure).

The 'father' and the 'grandmother' are narratively linked as they both guide Félix away from his search for his father (this could also be read as assimilationist rhetoric; that Félix should not look to a culture/father other than France, affirming it as his home according to *droit du sol*). Instead of looking for his official origins, Félix builds a family based on empathy and

compassion and engages his ‘father’ in discussion with complicity and tenderness (just as he did his ‘grandmother’). Their conversation is suitably mysterious and unclear, pertaining to a mixed-race kind of resolution, that is, one that is ambiguous, both black *and* white.^{xviii}

Whether or not this man is his real father is as irrelevant as the authenticity of the ‘family’ he created: what matters is that Félix has found the wholeness of self and identity he was seeking through unpacking his dual ethnicity. As in most mixed films, the family is revealed to be a construct which, like gender or ‘race’, has to be acted out.^{xix} The national family is not based exclusively on biological or social criteria, but is a contingent social construct.

Drôle de Félix manages to combine individualism with nationalism, to represent the problems and positives at the heart of French society without recourse to polemical, hegemonic or revolutionary discourses. By the end of the film Félix has become an agent who demands the right to, as Miri Song (2003) put it, *choose* his ethnic identity, and construct his own idea of self.

Félix's transgressive identity transforms traditional representations of the *beur*, Maghrebi-French, mixed-race male or homosexual in French cinema. As protagonist, he directs the spectator's journey, personalises the drama of racism and becomes the author of his own representation, the mouthpiece of two directors making the doubly marginalised gay non-white man a visible and familial part of the cultural identity of modern France, showing that racial difference may be accepted without being stigmatised. Each (‘family’) vignette prepares the spectator for the meeting with ‘the father’, but the end of the film is marked by no such meeting. Narrative equilibrium is restored only when Daniel and Félix are reunited, forming another new version of the nuclear family.

The ideologies of hetero-normativity and racial homogeneity are thus disrupted from their positions as natural order. Instead Félix finds his own order, which, as Anzaldúa notes, is based on his mixed framework:

The mixture of bloods and affinities, rather than confusing or unbalancing me, has forced me to achieve a kind of equilibrium. Both cultures deny me a place in *their* universe. Between them and among others, I build my own universe...I belong to myself and not to any one people. I walk the tightrope with ease and grace. I span abysses (...) expert at the Balancing Act (...) we are the queer groups, the people that do not belong anywhere (...) [together we] can transform the planet (1992: 143).

From Anzaldúa's argument we can extrapolate the change that has occurred in Félix by the end of the film. As is traditional in road movies he has found a new 'family', a new idea of himself and a new pleasure in his independence. His search for identity has taken on an Anzaldúan shift by the film's end, as he realises that his exclusion from one group does not diminish his sense of belonging, selfhood or pride.

The 'family' he creates is a 'queer group', each of whom rejects social expectations: a single mother whose children each have a different father; a gay teen; an independent granny. It is a new type of family which embraces his mixed culture within a white French context and establishes a new form of national belonging and morality. Their liberal approaches and ideas transform society through Félix, who becomes an active and confident citizen. Through them and between them he does indeed build his own universe, where it is possible to be French, mixed, homosexual and in love with Maghrebi music, global rave culture and French soaps.

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Notes

ⁱ By this I mean that homosexual sex will not produce a child (although it is possible that they might adopt) and thus unlike interracial heterosexual reproductive sex it does not pose a threat to the status quo (see Mask 2004).

ⁱⁱ For more on this issue see Rossello, 1996.

ⁱⁱⁱ The 'tragic mulatto' is a stereotype based on the perceived nature of the mixed-race body; a body at war with itself. As its black and white elements conflict, this character is revealed to be tragic and doomed to failure, hence its popularity in the melodrama genre. The 'tragic mulatto/a' is a key element of American cinema and features as early as 1911. See Scott Giles, 1995; Bost, 2005; Beltràn and Fojas, 2008.

^{iv} The western in Cawelti's terms is a metaphor for expressing young working class male desire and its conflictual relationship with authoritarian corporate America. Warshow defines the western as a metaphor for the histories of civilisation, capitalism and individualism with regard to adult males. Both scholars locate the genre's central theme in the exploration of masculine identity and its relation to violence.

^v See the discussion of social mobility in Catherine Wihtol de Wenden, Rémy Leveau, *La Bourgeoisie: les trois âges de la vie associative issue de l'immigration*, Paris: CNRS Editions, 2001.

^{vi} The scene recalls images of Rodney King's attack where the 'brutality of the racial drama was a re-enactment of a multiplicity of brutalisations inaugurated by the ruling elite' (Robinson cited in Gooding-Williams 1993: 5) . In 1991, four Los Angeles police officers pulled over and brutally beat King (a black man, aged 26) with batons as he

lay on the ground by his car after he had allegedly resisted arrest. Their use of excessive force was recorded on videotape by a private bystander. Virtually all were acquitted. This sparked the L.A. riots of 1992.

^{vii} This is an extra-diegetic reference to the artistic boycotts which followed the pro-FN shift in southern French towns.

^{viii} As Will Higbee notes, Marseilles is a ‘miscegenated, multicultural space... an *espace métisse* [mixed-race space]’ (2001: 56).

^{ix} The postcolonial question of the identity of those with dual heritage is also a key element of *Wesh wesh...* In this film a Maghrebi-Frenchman returns to France following the state's imposition of the *double peine* (a criminal punishment involving prison and deportation) on him. Although he has grown up in France (the place he regards as his home), and found his time in the Maghreb nightmarish and alien, he is identified by the state as Maghrebi, not French. On his return as an illegal alien he jokes to his friend in desperation ‘where the hell’s home?’ echoing the popular feeling of nomadic homelessness as negative.

^x The severance from the name of the father described here can be applied to racial history. During slavery the practice of white on black rape was used to generate further slaves, hence the historical exclusion from paternity rights or religion for mixed slaves. This situation differed in certain contexts, e.g. under the Napoleonic Code, slaves in the French colony of Louisiana took their father’s status, thus mixed-race people were free and many were prosperous. The French colony of New Orleans was a unique space for mixed people due to the tradition of *plaçage* [placing], which legitimised sexual relations between white men and mixed-race women and was comparable to marriage both socially and legally. In addition, slavery was illegal on French soil and many slaves claimed their freedom through the courts upon arrival.

^{xi} This is interesting because in *The Siege* (Edwrd Zwick, USA, 1998) this is exactly what Sami Bouajila looks like – he plays Samir, a heterosexual Palestinian terrorist. He is again pictured naked – while his white American lover (an FBI spy) is clothed in the same scene – and objectified as something Other.

This comment can also be sourced back to the racist ideas which equate Arab with terrorist. This has a historical specificity for France given its troubled history in the Maghreb and the traumatic experience of the Algerian conflict which was not officially recognised as a war (rather than a series of illegal acts of terror on the colonial power and population) until 1999.

^{xii} This trope was common in early and silent cinema and is evident as a subtext or explicit narrative in many modern films – for the latter see Alan Parker’s 1987 (USA) film *Angel Heart*.

^{xiii} Other French films to represent non-white protagonists as excessively sexual (especially with whites) include: *Les Témoins*, where married Maghrebi-French Mehdi (Sami Bouajila) has unprotected sex with (white) men (thus threatening the health of Mehdi’s own white wife and unborn child); *Métisse/Café au lait* (Kassovitz, 1993), where mixed-race Lola and black-French Hubert are lovers, and both have white lovers; *Bye bye* (Dridi, 1995), where Sami Bouajila’s character Ismaël has an affair with a mixed-race woman who is the girlfriend of his (white) best friend.

^{xiv} See also *Chouchou!* (Allouache, France, 2003) which normalises the relationship between a transsexual Maghrebi man (played by mixed-race Franco-Maghrebi actor Gad Elmaleh) and his white male lover by presenting it as a traditional romance within the generic conventions of the romantic comedy.

^{xv} In February 2007 CRAN (Conseil Représentatif des Associations Noires) [The Representative Council of Black Associations] published the first French opinion poll on ‘race’ and found that 56% of mixed and black French people suffer racial discrimination in their everyday lives, while 37% believed that the level of racism had worsened in the last year. CRAN demand the institutionalisation of ethnicity statistics in order to deal with these problems. Their spokesperson Louis-Georges Tin claims that: ‘Being black [in France] is a social handicap’ (cited in Chrisafis, *The Guardian* newspaper, February 24th 2007).

^{xvi} This reflects the fact that many French non-white children of the empire remain foreigners within France. In 2008 President Sarkozy referred to this problem of postcolonial identity when discussing his plan to eradicate racism in France and regenerate the slums (the 16th renewal plan in 31 years) with new housing, education and jobs programs and tougher police enforcement. He announced: ‘We will no longer have young people who are foreigners in their own country’ (cited in *The Washington Post* February 9 2008).

^{xvii} The idea of a mixed French populus which celebrates *la plus grande France* (France and her colonies) has been popular in the past. Paul Broca (1864) endorsed procreation between black women and white men as he claimed their offspring would inherit more of the father’s racial superiority, thus elevating the perceived inferior races. His ideas championed integration but also inspired debates on the potential worth of hybrids, eugenics and racial engineering.

The 1937 World's Fair in Paris hosted a mixed-race beauty pageant called *Miss France d'Outre-Mer* [Miss Overseas France]. It was a beauty competition for the daughters of white French male colonials and colonised non-white women. As Ezra notes the politico-cultural framework of this fair, 'appeared to stress the assimilationist potential of the colonized' (2000: 16). It implied the idealisation of mixedness – this time on French soil – but only within a colonial context.

^{xviii} This could also be related to the idea expressed in the film that as an adult he no longer needs a father. A similar scene occurs in *Broken Flowers* (Jarmusch, USA/France, 2005), in which a father goes on a road trip to find the adult son he has never met. It is implied that the son is also travelling, looking for the father. In the final scene the older man thinks he has found his son but, as soon as he broaches the topic with him, the young man runs away, and the issue remains unresolved.

^{xix} For example, in *Made in America* (Benjamin, USA/France, 1993), a black teenage girl (conceived using a sperm-donor) decides to find her biological father and discovers that he is white. This is problematic for both parties but they overcome their differences to form a family (and he and her mother fall in love). This relationship is tested again when it turns out that, in fact, he is not her biological father. Yet, the family unit endures.

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