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DIAM'S: THE POLITICS OF AUTOBIOGRAPHY AND AVATARHOOD IN THE FRENCH REPUBLIC

TARYN MARCELINO¹

Abstract

Diam's is a French female rapper otherwise known as Mélanie Georgiades who was prominent in France's music scene from 1999 up until 2010 when she retreated to a small village in the French countryside. Her claim to fame was her anti-racist lyrics but what grabbed the media's attention was her reappearance in the public sphere wearing a veil. In this article, I trace her career from her lyrics, music videos, and finally to her autobiographies which she published during her retirement from music. By following her work, I analyze the avatars of Diam's and Mélanie to portray her journey from the persona of Diam's to the political stakes in writing about her faith in the autobiographies. I investigate whether Diam's, as the performer, and Mélanie as the author, question the complicated positionalities of women in France, particularly that of a Muslim woman. I argue that Diam's donning of the veil and her subsequent publications provide us with alternative avatars which disrupt French public space particularly in her insistence of French and Muslim as co-existing identities.

Key Words: Interiority, Geography, Black Feminism, Cultural Studies, Space, Autobiography, French Feminisms.

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Introduction

*"Ma France à moi ne vit pas dans l'mensonge
Avec le coeur et la rage, à la lumière, pas dans l'ombre"*

[My own France doesn't live in deceit

With heart and with rage, in the light and not in the shadows]

- "Ma France à Moi," Diam's¹

Mélanie Georgiades is a French female rapper otherwise known as Diam's. She was dominant in France's music scene starting in 1999, when she signed her first record deal, up until 2010, when she retreated to a small village in the French countryside, only emerging in the media a few times since then.² She has maintained a social media following where she updates followers on her nonprofit work and a limited view of her personal life, mainly focusing upon her travels and religious life. She chose the name Diam's, a nickname for diamond, because she says it described her personality as perfectly strong and clear.³

She won multiple awards during her rap career and was venerated by the media for escaping the *banlieues* [suburbs] to rise to stardom. What captured the public's attention was not only her disappearance from the music scene but her reappearance in the public sphere wearing a veil. This was in the midst of the increasingly restrictive hijab bans that were passed in France or as it is known, the *affaires des foulards*. After retiring from her music career, Mélanie Georgiades published two autobiographies that explained the state of her mental health while she was performing at the height of her celebrity, and her subsequent conversion to Islam that gave her the ability to be at peace with herself.

I utilize the concept of avatarhood from Uri McMillan's work, *Embodied Avatars*, in order to argue that Diam's/Mélanie are avatars that she developed in order to allow herself greater mobility within the French state as a Muslim woman and as a political figure that critiques the

¹ Translations are my own unless noted. Unknown Contributor, "Ma France à Moi," *Genius*. <https://genius.com/Diams-ma-france-a-moi-lyrics>.

² Mélanie Georgiades, *Mélanie, française et musulmane* (Paris: Don Quichotte, 2015), 43.

³ Mélanie Georgiades, *Diam's, autobiographie* (Paris: Points, 2013), 32.

state. I assert that her escape from the public eye of her rap career was not the end of her negotiations as an avatar, but that rather the autobiographical presence of Mélanie is a continuation of her avatarhood. It is another claim to avatarhood which allows her to maneuver the French State's interpellation of her body. As an avatar, she is allowed greater control over her body and image.

Diam's/Mélanie pushes the borders of national identity through her aesthetics, political stances, and her writing. In Uri McMillan's work, *Embodied Avatars: Genealogies of Black Feminist Art and Performance*, he moves to reveal how black performance art challenges assumptions of what can count as performance art, and focuses upon their archival traces. McMillan defines avatars as "alternate beings given human-like agency," which in his book, are like the second selves that the black female performers create, inhabit, and perform.⁴ The avatars produced by black performance artists exceed the boundaries of time itself and the limits of the archive, as they recur in the ebb and flow of time. Uri McMillan states that the efficacy of the avatars that he examines is the avatar's ability to comment back on identity itself and to inhabit social roles that distort its boundaries.⁵ Although she is a white "passing" figure, as a person of Cypriot origin, Diam's/Mélanie comment back on France's definition of citizen and complicates the racialization of the veil that occurs, even as France refuses to acknowledge race as a category. She subverts gender and spatial norms as Diam's in her aesthetic and the myth that she upholds of the *banlieusarde*. Diam's is an intriguing, salient figure to expose France's blind spots when it is confronted with the postcolonial subaltern subject.

I utilize McMillan's conception of avatarhood in the context of Diam's/Mélanie not to collapse Blackness with Otherness in the context of Europe but rather as a starting point to explore how the analytic of the avatar can provide new conceptualizations of racialized figures in France. This article traces Diam's/Mélanie's career from her musical career to her subsequent autobiographies. By tracing her career through cultural materials such as her songs, music videos, and autobiographies, I portray her journey from avatarhood in the persona of Diam's to the avatar, Mélanie, that she creates in her autobiographical writing about her faith. McMillan states that

⁴ Uri McMillan, *Embodied Avatars: Genealogies of Black Feminist Art and Performance* (New York: NYU Press, 2015), 12.

⁵ McMillan, *Embodied Avatars*, 12.

avatars act as mediums between the abstract and the real, and that these meanings continue to morph.⁶ This article traces how her avatars' meaning has changed throughout her career but continues to comment back on the limits of French identity and race. Diam's and Mélanie are activist personas even if she may not identify herself as a political figure. She is always performing for her fans. Mélanie Georgiades, as the performer and writer is always performing objecthood and subjecthood. She slips between the two categories and exerts a sense of agency in all her work, from her lyrics and music videos to her two autobiographies.

The concept of avatarhood is used in this case study not necessarily in a liberatory sense since at a certain point Mélanie Georgiades states that Diam's became a sort of oppressive figure that took over her life. Avatarhood is the mechanism through which Diam's/Mélanie is commenting back on her identities and distorts the boundaries of what can be defined as French and as Muslim, based on normative French conceptions of what Muslim people should embody. She is still an avatar as Mélanie the writer, as a French and Muslim woman.

The French state interpellates Diam's/Mélanie as an avatar in both phases, from rapper to recluse, after her conversion to the Islamic faith. Diam's could not exist anymore in the public sphere due to her mental health. She maneuvers in both instances as Diam's and Mélanie, both avatars disrupt and subvert French public space, in insisting on her presence as a female political rapper who made it in the music industry and as a French Muslim female writer who asserts that these can be co-existing identities. As the epigraph states, Mélanie Georgiades did not want to live in deceit anymore and wrote autobiographies to illuminate her struggles and the negotiations she had to make to survive. The avatars of Diam's and Mélanie provide us with an alternative narrative with which to question the French republic and which figures become celebrated by the State.

Background- Affaires des foulards

Diam's retired from her rap career after releasing her last album in 2009 due to mental health issues and sparked controversy when she was photographed in public with her veil. This image of a former music star sparked debates about the role of Islam in France and the long-standing hijab debate. The *affaires des foulards*, otherwise known as the "headscarf affairs" or "hijab ban," began

⁶ McMillan, 11.

in 1989 when three girls were suspended from their middle school in a suburb outside Paris by their principal, who claimed he was enforcing French secularism, or *laïcité*. The affaires des foulards culminated in an official ban on ostentatious religious symbols in public schools, enacted by former President Jacques Chirac in 2004. In practice, other religious symbols such as crosses were tolerated, highlighting the fact that the law was meant to mainly target young Muslim girls. The *hijab* ban was later followed by another restrictive ban in 2011, outlawing the *burqa* and *niqab* in all public spaces, further alienating Muslim women.

This debate is rooted in France's colonial history in Algeria, and the West's obsession with unveiling the Muslim woman, which includes the co-opted feminist imperative of the United States to save the "oppressed" Muslim woman in Afghanistan. This same rhetoric is present in the current debates regarding the use of the hijab and burqa in public space in France. This discourse is present in feminist organizations such as Ni Putes Ni Soumises, founded by Fadela Amara, whose purported central goal is for Muslim women to speak out against male violence, but in the same breath ask women to rid themselves of the hijab in order to practice a more enlightened Islam that blends more seamlessly with French secularism.⁷

Fadela Amara, founder of the organization *Ni Putes Ni Soumises* [NPNS], became a central figure in the political discourse of the *hijab* ban after she organized the "*marche des femmes des quartiers contre les ghettos et pour l'égalité*" [March of women from the suburbs against the ghettos and for equality]. It has been criticized for co-opting the struggle of women in the *quartiers* [neighborhoods], and their narratives of violence in order to serve NPNS' own political purposes which were said to have aligned with the French State's interests.⁸ In response to the criticism against NPNS, Amara published a book inspired by the name of her organization, titled *Breaking the Silence, French Women's Voices from the Ghetto*, in which she explains the motivations behind NPNS and their stances on political issues that concern the disenfranchised suburbs and housing projects of France. Amara claims to represent a more enlightened Islam, rather than the radical Islamism that she claims has spread like a cancer.⁹ For Amara, an enlightened Islam does not force

⁷ Fadela Amara and Sylvia Zappi, *Breaking the Silence: French Women's Voices from the Ghetto* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006), 100.

⁸ Bronwyn Winter, "Marianne Goes Multicultural: Ni Putes Ni Soumises and the Republicanisation of Ethnic Minority Women in France," *French History and Civilization* 2 (2009): 235.

⁹ BBC News, "French Minister Urges Burka Ban," BBC News, 15 Aug 2009, news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/8203290.stm.

the veil upon women and respects a version of Islam that is shaped by the French republic. She insists that “we must tell young women that they can be Muslims today without wearing the headscarf.”¹⁰

It is important to note that after the former President Nicolas Sarkozy was elected in 2007, he nominated Fadela Amara to Secretary of State for Urban Policy.¹¹ This was a telling choice, especially after the critiques of NPNS as being a recruitment ground for the *Parti Socialiste* (PS) [Party Socialist]. In Stéphanie Marteau’s article regarding NPNS, she analyzes the paradoxical movements of NPNS as they garnered more attention and support from the State, French public and news. Marteau explains that the organization’s discourse had changed very quickly from challenging institutions’ integration policies to then supporting the government’s repressive discourse.¹² The organization had become a peculiar ideological apparatus for the state.¹³ Diam’s also critiques NPNS stating that she has witnessed the change in discourse. Marteau explains that Diam’s was very quick to disassociate herself from the movement because she saw they were hurting neighborhoods, and saw their political aligning with the PS.¹⁴

Diam’s was outspoken about Fadela Amara, not just in the media but in her songs. At a performance for the NRJ Music awards, Diam’s changed lyrics to a song and said that Fadela resembled a witch.¹⁵ In response to this, Fadela Amara, during an episode of “*Politiquement parlant*,” stated that Diam’s was a danger to young women in the suburbs because she gives a negative image of a woman.¹⁶ Amara continues to say that she hopes that Diam’s will take off her veil. It is important to historically situate the political climate regarding the veil to explain why Diam’s encountered such media backlash for reappearing with the veil in public. The avatars of Diam’s/Mélanie helped her to negotiate this contentious political terrain throughout her career and after her retirement. In the next section, I discuss the role that the avatar Diam’s had in Georgiades

¹⁰ Fadela Amara and Sylvia Zappi, *Breaking the Silence*, 100.

¹¹ “Fadela Amara,” *Elle*, Nov. 29, 2020, <https://www.elle.fr/Personnalites/Fadela-Amara>.

¹² Stéphanie Marteau, “Ni Putes Ni Soumises : un appareil idéologique d’Etat,” *Mouvements*, Oct., 22, 2011, <https://mouvements.info/ni-putes-ni-soumises-un-appareil-ideologique-detat/>.

¹³ Marteau, “Ni Putes Ni Soumises : un appareil idéologique d’Etat.”

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ S.P., “Diam’s s’en prend violemment à Fadela Amara,” *Elle*, Jan., 25, 2010, <https://www.elle.fr/People/La-vie-des-people/News/Diam-s-s-en-prend-violemment-a-Fadela-Amara-1128094>.

¹⁶ Alexandra Hoffmann, “Fadela Amara versus Diam’s,” *Paris Match*, Jan., 04, 2010, Nov., 29, 2020, <https://www.parismatch.com/People/Fadela-Amara-versus-Diam-s-172175>.

life.

Avatarhood- Diam's

In her first autobiography, *Diam's, autobiographie*, Georgiades provides us with the origins of her music career, and how she became a successful rapper because of the environment she surrounded herself with during school. She adopted the persona of Diam's which quickly took over her whole personal life, that is to say, music became her whole life.¹⁷ The avatar of Diam's became a way for Georgiades to escape the troubles of her childhood, including the absence of her father. To be by herself without Diam's meant that she could only think of her discomfort, the lack of love in her life, therefore Diam's became a refuge for Georgiades.¹⁸ The drive to keep up the persona of Diam's as a refuge meant that there were no clear borders between Diam's and Mélanie. She states that the same girl suffered enormously.¹⁹ She demarcates a very clear line between her two mental states, and her two personas. In the autobiography, she describes that at the mental institution she resided in after her mental break, the psychologists were interrogating Mélanie.²⁰ She had no place on earth because Diam's had existed so brightly and so clearly in the world.²¹ At the mental institution, she had to ask herself what exists outside of her avatar, since she states that Diam's had invaded her world.²²

The avatars of Diam's/Mélanie help us to conceptualize her maneuverings in the French public sphere, as a figure thrown into politics through her lyrics, music videos, and autobiographies. At each stage, as Diam's or Mélanie, Georgiades is inherently politicized and placed within national debates about people of color in France. I argue that Diam's was racialized because of her *banlieusarde* persona even as a white passing figure and continued to be racialized when she converted to Islam and wore a veil. For example, Diam's claims the *banlieusarde* aesthetic and culture throughout her performances, even as the French State attempts to place her within an escape narrative. In *European Others*, Fatima El-Tayeb explains that the escape narrative genre exalts women who escape the "horrors of medieval Islam, crossing into enlightened Europe

¹⁷ Georgiades, *Diam's, autobiographie*, 64.

¹⁸ Ibid, 148.

¹⁹ Ibid, 77.

²⁰ Ibid, 139.

²¹ Ibid, 147.

²² Ibid, 120.

and, necessarily, burning all bridges behind them.”²³ Diam’s can be read as a figure that escaped the horrors of the banlieue but her aesthetic choices fight this narrative by bringing the banlieusarde culture with her even in her success.

Very conscious of this choice, Georgiades states in her autobiography, “*Je prenais conscience qu’en réalité on ne m’aimait pas pour ce que j’étais mais pour ce que je représentais : la réussite d’une jeune fille de banlieue. Dans mon ascension, j’avais apporté du rêve aux gens.*” [I am conscious that in reality, one doesn’t like me for who I am but for who I represent: the success of a young girl from the suburbs. In my rise, I brought dreams to people.]²⁴ She upholds the persona of the banlieusarde through her aesthetic, that of a true *garçon manqué* [tomboy]. She states that she developed a very strong character in her youth, decked out in basketball shoes, big puffy jackets, jogging pants, and a short haircut, a look very much characterized as *banlieue* street style. She said this tomboy look served to keep men away and to make herself invisible.²⁵ Georgiades explains that she intentionally cultivated the avatar of Diam’s to be a little *banlieusarde* at her very roots, a representative of the suburb culture.²⁶ She called Diam’s a princess of the *banlieue*.²⁷

Diam’s public life during her budding rap career and the scandal of her conversion to Islam, render her a controversial image in French media. Georgiades states in her autobiography that, “*Je ne suis pas un leader, je l’ai déjà écrit, mais j’accepte mon rôle de témoin : témoigner qu’en tant que française « de souche », comme on dit, je suis également une croyante musulmane*”²⁸ [I am not a leader, I have already written about that, but I accept my role as witness: to testify that as a French “native”, as one says, I am also a believing Muslim]. Georgiades’ usage of the term “native” is an interesting point for her to emphasize and identify with, and for her to recognize the power in identifying as indigenous French, especially as a child of immigrants from Cyprus, as the dominant rhetoric always frames migrants and immigrants as perpetually foreign, perpetually in movement, even after having spent generations in France. Therefore, her wearing the veil became

²³ Fatima El-Tayeb, *European Others: Queering Ethnicity in Postnational Europe* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011), 100.

²⁴ Georgiades, *Mélanie, française et musulmane*, 69.

²⁵ Georgiades, *Diam’s, autobiographie*, 31.

²⁶ *Ibid*, 68.

²⁷ *Ibid*, 70.

²⁸ Georgiades, *Mélanie, française et musulmane*, 147.

such a point of contention because she betrays this escape narrative fostered by the French State.

Mélanie Georgiades describes this avatar in her autobiography, *Diam's*, as a cultivation of her hip-hop persona.²⁹ Diam's was a persona that was also cultivated by her team and shaped by the public as well, as they responded enthusiastically to what she represented, the youth and the suburbs. Georgiades explained that as she became Diam's more and more, she lost more of herself, the person outside of her avatar. After each pass of the makeup that helped her to become Diam's for her shows, she would not recognize herself in the mirror. She started to become nothing else but her avatar.³⁰ She would not know if she was this avatar for others or for herself.

Diam's helps Georgiades maneuver the French public sphere as a girl from the banlieue who was able to achieve success and fame, as well as an audience, an avatar in which she could critique the state and its repressive white supremacist ideas of refugees and migrants. She took on the task of crafting a better image of the banlieue.³¹ I will describe the importance of Diam's as a political music figure and how she was able to negotiate the French hip-hop scene through avatarhood.

An Accidental Political Figure

Diam's became an accidental political figure, as described by Mélanie Georgiades, when in 2006 she came out with her album, "Dans Ma Bulle," and particularly with the song "Ma France à Moi." In Denis-Constant Martin's work, *Quand Le Rap Sort De La Bulle*, he places Diam's within the musical and political trajectories of France and analyzes her album "Dans Ma Bulle," to demonstrate why her album resonated with so many people in France, as evidenced by her record sales. This political sociological text is unique in the sense that it is one of the few scholarly works that takes into consideration Diam's as a figure separate from Mélanie Georgiades and her role in the political realm. He states that one aspect of her popularity can be attributed to her confessional style of rap that provided a more intimate feeling throughout her songs.³² Her command of youth vernacular and her identification with them, allowed youth to connect with her verses with a sense

²⁹ Georgiades, *Diam's, autobiographie*, 31.

³⁰ Ibid, 71.

³¹ Ibid, 77.

³² Denis-Constant Martin et al., *Quand Le Rap Sort de Sa Bulle* (Paris: IRMA, 2010), 87.

of comradeship. Through this language, she was able to communicate her politics that vehemently opposed the Front National in France, which is an increasingly popular Far-Right party, that has since rebranded as Le Rassemblement National.³³ Diam's communicated in her songs, her vision for the future of France and its youth in the *cités* [projects].³⁴

Martin states that Diam's music was not separate from the politics that her persona embodied.³⁵ Diam's embodied the banlieue in her performances and her music offered an avenue to speak about her politics, which Martin found typical in his analysis of rappers, who he states tend to reject the dominant political discourse to offer a different political and social ideology, which I assert calls for social justice, and recognition of the experience of people of color.³⁶

One of Diam's most popular songs was, "*Ma France à Moi*" [My Own France], which had an accompanying music video. The lyrics of the song are built upon Diam's vision of France, and what France meant to her, which was centered around the second-generation youth that grew up in the country. She characterizes France as a racist, anti-immigrant country that is inherently hypocritical. Diams' raps,

*Et qui prétend s'être fait baiser par l'arrivée des immigrés,
Celle qui pue le racisme mais qui fait semblant d'être ouverte,
Cette France hypocrite qui est peut-être sous ma fenêtre,
Celle qui pense que la police a toujours bien fait son travail*
Who pretends to have been screwed over when immigrants arrived
That one who stinks of racism but who pretends to be open-minded
This hypocritical France who may be right underneath my window
The one who thinks that the police always do a good job.³⁷

The music video that followed the release of "*Ma France à Moi*" [My Own France], is centered around a seemingly normal day in the life of a white French man played by Pascal

³³ "Marine Le Pen annonce que le Front national devient Rassemblement national," *Le Monde*, June 01, 2018, https://www.lemonde.fr/politique/article/2018/06/01/marine-le-pen-annonce-que-le-front-national-devient-rassemblement-national_5308450_823448.html.

³⁴ Martin et al., *Quand Le Rap Sort de Sa Bulle*, 107.

³⁵ *Ibid*, 61.

³⁶ *Ibid*, 87.

³⁷ Unknown Contributor, "Ma France à Moi," *Genius*. <https://genius.com/Diams-ma-france-a-moi-lyrics>.

Greggory. He wakes up hearing “*Ma France à Moi*” by Diam’s and is instantly infuriated because it is playing loudly outside his window, and in the headphones of a young black boy who he follows outside. He is so infuriated by the song that he grabs the headphones from the boy and violently stomps on them until they shatter. All throughout the video, he is surrounded by the sound of Diam’s, from youth singing the lyrics in the park, to a taxi driver playing the song on his radio. He portrays a violent white man that has no qualms about destroying property and being physically aggressive towards people of color. The climax of the video occurs in an electronics store whose multiple television screens are displaying Diam’s rapping the lyrics. She is portrayed with her iconic shaved head and feminine earrings. Enraged by seeing her image all around him, the white protagonist starts to throw television screens on the ground, but he cannot stop Diam’s from appearing, along with the many marginalized youth that also appear on the screens. His rage exhausts him and he gives into being surrounded by the images of French youth. The white male character is representative of the French state, as well as its provinces that feel left behind, and their rage at being surrounded by a seemingly rebellious population of youth. The French can no longer ignore the French-born youth that they still regard as internal Others.³⁸ This music video clearly is gazing back at the French State and is an explicit political move by Diam’s. Diam’s is claiming a space of living for marginalized youth in the suburbs.

Diam’s describes in her autobiography, a moment where she was watching a tv appearance of Marine Le Pen, daughter of Jean-Marie Le Pen, who was an instrumental figure of the Front National.³⁹ She describes the sensation of wanting to enter the TV screen and talk to her directly.⁴⁰ In the music video, she takes on this imagery by placing herself within the television and critiques the French state’s hypocrisies from that platform. She could only perform this placement as Diam’s, the avatar.

In the song, “Marine,” Diam’s directly identifies with other immigrant youth in France and sings to Marine Le Pen. She raps that Jean-Marie Le Pen wants war when the rest of France wants peace and that immigrants who have come from around the world are too much to bear for Marine

³⁸ See Fatima El-Tayeb’s discussion on queering ethnicity on page xxxi, in her text *European Others*, for an extended analysis of second-generation youth in Europe.

³⁹ Associated Press in Paris, “Marine Le Pen rebrands Front National in push for support,” *The Guardian*, June 1, 2018, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/jun/01/marine-le-pen-rebrands-front-national-in-push-for-support>.

⁴⁰ Georgiades, *Diam’s, autobiographie*, 82.

Le Pen. Diam's identifies with immigrant youth in France in the song and advocates for a different future for them and for France. Diam's, the avatar, allowed Georgiades to speak freely and critique the French state, while providing a voice for French youth who shared her vision of a different France.

Diam's *banlieusarde* appearance and effect on stage veers away from the conventional orderings of sex, and gender norms. As El-Tayeb explains, artistic forms like Euro hip-hop, spoken word and performance art "represent a fusion that resonates with the attempt to 'queer' ethnicity, since its most significant characteristic is the use of the performative nature of popular culture to emphasize the performative, constructed nature of tacit social, racial, and cultural assignments."⁴¹ In this sense, Diam's as an avatar subverts notions of ethnicity and French identity as well. Even though she is retired, Diam's still has a cultural presence and a place in French hip-hop history, with her image and songs reverberating through the ebb and flow of banlieue culture. Diam's exceeds the boundaries of time itself as a powerful avatar. After her conversion, Mélanie's slippages through time and space counter normative notions of Muslim women, especially in Europe where they are seen as forever stuck in a particular time and space that is inherently incompatible with the West. Mélanie's white passing appearance is racialized in France because of the veil. Mélanie disrupts this static image of a Muslim woman that France has emplaced on brown women.

Avatarhood- Mélanie

In her latest autobiography, Mélanie explores moments of her childhood and her career as factors that culminated in her retirement. She ruminates upon her mental state during her career and contrasts that with her mental state when she found Islam. With finding Islam, she was able to access the power of her interiority and was able to heal through introspection and prayer.

Not much has been published about Mélanie Georgiades after her retirement from performing as Diam's, except for public sightings with a veil that have garnered national attention in the media. In this section of the article, I explore the productive nature of claiming avatarhood after Diam's retirement, as Mélanie. Mélanie, the writer and the avatar, is a completely different

⁴¹ El-Tayeb, *European Others*, xx.

persona from that of Diam's and is cultivated in her two autobiographies. I look to what happened after Diam's escaped the spotlight and investigate the role of autobiography and the power of Mélanie Georgiade's interiority. In her insistence of Muslim and French as two co-existing identities, Mélanie subverts ethnic and racial norms, especially in the context of the republic, as all other identities are subsumed under being French, therefore it is a powerful statement just to say that these two identities can be claimed together.

Not all reactions to Diam's have been positive, particularly after the publication of her autobiographies. For example, the French-Tunisian journalist Fawzia Zouari wrote a pamphlet publication titled, "*Je ne suis pas Diam's*" [I am not Diam's], that explained how Diam's veil was a symbol of subjection which should not be tolerated in a country that recognizes the rights of man. Zouari, following the logic of Fadela Amara, states that the veil of Diam's condones the jihadist discourses that inherently deny women their right to exist. Zouari insists that one cannot be Muslim, feminist, veiled and modern, and that Islam as well as its veil poses problems in France because it invites Muslims to escape the communitarianism of the Republic.⁴² This view is certainly the dominant view in France which leaves texts like Diam's autobiographies as important interventions.

McMillan proposes that forms of subjectivity and agency are always present in the performances of objecthood that he traces throughout his work.⁴³ He asserts objecthood and avatar production as a powerful framework in which to think through art, performance, black embodiment and as a way to view performers who slipped between objecthood and subjecthood. In the slippages of Diam's/Mélanie's performance, we can explore the borders she creates between avatar and human.

I engage with black feminist frameworks in my discussion of Diam's/Mélanie not to collapse the categories of blackness with Otherness as framed in France's racial hierarchies, since Diam's is a white passing figure, but to build upon and engage with the scholarship that already exists at this intersection to rethink and reframe race in Europe in generative ways. If we analyze

⁴² Nadia Lamlili, "Livres: «Je Ne Suis Pas Diam's»,» jeuneafrique. October 30, 2015, <https://www.jeuneafrique.com/mag/274208/culture/livres-je-ne-suis-pas-diams/>.

⁴³ McMillan, *Embodied Avatars*, 9.

public figures like Diam's through a black feminist lens, I argue that we can have generative conversations about the intersections of race and religion in France. Scholars like Fatima El-Tayeb are using black feminist scholarship to analyze race in Europe, and this body of scholarship is an important foundation from which to think through the slipperiness of figures like Diam's, within the continuously damaging narratives of racism towards veiled women in French discourse. Even with Diam's as a white "passing" person in Europe, the veil racializes her as Muslim, which is a specific image in the European context.

Diam's music and politics oppose the ever-present escape narrative genre that perpetuates the Clash of Civilizations rhetoric in Europe, and in the greater "Western" world. This escape narrative purported by public figures like Fadela Amara oppose Diam's veil as a symbol of backwardness. The French state insists that French and Muslim are identities that cannot co-exist within the Republic. The dominance of this view in France renders the avatar of Mélanie an important intervention in the political performance of everyday life. For Mélanie Georgiades, being French and Muslim is not a contradiction.

In a recent article in *Paulette Magazine*, Mélanie engages in a dialogue with her former avatar Diam's. It is a unique take on interrogating her past decisions as Diam's and how it compares with her present life as a more reclusive person who has devoted their life to family, faith and philanthropy. The author introduces the pair of avatars and remarks that Diam's is the personality that marked a generation, she makes a choice at the height of her celebrity to stop it all and to give sense to her life via spirituality.⁴⁴

As seen in this exchange in *Paulette Magazine* and her latest autobiography, Mélanie carefully articulates her faith and identity as a French person and how her aesthetic choices after conversion, donning of the veil, was a clear demarcation from her life as Diam's and as she found out quickly and publicly in the media, that this was a transgression of French cultural norms of celebrity. Mélanie explains that faith destabilizes our prejudices and makes us question our origins.⁴⁵ This image of Diam's was a destabilizing moment for France. After paparazzi circulated

⁴⁴ Team Paulette, "Il Était Une Foi... Diam's," *Paulette Magazine*, July 22, 2019, <https://www.paulette-magazine.com/il-etait-une-foi-diams-2/>.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

an image of Mélanie with the veil in French media, all the negative clichés of Islam were attributed to her. She instantly became named a danger to the whole generation of youth who she had previously influenced in a positive manner.⁴⁶

To this day, she is still embodying the avatar of Mélanie in her social media presence. She thanks her followers for their kindness, and for those that understood her journey to faith, and took the time to read her autobiographies. On her Instagram, she promotes her nonprofit, Big Up Project, which aims to improve the daily quality of life for children in Africa. She also streams live occasionally, showing her travels and reposting posts about her books and products. She does not communicate outside of written word, and never talks during her live streams. But her fans till this day clamor to hear a word from her, something to confirm that she is still with them. I contend that this persona, Mélanie, is distinct from Diam's and Mélanie Georgiades. Mélanie still understands the circulation of images and the importance of cultivating a particular persona, now in the service of her nonprofit and her real-life identity as a Muslim woman.

Mélanie was able to speak her truth through writing which is in direct contrast to how she became famous, which was through her aural performances. Her choice to communicate through writing is a deliberate choice and a distinction from her avatar of Diam's. Her media silence was an escape from the paparazzi that reminded her of the fame that made her unhappy. Her geographic escape to a more rural area of France coincides with her being able to control her own narrative outside of fame's spotlight.

Mélanie has the ability to comment back on the assumed identity of a veiled Muslim women in French society as an avatar and inhabits a certain social role that distorts the boundaries placed upon her. She represents an important facet of avatar production within the French hip-hop scene, an avatar who shows different alternatives of what activism can look like, through visual culture and through reflections on her interiority.

There are important political stakes in analyzing Diam's avatarhood, past the trite narratives of veiled women, who are normally framed as victim or out of "Western" time and place of the nation. Diam's as an avatar subverts sex and gender norms in her encapsulation of the

⁴⁶ Georgiades, *Diam's, autobiographie*, 305.

banlieusarde persona and aesthetic, which is normally attributed to Arab and Black men. Diam's as an avatar moves about in space and time, and the key to understanding her cultural power can be found in the implications of her movement and the productive nature of her writing from a space of reclusivity. Mélanie Georgiades, uses the retreat from the logics of visualization, and uses her existing landscapes to name the complicated positionalities of women, particularly that of a Muslim woman in France. Mélanie, the avatar, creates a disruption of French space by her insistence that French and Muslim can be co-existing identities.

I focus on Diam's not only because she was one of the most successful female French rappers in a musical genre dominated by men, but because of the interventions she makes within French political space. She is an artist that fans ask to come back constantly, for her politics and for the beauty of her lyrics. I argue that the figure of Diam's can be used to understand the intersection of race and gender in the current landscape of France which has not only become more legislatively restrictive in regard to the hijab and other veiling, but also fraught with tension from the refugee crisis, all coming to a head in the seemingly recent rise of white supremacy that has been an underlying grammar of discourse. Even in the title of the book, *Mélanie, française et musulmane* [Mélanie, French and Muslim], Georgiades is presenting a political stance and emphasizes that there is no contradiction or incompatibility with these two terms.⁴⁷ Mélanie creates an alternative formulation of agency and comments back on the assumed identity of a veiled Muslim women in French society. Diam's/Mélanie inhabits this objecthood to distort and shift the boundaries placed upon her.

Understanding Diam's as a figure, not within a multicultural narrative but as a political actor in her writing and performances, can advance critical dialogues on gender and performance. Her persona is actively against the intolerant State and the larger global grammar of white supremacy. The scholarship about Diam's has only focused on her career and her politics during that time, but not much scholarship has been dedicated to Mélanie Georgiades in her retirement and after her conversion to Islam. There is potential to understanding her transition to Islam and the power in the interiority of her autobiographies to uplift other voices and forms of activism.

⁴⁷ Georgiades, *Mélanie, française et musulmane*, 6.

Georgiades does not fall easily into any dominant narrative. The productiveness of Diam's/Mélanie is that they show us different alternatives to what activism can look like, through visual culture and through autobiography. Even though she is retired, Diam's still has a cultural presence and a place in French hip-hop history. The subversive avatars of Diam's/Mélanie broke through the French state's narratives while she was rapping for millions and is still fighting for a different narrative today.

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