

# Serious Laughs: Blackness, Humour and Social Media in Contemporary France

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**Abstract** This chapter analyses the emergence of a generation of influential black French humourists through YouTube, Instagram and other social media platforms, and connects it to the history of minority humour in France. The work of the new generation differs from the sketches of early comedians because of the specific opportunities and constraints that social media offer. Thanks to new media technologies, these comedians' work addresses both African diasporas within France and audiences in African and Caribbean countries connected to France by the legacies of the colonial experience. It thus has repercussions both within and beyond the nation.

**Keywords** Black comedians. Humour. Social media. Politics. Postcolonial France.

**Summary** 1 Introduction. – 2 Three Generations of Black Humourists in France. – 3 Humour and Politics. – 4 Self-Irony and Diasporic Connections. – 5 Black Public Spheres and the Commodification of Race on Social Media.

## 1 Introduction

As most European former colonial powers, France entertains a complex relationship with the colonial past and its legacies on contemporary politics and culture (Forsdick, Murphy 2003; Borrel et al. 2021). Since at least the 1980s and the emergence of the first significant mobilizations against racism and discrimination (such as the 1981 Lyon riots), debates about the need to reshape the country's relationship with its former African colonies, about the memory of the Algeria

war, or about the tensions between universalist and multiculturalist models have cyclically come to the centre of the national debate, on the media as much as in the academia (Wieviorka 1996; Stam, Shohat 2012; Keaton, Sharpley-Whiting, Stovall 2012). Within this context, minorities' demand for stronger political and cultural recognition has often been met with hostility, and described (misleadingly) as an attempt to undermine the Republican principle of 'égalité' by promoting 'diversity'. Under the ongoing tenure of Emmanuelle Macron as president, these issues have once again come to the fore, as a result, on the one hand, of the presidential intention to reshape the debate through a series of highly symbolic acts including the commissioning of a report on the memory of the Algerian war (Stora 2021), on the issue of the restitution of African artworks (Sarr, Savoy 2018) and on the future of France-Africa relations (Mbembe 2021); and on the other hand, as a consequence of the steady increase of the influence of far-right parties such as *Rassemblement National* (led by Marine Le Pen) and *Reconquête* (led by controversial journalist Éric Zemmour) on the French political debate.

Within this framework, screen media<sup>1</sup> have played an important role in shaping public perceptions about racial, cultural and religious diversity in the country. As much research has shown, the presence of minorities on French screens has been marginal until recently (Rigoni 2007; Knox 2016), and existing representations are often perceived as discriminating by members of the minorities themselves (Malonga 2007; Mattelart 2017). Within this context, if people of North African descent have been given some space on French screens since the 1980s (Heargraves 1993), more marginal and controversial has been the place of black minorities (Jedlowski, forthcoming). Following a trend similar to the one that is possible to observe in relation to the American and British contexts (Saha 2018), research about Blackness on French screens focused mostly on content analysis (Rebillard, Noûs 2020), marginalizing the interest for other equally important approaches, such as the analysis of minority groups' modes of media reception, and the study of the place of these same groups in the processes of media production. Within this context, particularly notable is the absence of research on the growing phenomenon of black YouTubers and social media influencers that emerged over the past few years, opening up a new space for the representation of Blackness on French (small and super small) screens.

If the screen time for members of black French minorities began to increase in the mid-2000s (Malonga 2007; Macé 2007), partly as

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**1** When I use this term, I refer to all media produced for or distributed via the screen, including media distributed via the cinema, the television, the computer and the small screen devices of mobile phones.

an institutional response to the social fracture highlighted by the 2005 banlieue riots (Tshimanga, Gondola, Bloom 2009), the emergence of new media platforms changed the rules of the game. As a matter of fact,

web distribution allows producers to connect with viewers directly, without network distributors who shape and select narratives to appeal to broader audiences, conform to established formulas, and satisfy advertisers. (Day, Christian 2017, 4)

This allowed minority media producers to find new avenues for the production and circulation of their work beyond the hostile environment of (mostly white) legacy media production networks, and to constitute new, transversal audiences, beyond the narrow frontiers of the French nation. If interesting forms of alternative citizen media have emerged as a result of this process (Baker, Blaagaard 2016), more and more members of minority groups “are turning into professional [online] content creators” (Hou 2019, 535), positioning themselves at the crossroad between cyber-activism and digital entrepreneurship. Within a context marked by the expansion and increasing diversification of social media platforms, from YouTube to Instagram, from Twitter to TikTok and Facebook, the politically active members of black minorities (in France as elsewhere) go online not only to express political opinions but also to achieve visibility and develop new economic opportunities based on the commodification of Blackness and dissent.

Building on existing studies about this rapidly evolving landscape, in this essay I will investigate the emergence of alternative postcolonial public spaces and transversal black constituencies triggered by the multiplication of online screen media content produced by members of black French minorities. In particular, I will focus on the emergence of a new generation of influential black comedians who use YouTube and other social media platforms as key instruments for the promotion of their career. I will focus more closely on the work of a small number of them, including Christian Nsankete (Dycosh), Fadily Camara, and Jean-Claude Muaka (one of the comedians who emerged from the experience of the Black Power Comedy collective).

As I will discuss in the first part of this text, the work of these comedians needs to be read in relation to the longer history of minority humor in France, which opened up the space for the emergence of a new kind of humor based on self-reflexive accounts of the experience of being part of a racialized minority in France, geared toward the critique of French Republican universalism and its inability to address racial discrimination meaningfully (Quemener 2013; Vigouroux 2015). As I will argue, the work of early black French comedians differs from the experience of the new generation, for the lat-

ter's success is closely connected to the specific opportunities and constraints that social media offer. In this sense, the study of the political content of the sketches and caricatures produced by the new generation, which I will analyse in the second and third parts of this text, cannot be dissociated from a critical understanding of the economic and technological specificities of celebrity and fandom on social media platforms (Hou 2019; Abidin 2021). As I will highlight in the final section of this essay, the combined analysis of these two different but intertwined dimensions opens up the possibility to describe the specificities of the alternative postcolonial publics that the work of these comedians is constituting. These comedians' work addresses both African diasporas within France and audiences in African and Caribbean countries connected to France by the cultural, linguistic and political legacies of the colonial experience. It thus has repercussions both within and beyond the nation, highlighting "the challenges faced by citizens and states in the present era of technology and mobility" (Bernal 2014, 12).

## 2 Three Generations of Black Humorists in France

Because of the little space that was granted to minorities on French screens, early comedians had to find alternative avenues of expression. One of the most important of them, throughout the 1980s, was the (almost underground) scene of the Parisian *cafés-théâtre*, where a first generation of minority humorists emerged. Following a system that recalls the experience of African American comedians in the 1960s and 1970s, these early comedians adopted and reversed the stereotypes used against minorities, mobilizing them "as a means of revenge against their more powerful detractors" (Boskins, Dorinson 1985), as well as a strategy to regain control of the representation of their social group and fight against existing mechanisms of social exclusion (Quemener 2013, 2; see also Weaver 2010). According to Nelly Quemener, despite its marginality in the wider landscape of French culture at the time, the work of this first generation paved the way for the emergence, in the following years, of more politically explicit humorists, such as Jamel Debbouze and Omar Sy (both from the suburban city of Trappes, in the Paris region), who came to the lime-light thanks to a short TV program aired in the late 1990s on Canal Plus, *Le cinéma de Jamel*.

Jamel Debbouze in particular played a central role in creating new avenues for the expression of minorities on French screens throughout the 2000s. The star status he acquired thanks to the participations to a few widely popular films in the early 2000s (in films such as *Le Fabuleux Destin d'Amélie Poulin*, 2001; *Astérix et Obélix, Mission Cléopâtre*, 2002; *Indigènes*, 2006) granted him the possibility to

develop his own TV show, *The Jamel Comedy Club* (JCC). Broadcasted intermittently on Canal Plus between 2006 and 2016, the show was constructed as a talent factory, where young and upcoming minority comedians who had begun to emerge in the underground scenes of small Parisian cafés-théâtre could come and express themselves. From 2008, the show, which participated in propelling a new generation of young black talents, including Thomas N’Gijol, Fabrice Eboué, Claudia Tagbo and Patson, began to be associated to a physical place, the Comedy Club, a medium-size theatre of 120 seats, opened by Debbouze himself in an old cinema hall, close to Place de la République, in central Paris. The creation of this place played an incontestably important role in pushing this generation to become collectively aware of the political relevance of its work in relation to the long-term historical experiences of minorities in France. As Debbouze underscored, “they (the French) asked our great grandparents to defend France, our grandparents to reconstruct it, our parents to clean it and we will try to narrate it” (quoted in Vigouroux 2015, 251).

The second generation of comedians that constituted itself around Debbouze discursively described its work as stand-up comedy, claiming a connection to the American cultural scene, and particularly to the tradition of African American actors and stand-up comedians (such as Richard Prior, Redd Foxx, and Eddy Murphy). As noted by Cécile Vigouroux,

the evocation of a genre also pertains to issues of *identity* and *power*, as it asserts the performer’s authority to decontextualize discourse and recontextualize it in another setting and to another audience. In the sociopolitical context of France, [...] performers of North and sub-Saharan descent use stand-up comedy as a forum to make their way of being French *heard* (both literally and figuratively) and, more importantly, to take an active part in creating a new narrative of the *here-and-now* France. (Vigouroux 2015, 245; italics in the original)

Within this context, the reference to African American actors gave this generation the opportunity to identify with positive black icons (which were lacking in the French television and theatre landscapes) and to express their criticism against the politics of minority representation in the Hexagon. As this example shows, African American popular culture played and still plays an important role in influencing black French humorists. However, black popular culture and political activism in France developed according to their own specific trajectories and temporalities, which at times converged and at times diverged from what took place on the other side of the Atlantic. We should thus refrain from suggesting any linear connection (Ndiaye 2008).

Whatever the influence of African American stand-up comedy on this phenomenon, Debbouze and the JCC gave visibility to this generation of comedians, opening up the doors of a successful career in theatre and TV shows for many of them over the following years. Their reputation was already established when, in the late 2000s, social media became mainstream. If the use of these platforms was marginal in their work, though, it became essential for the aspirations of what can be defined as the third generation of minority humorists that emerged throughout the 2010s. This generation, which is the object of my research, was strongly influenced by the work of Jamel Debbouze and the group of comedians who coalesced around him, but it equally had to elaborate new strategies to differentiate itself from the predecessors, in a context of growing saturation of the (relatively small) segment of the French entertainment market dedicated to minority comedians, and within a sector mostly run by 'white-owned' enterprises targeting mostly white French audiences. Social media became here a fundamental tool for newcomers to establish their reputation, before eventually entering the more formal circuits of live and television shows. Social media, with their constraints, their potentialities, and their specific ways of addressing and constituting new publics, should thus be considered the key feature that differentiates the third generation from its predecessors. Before investigating these specificities, it is important to better identify the comedians this research focuses on, and the content of their shows. As mentioned in the introduction, I decided to focus on three comedians in particular: Christian Nsankete (Dycosh), Fadily Camara, and Jean-Claude Muaka. This selection has been driven by their popularity, but also by the interest that their different approach to the use of social media presents for the analysis conducted here.

Dycosh is the most popular on social networks among the three comedians selected for this study, and the one who made YouTube the centre of his communication strategy since the beginning of his career. In February 2022 (at time of writing), his YouTube channel, DycoshTV, had 262,000 subscribers, and his Facebook page more than 435,000 followers.<sup>2</sup> As he explains in interviews, when at the beginning of his career he tried to obtain film and theatre roles participating to several auditions, he was deceived by the stereotypical roles that were offered to black actors. He then tried to achieve visibility by participating in open mike stand-up comedy shows in small venues around Paris, without much success. It is only when he began to

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<sup>2</sup> From now on, all data about subscriptions to the comedians' social media profiles refers to data available at the time of writing, in February 2022.

make YouTube videos in 2014 that his career really took off.<sup>3</sup> YouTube never became his main source of income (even if the high number of subscribers to his channel does guarantee some revenues), but it is thanks to his social media presence that he managed to attract the interest of key stakeholders in the industry, who gave him the opportunity to tour France with his live show, to obtain a contract with Canal Plus for the production of a TV series (*The Barber Shop*) and to collaborate with other, more established comedians.

Fairly different is the itinerary of Fadily Camara, whose acting career began in 2013, in a more conventional way, by performing in key stand-up comedy theatres around Paris, such as Debbouze's Comedy Club and Le Paname, also close to Place de la République. Social media became important in her career as tools to expand her fan base. Even if she has a YouTube channel (FadilyCamara) with almost 70,000 subscribers, her preferred platforms are Facebook and Instagram, where she has 300,000 and 200,000 followers respectively. Because of their less straightforward model for revenue sharing with content creators than YouTube (Kay 2021), in most cases presence on these platforms translates into remuneration only indirectly, via the visibility that the platforms guarantee. One can thus argue that Fadily Camara's focus on these platforms is the result of the fact that she adopted them as communication tools to promote her career as a live performer when she was already in the business, rather than as instruments to launch her career from the scratches, as in Dycosh's case.

In this respect, Jean-Claude Mouaka's trajectory is situated somehow in between. The most senior of the three comedians, Muaka's begun in the late 2000s with the ambition to develop a career in theatre drama. He then managed to carve out some space for himself in the Parisian stand-up comedy landscape (again, partly thanks to some appearances at the JCC show), but until 2015 he had to do several other small jobs to survive. It is around then that he started developing YouTube comedy series, initially together with a few other comedians (as part of the Black Power Comedy group, a small group of four black stand-up comedians that he contributed to create), and later independently. As for Dycosh, in many ways, it is through social media that he achieved the visibility that granted him enough audience support to push his career to the next level. He has today almost 500,000 followers on Facebook and his YouTube channel (Jean-Claude Muaka Comedy) has almost 120,000 subscribers.

<sup>3</sup> See "Dycosh : 'Je ne savais même pas ce qu'était YouTube'". *Le Monde*, 7 March 2017, [https://www.lemonde.fr/afrique/video/2017/03/07/dycosh-je-ne-savais-meme-pas-ce-qu-etait-youtube\\_5090592\\_3212.html](https://www.lemonde.fr/afrique/video/2017/03/07/dycosh-je-ne-savais-meme-pas-ce-qu-etait-youtube_5090592_3212.html).

### 3 Humour and Politics

Whatever their career path and social media strategy, each of these three comedians do not shy away from politically engaged content. In particular, two interrelated issues preoccupy them the most: the experience of being black in contemporary France and the need to open up the space for the expression of racial diversity on French mainstream media. As Jean-Claude Muaka suggests,

France needs to accept its history, with its strengths and weaknesses. [For instance] at school they talked to us about Napoleon as a great hero, but Napoleon has also re-established slavery! He did it! And none told us about it!<sup>4</sup>

What Muaka suggests here is the importance to uncover the multiplicity of French history, the historical complexity beyond the diversity of contemporary French society, and the violence that exists behind it. Within this context, social media are instruments that open up new possibilities. In Dycosh's words: "I am convinced that, if we want to see more minorities on television and in the cinema, these people called 'from minorities' simply have to take the lead. They have to create their own roles, they have to write, to direct. Because 'who better than us can talk about us?'" Social media are seen by this generation as the tool that can make this objective achievable.

A first strategy these comedians tend to adopt is the denunciation of everyday forms of racism, for instance by laughing at the stereotypes implicit in many casual conversations. Fadily Camara's YouTube sketch "Je ne suis pas raciste enfin ! J'ai déjà été au Togo!" (I'm Not Racist! I've Already Been to Togo)<sup>5</sup> is an excellent example in this sense. In the video she re-enacts a number of casual conversations in which people try to guess her origins, thus showing their deep-seated belief that a black person cannot be born in France, and that she must thus inevitably come from somewhere else. "I think I should post a video in which I list all the things that people should not say" - she ironically suggests during the sketch. "Because people actually do not realize. There are people you cannot blame, they're simply unaware of how hurtful their questions can be". In a similar vein, in a series of Instagram sketches such as "Les remarques déplacées des blancs" (White People's Inappropriate Comments) and "Parce que

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<sup>4</sup> From the online interview on the YouTube channel Spot Comedy "Jean-Claude Mouaka - One man costaud - interview Spot Comedy". <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vaWH5LpR6vY>.

<sup>5</sup> "Je ne suis pas raciste enfin ! J'ai déjà été au Togo!". <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cR4pp8Kz2s>.



tous les renois se ressemblent..." (Because All Black People Look Alike),<sup>6</sup> Dycosh rehearses and mocks recurring stereotypes about black people, such as their innate capacity to dance, their physical strength, or their sexual potency. More offbeat is the style of Jean-Claude Muaka's YouTube series *Les trois frères* (The Three Brothers) in which he takes contemporary controversies as starting points to develop open debates between three imaginary black brothers who present different points of view, tainted with humour, intellectual nuance or political indignation. In a sketch like "Nérophobes",<sup>7</sup> the issue that is tackled is racial discrimination against black minorities by people of North African descent in France; while in the sketch "L'Afrique n'est pas un laboratoire" (Africa Is not a Lab)<sup>8</sup> the starting point for the debate is the widely criticized opinion of a French doctor who, in the initial phases of the COVID pandemic, during a television talk show, suggested to test new vaccines on African people first, to avoid putting the life of French people at risk.

Strictly connected to this first thematic line is the issue of police violence against members of black minorities, which is also discussed in several sketches. Here again the styles are very different, but the clips share the intention to raise audiences' awareness about this issue. Dycosh's sketch "Comment éviter un contrôle de police" (How to Avoid a Police Control)<sup>9</sup> is centred around a fake advertizing campaign for a new app called *Waze for niggaz*, designed to detect police checking point in the surrounding areas. As one of the fictive black users of the app interviewed in the clip says, "since I use *Waze for niggaz*, I spend three times less of my time in police custody!". Another one insists, "*Waze for niggaz*? It really changed my life! I used to see cops more than my family!". In the same clip, another product is also advertized, *White face*, a lotion that can be used to better prepare for job interviews. As the advertizer says, "if you too have all the skills required, but never get the job, discover our new product, *White Face*. The balanced composition of our product will give your skin the right colour to make your interview a success!". Less straightforward is Jean-Claude Muaka's sketch "Violences Policières" (Police Violence), of the *Three brothers* series.<sup>10</sup> Here, the topic is in-

6 Both videos are included in the YouTube clip "Dycosh best of Instagram". <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YhTiyfuY0-8>.

7 "Trois frères: Nérophobes". [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1Rf03wePO\\_g](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1Rf03wePO_g).

8 "Trois Frères (Le Bon, La Brute & Le Naïf): L'Afrique n'est pas un laboratoire". <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DWPfPotEVwg&t=63s>.

9 "Comment éviter un contrôle de police". <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=X90PXT6tLNY&t=19s>.

10 "Trois frères: Violences Policières". <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GTBheWu9S-0&t=118s>.

roduced by a fight between two of the three brothers, in which one reacts angrily against the second's rant about police violence in the United States, underlying the hypocrisy of black French people who get mad at what happens on the other side of the Atlantic but stay silent in front of recurring episodes of police violence and discrimination in France, such as the killing of Adama Traoré in 2016. Playing on the divergences between the three brothers' opinions, the sketch articulates a nuanced discourse about racism and law enforcement which resonates with audiences of different ethnic and class background, as indicated by the numerous comments to the video, including that of a self-identified "white cop", who praise the intelligence of the clip.

#### 4 Self-Irony and Diasporic Connections

If the videos described above are the most openly political, they are not necessarily the most successful among those that these comedians post online. Another thematic line seems to attract more viewers: clips that emphasize and mock some cultural or behavioral aspects of black communities themselves. On Dycosh's channel, for instance, the series *Sapologie* and *Les mecs de cité en soirée* (The Guys of the Hood Out for the Night) are the most successful, with some achieving more than a million views.<sup>11</sup> In these videos Dycosh takes some of the attributes that are often stereotypically mentioned to describe certain communities (including by members of these communities themselves), and pushes them to the extreme, re-appropriating and reversing the stereotype, while making the audiences aware of it. In particular, in these series, Dycosh focuses on the extravagant attention for expensive brands and luxurious clothes ("La sape")<sup>12</sup> among people of Congolese or Ivorian descent, and on the susceptibility and aggressivity of young black men living in the banlieues (the marginalized suburbs).

Another common form of self-reflexive irony concerns the use of language, and the caricature of the African accents spoken by some members of the African diaspora in France. Dycosh's series *The Barber Shop* and Muaka's series *The Barber Flop* (that he produced together with the Black Power comedy collective) both mock linguistic and cultural aspects displayed by members of the African diasporas in France, also insisting on the stereotypes and tensions exist-

<sup>11</sup> Check for instance the clip "LA SAPOLOGIE #1 - Il garde ses chaussures dans un frigo". <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IwvB5EDq9y4>, or the clip "Les mecs de cité en soirée". <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BYFRMVLPtao&t=134s>.

<sup>12</sup> This term comes from the phenomenon of the "Société des ambianceurs et des personnes élégantes" emerged on the two sides of the Congo river, in Brazzaville, Kinshasa, since the 1960s.

ing between different groups within the larger diasporic community. In the third episode of the series *The Barber Flop* for instance, a group of black men including members of the Caribbean and African diasporas, discuss the issue of slavery and colonialism, producing an entertaining as much as surreal competition about who has been enslaved for longer.<sup>13</sup> In Dycosh's sketch "Embrouille dans un barber shop à Château d'Eau" (Fight in a Barber Shop in the Château d'Eau Neighborhood)<sup>14</sup> the conflict erupts when a Caribbean customer claims that Caribbean people have nothing to do with the African continent, provoking the indignation of his African barber.

Self-irony is not only oriented at cultural and linguistic stereotypes, but also at forms of political activism practiced by members of black French minorities themselves. Dycosh, for instance, has a series titled *Black Is Beautiful*, whose protagonist, Aristote, "the best black activist in the whole of France, the last Black Panther of the French delegation", is so obsessed by blackness that he only does things black. During one of the sketches titled "Il vit dans le noir" (He Lives in the Dark),<sup>15</sup> for instance, a voice over asks him a number of questions about his everyday life: "Aristote, your're cooking? How do you spice your food?", "Only black pepper! Yes, black is beautiful!", "But, what I see here: a snowboard, ski boots... Aristote, you ski?", "Yes, but only on black runs!". And later, on the image of Aristote pushing a hand cart full of bricks, "Aristote, you work? Do you have a contract?", "No, I'm on the black market! Black is beautiful!!!". In a similar vein, in one of the rare sketches produced by these comedians that discusses gender issues, "Parité homme-femme? A 80% ça me va!" (Gender Equality? At a 80% Rate It's Ok for Me!),<sup>16</sup> Fadily Camara mocks the ambiguities of gender equality discourse as expressed by some of her friends. "I know that we want men and women to be equal. But do we want to be equal about everything? Because I'm going to tell you, we're going to gain in plenty of ways, but we are also going to lose a number of things. For instance, we will not be able to put pressure on our partners saying, 'Come on, be a man!'" Through this kind of inward jokes, these comedians reveal the complexity and ambiguity of the struggles in which they are engaged, and by making people laugh about them they also raise awareness about the issues at stake.

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**13** "The barber flop - Episode 3". [https://www.facebook.com/watch/?ref=search&v=802403146581773&external\\_log\\_id=ab401806-f646-4224-8c52-90e7a5f16a82&q=black%20power%20comedy](https://www.facebook.com/watch/?ref=search&v=802403146581773&external_log_id=ab401806-f646-4224-8c52-90e7a5f16a82&q=black%20power%20comedy).

**14** "Embrouille dans un barber shop à Château d'eau". <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=16xOuBdwWYI>.

**15** "Il vit dans le noir". <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cfrNwA-3tmk>.

**16** "Parité homme-femme? A 80% ça me va!". <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=conCFkcvXL8>.

A last recurring thematic line worth describing here has to do with these comedians' relation to Africa. As I will better discuss in the next section of this text, if compared to the television shows and live performances that characterized the work of the previous generations, the use of social media opens up new possibilities to connect to African audiences, triggering the emergence of a discourse about the interaction between the diaspora and the homeland that was less significant in the work of the predecessors. In several sketches, for instance, Jean-Claude Muaka travels to African cities or to the French Caribbean Islands to meet and perform together with local stand-up comedians. In these sketches he plays around reciprocal stereotypes between black French people and francophone Africans. In a sketch shot in Abidjan together with local comedian Moses, "Bienvenu à Abidjan ft. Moses" (Welcome to Abidjan ft. Moses),<sup>17</sup> Moses picks up Jean-Claude Muaka at the airport and the two have a conversation in the car, while going home. At one point, Muaka comments, "So say, Abidjan is like Paris, you too have traffic jams!", and Moses replies, "So, you thought we were living in a jungle, didn't you?". But Muaka insists, "I think you'd like Paris better! If you like Abidjan, you'll definitely like Paris", and Moses asks, "Are you telling me to leave Abidjan to go to Paris? What does it mean to ask something like this?". And later, "Don't you think that, if they had shown you on French TV what a paradise Abidjan is, you would have all tried to colonize us again?". Then Moses asks his girlfriend, who is in the back seat, "Baby, even if you had the visa, you would have never left Abidjan, isn't?", "Of course I would have!", she replies, and Moses suddenly stops to get her off the car. The conversation continues on this tone, playing around stereotypes and reciprocal perceptions with irony, thus deconstructing them while recognizing the role they play in the relation between the two groups.

Sketches like this signal also the emergence of a space of interaction between diasporic and African comedians, in which diasporic humorists often pay a tribute to their African counterparts, emphasizing their desire to reconnect with their African cultural roots as well as with contemporary expressions of African popular culture. In the sketch "Quand Dycosh rencontre Gohu..." (When Dycosh Meets Gohu)<sup>18</sup> Dycosh takes an auto-ironic stand on this phenomenon. In the sketch, Dycosh sees Gohu, one of the greatest living Ivorian comedians (protagonist of Ivorian TV series such as *Les Guignoles d'Abi-*

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**17** "Bienvenu à Abidjan ft. Moses". <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UKLo0sXk3vg&t=301s>. Similar sketches playing on reciprocal perceptions can be found also in Jean-Claude Muaka's series "Coach Muaka", such as in "Coach mwaka... parole lingala" (Coach Muaka... Speaks Lingala). <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lvg4WDotmA0>.

**18** "Quand Dycosh rencontre Gohu...". <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DRNhmLeW-VU>.

*djan* and *Ma Famille*, which had a pan-African success over the past twenty-five years), but mistakes him for a member of the internationally successful Ivorian music band Magic System, provoking Gohu's anger. With this twist, Dycosh mocks the attitude of some diasporic comedians and influencers, who emphasize their proximity with the African cultural scene to the point of faking it.

## 5 **Black Public Spheres and the Commodification of Race on Social Media**

Analysing the use of social media by influencers belonging to minority groups in Singapore, Crystal Abidin (2021) coined the concept of 'minority celebrities'. She used this term to identify celebrities whose fame and recognition are

founded on commodifying and representing a usually marginalised and stigmatised demographic of society, built upon the validation and celebration of minoritarian values, with the political agenda of making public and critiquing the systemic and personal challenges experienced by the minority group in everyday life. (Abidin 2021, 600)

While relevant, this definition does not fully capture the work of the comedians studied here, as their work addresses both black French minorities and African audiences beyond the borders of France, and thus participates in constituting publics that, as I will argue below, can hardly be understood through the prism of existing definitions of black, African or diasporic public spheres.

However, Crystal Abidin's definition remains relevant for this analysis because of its emphasis on the imbrication of political and commercial logics. The concept of 'minority celebrities' in fact helps identifying the specificity of the media environment within which the work of Dycosh, Jean-Claude Muaka and Fadily Camara circulates, and its difference from the environment within which the work of previous generations of French minority comedians used to be consumed. In the mid-2000s, when Debbouze and the generation of comedians that emerged around him became popular, their work began to be distributed by national commercial television networks such as Canal Plus. These networks were interested in maximizing the share of the national audience that minority humor could reach. As a result, despite the critical role they played in debunking a number of racial stereotypes, these comedians were caught in wider processes of 'commodification of race' through which capitalism co-opted and exploited racial difference "for both profit and the reinforcement of white supremacy" (Saha 2018, 58). In the opinion of Nelly Quemener

(2013, 11), then, their work ultimately participated in “domesticating issues of race and ethnicity for a wider public”.

As Paul Gilroy (1994, 61) observes,

successive communicative technologies organise space and time in different ways and have solicited and fostered different kinds of identification. They create and manipulate memory in dissimilar ways and stage the corporeal and physical enigmas of cultural identity in contrasting processes.

Indeed, the media environment within which the comedians analysed in this essay operate does not produce the same kind of dynamics seen in the case of legacy media. If commodification is still an influential factor, here it operates in significantly different ways. Social media encourage “creators to compete for attention and rewards them economically for promoting themselves”, making self-commodification and self-branding “integral part of working as a creator” (Hokka 2021, 144), but they do so within a media environment that is potentially much larger (in terms of geographic scope) than the one within which national broadcasters used to operate. Contrary to the national TV channels that distributed Debbouze’s shows to mostly French audiences residing in France, the circulation of media content via the internet has virtually no boundaries.<sup>19</sup> This means that, by posting their content on YouTube and other social networks, the third generation of black humorists analysed in this essay do not target exclusively audiences based in France (be them members of ethnic minority groups, or part of the white majority). Within this context, in order to commodify content, these comedians operate according to logics that differ from those that Quemener analysed in relation to Canal Plus and its distribution of Debbouze’s work (e.g. the domestication of racial difference). Commodification here takes place through the ‘afrocentrisation’ of sketches and content so as to go beyond France’s boundaries and convoke Afropolitan audiences that are more interested in African popular culture than in French politics about race and discrimination. Hence the relevance of sketches that go beyond French politics to convoke Afropolitan publics by playing on inward irony and on the interplay between diasporic and African forms of popular culture. Hence the fact that, if sketches that insist on politically sensitive topics (such as police violence and racism) do exist, they are by far less successful than sketches that focus on African and diasporic communities themselves. Following Achille Mbembe’s

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<sup>19</sup> This is, of course, also a myth, as many factors, including the digital divide and various forms of digital surveillance, participate in limiting the circulation of content on the internet.

work (2010), the concept of Afropolitanism is used here as a concept that challenges “victimhood discourses attached to Africa and the Black diaspora” (Gehrmann 2016, 65) and opens up the way for the description of “a new phenomenology of Africanness – a way of being African in the world” (Gikandi 2011, 9; quoted in Gehrmann 2016) that is constitutively hybrid and projected toward the future.

Existing works that criticize Jurgen Habermas’s well-known formulation of the concept of ‘public sphere’ tend to insist on the need to consider the inevitable multiplicity and variety of the competing public spheres that constitute the fabric of our societies (Fraser 1990). Building on this kind of criticism several alternative concepts of public sphere have been formulated in relation to black people, in Africa and across the diaspora. In relation to African American people, for instance, Catherine Squires suggests to elaborate a model able to recognize the existence of different types of black public sphere, all infused with important political dimensions. As Squires argues,

a public can *enclave* itself, hiding counterhegemonic ideas and strategies in order to survive or avoid sanctions, while internally producing lively debate and planning. It is also possible to create a *counterpublic* which can engage in debate with wider publics to test ideas and perhaps utilize traditional social movement tactics (boycotts, civil disobedience). Finally, a public that seeks separation from other publics for reasons other than oppressive relations but is involved in wider public discourses from time to time acts as a *satellite* public sphere. (Squires 2002, 448; italics in the original)

In what concerns sub-Saharan Africa, Peter Ekeh (1975) suggested, already in the 1970s, the possibility to describe the existence of two, almost parallel public spheres, related to the impact of colonialism on African societies. On the one hand, a public sphere connected to the modern state with its western inspired institutions, and on the other hand, a public sphere connected to the existence of what he calls a ‘primordial public’ and on pre-colonial forms of sociality and collective cohesion, including ethnic and religion institutions. British anthropologist Karin Barber, further complexified this model by underlining the fluid nature of the imagined communities that have emerged in sub-Saharan Africa as a result of colonialism and decolonization. In her words, because of the specific historical trajectories of state formation in the continent, African publics cannot but

shrink and expand from moment to moment, sometimes consolidating ethnic linguistic communities far smaller than the national entity, at other times by-passing the nation to convoke a pan-African, black, or pan-human audience. (Barber 2007, 202)

Finally, looking at Eritrean diasporas in the United States, Victoria Bernal (2005) highlighted the role of new media in triggering processes by which diasporas develop specific forms of public sphere, that are simultaneously related to the experience of living abroad and to the intimacy of the diaspora's connection with the homeland. These processes end up expanding the boundaries of the nation to produce diasporic public spheres, that are key future of what she calls "the nation as network" (Bernal 2014; see also Osman 2017; Ponzanesi 2020).

In my view, the work of the comedians discussed in this essay is situated somewhere in between these different understandings of the black public sphere. It builds on the innovative possibility offered by social media, which give these comedians the possibility of addressing simultaneously minority audiences in the diaspora and African publics based in the continent. If, according to Céline Vigouroux (2015, 267), the commodification of the work of the first two generations of black humorists in France, within a mediascape "where non-stereotypical African or Arab counter-models [was] still rare and in a social sphere where non-whites [were] absent from dominant positions", was likely "to reinforce stereotypes of 'Black jesters entertaining Whites'", the impact produced by the third generation of humorists studied here is significantly different. Their work is oriented *simultaneously* at both French-speaking black minorities in France and across the world, and at francophone African audiences in Africa. As such, it interrogates the position of black minorities in a Western society, using humor as an instrument to "subvert, deconstruct, and engage with the state", and as a tool for "emotional discharge" that brings with it some form of (both individual and collective) therapeutic power (Obadare 2016, 12; see also Reichl, Stein 2005). But it also produces a self-ironic discourse that permits to go beyond the "hydraulic models of domination and resistance" that have long dominated African and African studies debates on the public sphere (Willems 2012, 23; Mbembe 2001). By doing so, it convenes publics that exist beyond their status as minorities or as diasporas; publics that have Afropolitan cultural references and are transnationally interconnected; whose political preoccupations include but also exceed issues related to the representation of race in France; publics who are interested in larger questions about the place of Africa and black people in the future of the world.



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