MÉLANIE GEORGIADES, ALIAS DIAM'S:
EXAMINING IDENTITY THROUGH RAP

by

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ABSTRACT

The ex-rapper Mélanie Georgiades (b. 25 July 1980), more commonly known as Diam's, profoundly affected the genre of French rap. Originally from Cyprus, but growing up in the *banlieues* of France, this "*petite banlieusarde*" quickly rose to fame, achieving the best-selling album of 2006 in France. Her musical career came to an abrupt end in 2008, however, with her conversion to Islam. She chose to wear the veil and to retreat from public life, focusing instead on writing two autobiographies and enjoying a quiet home life. This essay examines Georgiades's music and identity as a reflection of the complexities of contemporary French society, focusing on three aspects: Regional Identity, Gender Identity, and Religious Identity. Each of these perspectives sheds light on how Diam's/Georgiades navigated complex identity politics to create a new and more diverse image of "Frenchness."

INTRODUCTION

Mélanie Georgiades is a French ex-rapper who quickly rose to fame for her unique voice, talent, and controversial lyrics. More commonly known by her stage name, Diam's, Georgiades rose to international fame and then quickly retired from rap. Throughout her career, her regional, gender, and religious identities have impacted her professional as well as personal decisions and accomplishments.

Born in 1980 in Cyprus to a Cypriot father and French mother, Georgiades spent her childhood outside of France until her parents divorced. She moved to the Parisian *banlieue* with her mother at the age of three, travelling back to Cyprus a few times to see her father. Living in the *banlieue* as a non-native, she had a different experience living in France than the white majority population. Her *banlieue* origins had a significant impact on her music as she contemplated ideas such as French national identity and urban violence. She started writing music during her adolescence, making a radio appearance[1] and joining Mafia Trece[2] (in which she was the only female), all while going to high school. During her senior year of high school, she recorded her first album, *Premier Mandat*, in 1999. It wasn't until her second album *Brut de femme* (2003) that she started to make a name for herself. This album achieved gold certification and paved the way for her next album, *Dans ma bulle* (2006). *Dans ma bulle* was her most popular album, becoming the best-selling CD of the year in France. In *Dans ma bulle*, she raps about controversial issues such as politics and women's issues like domestic violence. In 2009, she released her final album, *SOS*, after her conversion to Islam in 2008. Through her music, she was able to give a voice to the women and youth of the *banlieue* and to redefine the French national image.

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[1] She called in to the radio station Générations and gave a live freestyle rap.
[2] Mafia Trece was a group of thirteen Parisian rappers who produced albums and gave live performances.

Aside from music, Georgiades is also known for her religious choices and subsequent humanitarian efforts. In 2008, after battling with mental issues for many years, she made the choice to convert to Islam. Her conversion was extremely controversial because it was released to the public via a photo of her husband and herself, veiled. Since France has laws against wearing certain types of veils in public and because she was formerly seen as a feminist icon, the media was shocked and angry at her conversion. Some people saw it as a form of submission to her new husband and were genuinely afraid for her. Nonetheless, she has remained strong in her faith and has founded a nonprofit called The Big Up Project as a result. The Big Up Project helps to build orphanages and wells in multiple countries in Africa. Islam helped her to see a world bigger than France and to focus her attention not on herself, but to others in need of help.

Since retiring from music after her release of *SOS* in 2009, Georgiades has authored two books, *Autobiographie* (2012) in which she tells her life story, and *Mélanie, française et musulmane* (2015), a defense of her faith. Now she lives a relatively quiet life, away from France, with her husband and two children.

REGIONAL IDENTITY

The word *banlieue* literally translates to mean "suburb," but it has a different connotation in French than it does in English. The *banlieues* in France are much different from the suburbs in the United States: in France, most work opportunities are found in big cities, but the high cost of living prevents people from living in the city itself. Instead of living in the cities, many French people, particularly lower-class French people, tend to live in the *banlieues*. According to Dr. Mustafa Dikeç, professor of Urban Studies at the École d'Urbanisme de Paris, unlike American middle-class suburbia, *la banlieue* denotes "the darker inhabitants of social housing neighborhoods in the peripheral areas of cities."[3] Although this was not originally so, now the word *banlieue* now seems to be a convenient way to reference the immigrant, African Muslim population of France. This connotation of the word promotes a division between white French citizens and foreigners, resulting in an "us versus them" mentality that catalyzed the development of hip-hop for social change in French *banlieues*.

Over time, the *banlieue* has transformed in the eyes of the French government. As the banlieue became increasingly affiliated with the Muslim immigrant population, it started posing a problem to the French government. "With the development of a republican nationalism in the 1990s," Dikeç states, "'the banlieue' has started to fulfil, though negatively, its incarnating role as a space seen as incompatible with the integrity of the Republic."[4] Because these immigrants didn't match the "look" or "values" of the general population, they posed a problem to views of French society as a homogenous and cohesive white, Catholic society. The French government

[3] Mustafa Dikeç, "Immigrants, Banlieues, and Dangerous Things: Ideology as an Aesthetic Affair," Antipode Vol. 45 No. 1 (2013).
[4] Ibid., 28.

couldn't figure out how to incorporate these foreigners into mainstream French society, so they remained on the outside, forced into an alterior space, both literally and figuratively.

Mélanie Georgiades, who was born in Cyprus, grew up in these *banlieues*, the birthplace of hip-hop in France. She rose to fame during the late 1990s and early 2000s: the height of *banlieue* fear in the French government. The media took notice of her origins, especially during her successes, frequently calling her a *banlieusarde:* a pejorative word that essentially refers to people who live in the *banlieues* "with the inferiority that this implies."[5] Instead of shying away from this identity, however, Georgiades touts her success story (coming all the way from the *banlieue* to selling out theaters in Paris). Her song "*Petite banlieusarde*" directly addresses her experiences as a youth:

Petite banlieusarde, j'ai fait du rap pour me libérer du mal.	Little *banlieusarde,* I rap to free me from bad.
J'aurais pu finir à la MAF, le cœur criblé de balles.	I could have ended up at the MAF,[7] the heart riddled with bullets.
J'ai pris la plume pour qu'elle m'éloigne de la mort,	I took the plume so that it would distance me from death,
Pour que ma mère n'aille pas à la morgue pleurer sur mon mort[6]	So that my mother wouldn't go to the morgue to cry over my death[8]

In these verses, she discusses what life could have been like had she stayed in the *banlieue*. She writes that rap music freed her from poverty and violence and that she took up writing to distance herself from death. Her view of the *banlieue* is significant because it shows that she believes life there for her would almost certainly mean death. She portrays rap as a way to get

[5] "Banlieusard," in *TLFi*, http://www.cnrtl.fr/definition/banlieusard.
[6] Mélanie Georgiades, *Diam's Autobiographie* (Don Quichotte, 2012), 98.
[7] *Maison d'arrêt pour femmes*. This is a women's prison in France.
[8] With regard to the translations in the essay, all of them are done by me, and I have tried to capture the general meaning of the text more so than a direct word-for-word translation.

away from all the destructive aspects of the *banlieue*. Whereas people from outside the *banlieue* usually see rap music as a bad influence on the public, Georgiades shows the healing and saving force of rap. The genre enables her to have a voice in society and to speak about her thoughts and her experiences.

In another verse of "*Petite banlieusarde*," she describes her experience being mixed race: "*Métisée, je reste le cul entre deux chaises.* "[9] She plays perfectly into the generalization that people in the *banlieue* are impoverished immigrants: Georgiades was born to a French mother and a Cypriot father who met in London. After meeting, her parents moved to Cyprus, where she was born. Her father did not stay in her life for very long, however, which resulted in her mother returning to France. Georgiades continued to stay in touch with her father for a while, visiting him occasionally in Cyprus. But as she got older, the language barrier became more of a problem; by her teenage years, she lived the life of the daughter of a single mother. Thus, she didn't necessarily fit the stereotype of an African immigrant to France—yet neither was she treated as completely French. She talks about this in another verse: "*Autant mes profs que mes potes, une petite Blanche dans le hip-hop.*"[10] She mentions the "shocking" fact that she is both a white and a woman, not the usual image of the black African immigrant. Like hip-hop in the United States, French Hip-hop has historically been dominated by black men, so a white woman rising to the top of the genre is an impressive—and unusual—feat.

She mentions her father again in another verse: "*Moi, je veux du long terme soyons clair. / Tous ces putains de disques d'or ne me rendront pas mon père.*"[11] In this verse, she feels his absence, saying even though she's been highly successful, her certified gold albums won't bring

[9] "Mixed race, I have my ass between two chairs." Georgiades, Diam's Autobiographie, 99.
[10] Ibid. "As many teachers as friends, a little White in hip-hop."
[11] Ibid. "Me, I want to be clear in the long term. All these shit tons of gold discs won't bring my dad back to me."

her father back to her. It shows the profound impact her father's absence had on her, and even later in her career, when she seeks psychological help, many of the psychiatrists focus on her relationship with her father, believing it is one of the sources of her depression. In her track "*Daddy*," she raps about her experience growing up without her father:

Il y a toujours un vide dans nos vies, toi t'es un bide dans la mienne	There is always an emptiness in our lives, you you're a dud in mine
Et dans mes lignes, t'es loin d'être un mythe	And in my lines, you're far from being a myth
J'avais besoin de ton soutien et je t'ai appelé	I needed your support and I called you
Tu t'en souviens ? non. Moi oui, car t'as jamais rappelé	You remember? no. Me yes, because you never called back
Quand il n'y a pas de père, il manque quelqu'un et y'a pas de paix	When there's no father, someone is missing and there's no peace
Parce que tu n'y comprend rien et que tu dois faire avec trois petits points	Because you don't understand anything about it and that you need to do it with three little dots
J'sais qu'il y a des gens qui vivent la même chose que moi	I know that there are some people who live the same thing as me
J'sais qu'il y en a qui savent ce que c'est que de vivre dans le noir[12]	I know that there are some who know what's it's like to live in the dark

The notion of a single-parent household is not uncommon in Parisian *banlieues*. The percentage of single-parent families in Parisian *banlieues* (25.7%) is nearly twice as high as the metropolitan average (15.8%).[13] Georgiades's experience is not unique, and her music provides an outlet to talk about these experiences.

After defying all odds by making it out of the *banlieue* and establishing her career, Georgiades started to explore what it means to be French. Even though her music contains more

[12] "Daddy Diam's," in Genius Lyrics, https://genius.com/Diams-daddy-lyrics.
[13] Corinne Chevalier and François Lebeaupin, "La population des zones urbaines sensibles," report no. 1328, December 15, 2010, https://www.insee.fr/fr/statistiques/1280948#documentation.

political material (e.g. "*Ma France à moi*" and *"Marine*"), she states that she never meant for it to be a political argument, but that she just wanted to write about her experiences. This was a chance for mainstream French culture to hear voices from the *banlieue* reflect on a society that has traditionally excluded them.

In her song "*Ma France à moi*" ("My France to Me"), Georgiades does not paint a glamorous picture of Paris. Usually, tourists view the City of Lights with a sort of nostalgia, and it becomes a source of emotional connection. Instead, Georgiades focuses on the France she sees: not the pretty skylines with the Eiffel Tower, but a scene that's romantic in its own way. She is able to romanticize and praise the France she knows—the *banlieue*—while also offering a striking critique of mainstream media in her country. Overall, "*Ma France à moi*" discusses the acceptance of *banlieusards* by French society; Georgiades contrasts the welcoming France portrayed in the mainstream media to the France she knows, which is much less inviting.

In the first verse, Georgiades paints a picture of an ordinary scene of her France: "*elle [La France] joue au foot sous le soleil souvent du Coca dans la gourde / c'est le hip-hop qui la fait danser sur les pistes / parfois elle kiffe un peu d'rock, ouais, si la mélodie est triste*."[14] She seems to romanticize this simple scene of people playing soccer, drinking Coke, and dancing to hip hop since this is the normal France that she knows. At the end of the first verse, she again calls to attention social stigmas surrounding the banlieue: "*Elle s'intériorise et s'interdit de saigner, nan*."[15] The fact that she says her France is forbidden from bleeding plays into the stereotype that the *banlieuesards* are forced to lead a "tough" life, never showing weakness. "Urban violence" has become a term widely used in the French media to depict this "toughness"

[14] "She [France] plays soccer under the sun often with Coca-Cola in the throat / it's hip-hop that makes her dance on the dance floor / sometimes she likes a little rock, yeah, if the melody is sad." Georgiades, *Diam's Autobiographie*, 96.
[15] Ibid. "She internalizes and forbids herself from bleeding, nah."

of the *banlieue*. The "urban violence" associated with the *banlieue* is largely due to the limited mobility and hostility presented to residents by police officers and the French government, and not by the characteristics of the residents themselves. As Sorbonne professor Sophie Body-Gendrot states:

> Urban violence in France is the *voice* of a minority of disenfranchised youths of Muslim and post-colonial immigrant origin, unable to emancipate themselves from marginalized spaces and insert themselves in the mainstream, in part due to specific characteristics of the French Republican model of social integration.[16]

This shows that "urban violence" is practically built into French culture and can only be overcome by a complete change in the system. Through her music, Diam's seeks to bring light to this controversial subject with subtle references, showing how her France is systematically different from mainstream French culture. This idea of "otherness" in the *banlieues* is carried into the refrain of "*Ma France à moi*."

In the refrain, Georgiades separates herself from the France that most of the population sees. She says that her France is not this "*France profonde*," meaning the welcoming and inviting France. Instead, she implies that this seemingly hospitable France is a lie: "*Ma France à moi ne vit pas dans le mensonge / Avec le cœur et la rage, à la lumière, pas dans l'ombre."*[17] This verse is especially significant in that it shows that Georgiades's France—and Georgiades herself—do not hide in the darkness; they show their rage in the light. As stated in *The New York Times* after her first American performance, "Diam's incarnates a new generation of French artists with immigrant roots who are claiming France as their own."[18] This suggests a resilience and determination to make their situation known and to claim what is rightfully theirs.

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[16] Sophie Body-Gendrot, "Deconstructing Youth Violence in French Cities," European Journal of Crime, Criminal Law and Criminal Justice 13, no. 1 (2005): 5, https://doi.org/10.1163/1571817053558275.
[17] "My France to me doesn't live in lies / With the heart and the rage, in the light, not in the shadow."
[18] Katrin Bennhold, "Rapper with Attitude Updates 'Frenchness,'" The New York Times, June 5, 2007, https://www.nytimes.com/2007/06/05/world/europe/05iht-diams.5.6012670.html.

The music video for "*Ma France à moi*" reinforces this idea. The video depicts an older white man in a nice neighborhood who hears "*Ma France à moi*" and tries to turn off the song. However, when he leaves his house, he begins hearing the track everywhere, despite his repeated attempts to silence the music (including smashing a child's headphones). Eventually, he ends up in a TV store where the song is playing on every single TV. He realizes at this point that he cannot turn off the song, and he has a meltdown. This is symbolic of the resilience of the marginalized *banlieusards*, and how they are now living in the light and refuse to be silenced. The white man attempting to turn off the music symbolizes the French government (especially right-wing politician Jean-Marie Le Pen) trying to silence these marginalized people. Even though the French government attempts to show an effort at inclusivity, Georgiades's text brings to light how the older, white, majority population of France as well as the French government may think they're being welcoming, but *banlieuesards* are still stigmatized and excluded.

Ironically, although Georgiades brings this pattern of systematic cultural exclusion to light, she also claims that she never wanted to get involved with politics. Despite her wishes, she subsequently became known as the voice of the disenfranchised youth. As journalist Katrin Bennhold said, "Her hit song—"*Ma France à moi*" (My France, to Me)—has become the anthem of the disaffected youth in the suburbs where rioting broke out two years ago."[19] Georgiades achieved this status of being the voice of a people by representing a different sort of France—her France. In an interview with Bennhold, she says "The France of the baguette and the beret is not my France…. I don't relate to that France. It doesn't mean anything to me. I like to eat kebabs. I wear hoods."[20] By rejecting this stereotypical mainstream France, she calls into question the very definition of "Frenchness."

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[19] Bennhold, "Rapper with Attitude."
[20] Ibid.

In a country where there is a prejudicial as well as physical separation between two distinct groups of people without much effort to homogenize them, what does it mean to be French? Stereotypically, the Eiffel Tower, L'Arc de Triomphe, camembert, le vin, etc. characterize France; however, Georgiades provides an alternate way of showing "Frenchness." Instead of forcing *banlieue* immigrants to assimilate to the "French" standard, Georgiades argues that a new standard altogether should be created: instead of immigrants adapting to fit the ideal of "Frenchness," "Frenchness" should adapt to them. Through the media of rap, Georgiades is effectively reconstructing the idea of what it means to be French.

"Frenchness" is a concept that has been frequently debated by politicians and French citizens. Unlike in multiculturalist societies such as the United States, identifying with multiple cultural groups is not common in France: "commitment to a minority culture or a foreign country detracts from the quality of one's commitment to French identity."[21] France seeks to create a homogenized and universal national identity, but there are many people in the country who either do not identify with this cultural identity or who identify with multiple cultural identities. Therefore, people who identify with minority cultures often feel left out of the mainstream French identity. Rap music allows these marginalized people a voice to speak about their unique experiences as French citizens.

Through her rap and through asserting her "Frenchness," Diam's has also critiqued figures in the French government, playing a crucial part in the 2007 French presidential elections. Her most obviously political track is entitled "*Marine*," and it is about Marine Le Pen, the daughter of Jean-Marie Le Pen who is the founder of the Front National political party. The Front National (now rebranded to the Rassemblement National) is the third largest political party

[21] Patrick Simon, *French National Identity and Integration: Who Belongs to the National Community?* (Washington, DC: Migration Policy Institute, 2012), 1.

in France, known for its extreme anti-immigration policies. The far-right party achieved much success in a relatively short amount of time, with Marine Le Pen becoming one of the presidential candidates in 2017. At the core of its ideology is a nationalistic, anti-immigrant stance, believing all French residents should conform to the idealistic version of "Frenchness" and that non-French residents pose a significant security threat to the idea of the French nation. Since the Front National takes such a nationalistic approach, it is necessary to define what a nation really is. In his book *Imagined Communities*, Benedict Anderson defines a nation as "an imagined political community – and imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign."[22] According to Anderson's definition, one can see that the nation is not analogous to the state, but rather it is a group of people who feel as though they are a part of the same, contained community. Defining nationalism in terms of ideology instead of geographical space entertains the idea of the existence of multiple nations within the same country.

Using Anderson's definition of "nation," the French *banlieue* could be perceived as a separate nation to the mainstream, baguette-eating, beret-wearing French nation of the Front National. Positioning the *banlieue* as a separate nation presents a greater issue with the Front National's nationalistic ideals. One of the phenomena of the nation is people's willingness to die for their nation. This holds true for the French *banlieue*, with multiple riots having taken place between its residents and the French police/government.[23] The enmity between the residents of the *banlieue* and the Front National is therefore logical since each nation proved a problem to the other's existence.

Georgiades communicates the *banlieue's* rage towards the Front National in her track "*Marine*," directed towards Marine Le Pen, daughter of the founder of (and later excluded from)

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[22] Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities* (Verso, 1991), 6.
[23] Body-Gendrot, "Deconstructing Youth," 6-8, 15.

the Front National, Jean-Marie Le Pen. In this track, she addresses Mme Le Pen on a first-name basis and uses the informal *tu*, as if they were friends having coffee together.[24] This familiarity shows a lack of respect for Mme Le Pen as well as showing how Georgiades considers herself an equal to Le Pen. The hook is simple yet poignant: "*Donc j'emmerde (j'emmerde) / J'emmerde qui ? Le Front National*."[25] The verses go into more detail, describing particular aspects of Le Pen's character and campaign that she finds troubling.

The second verse of "*Marine*" is perhaps the most stirring, reflecting Mme Le Pen's views of immigration:

Marine, tu es victime des pensées de ton géniteur	Marine, you're a victim of the thoughts of your father
Génération 80, on a retrouvé notre fureur…[26]	Generation 1980, we've rediscovered our rage…
Mais Marine, t'as fait la même connerie que lui	But Marine, you've done the same fuck-up as him
Penser que le blanc ne se mélange pas à autrui	To think that white doesn't mix with other people
Marine, on ne s'ra jamais copines	Marine, we will never be friends
Parce que je suis une métisse et que je traîne avec Ali[27]	Because I'm mixed race and because I hang out with Ali

In these lines, Georgiades criticizes Mme Le Pen's stance against immigration. Since a large number of *banlieue* residents are immigrants, Le Pen's views are seen as a direct attack of the *banlieue*. This provides a further wedge between the two nations of the *banlieue* and the Front

[24] After listening to the track, Marine Le Pen responded by actually inviting Georgiades to have coffee with her so that they could discuss its contents, but Georgiades didn't respond to the request.
[25] "So screw (screw) / Screw who? The Front National"
[26] This is a clever word play with the word *fureur*, meaning rage in English. It also sounds like Führer, a title associated with Nazi Germany and with Adolf Hitler.
[27] Ali is a common name among Muslims, so this line probably refers to the fact that Georgiades has many Muslim friends. It could also be a reference to Muhammad Ali, famous boxer.

National. Georgiades chooses to singularly address Marine Le Pen as a means to critique the entire Front National as a sort of synecdoche. She chooses Mme Le Pen because she is seen as the future of the party, and because she can address her woman to woman. Speaking as a woman to another woman, Georgiades provides a point on which the two seemingly opposite females can relate. In many ways, Georgiades uses her gender identity as an advantage in her music; however, she's also faced many struggles because of her image as a woman. This concept will be discussed further in the following section.

GENDER IDENTITY

In addition to her public representation of the *banlieue* immigrant culture, Georgiades became a voice of feminism and female power in Francophone rap, giving voice to women who had been excluded from the genre and paving the way for future artists. Traditionally, the French rap scene has been dominated by men. In fact, since the early 1990s, "only about 5% of commercially successful recorded albums were performed by female rappers."[28] In this sense, female *rappeuses* constitute a minority in French rap. The success of Diam's[29] second album, *Dans ma bulle*—the best-selling album of 2006 in France—is a remarkable feat in itself.[30] The question remains: how did this *petite banlieusarde* manage to compete in this male-dominated sphere to become one of France's most popular rappers?

Diam's started her career by participating in a number of "featurings"[31] on songs with already-established male artists. This exposure helped establish a reputation while simultaneously making connections and building relationships with mentors.[32] One of Diam's biggest mentors, the artistic director Sébastian Catillon, helped her throughout her entire career, becoming one of her close friends. About him, she writes:

> *"Il s'engageait à me faire enregistrer un album, à produire mes clips, à m'aider à partir en tournée, à proposer mes titres aux radios et à me verser un peu de sous pour que je n'ai pas à cumuler un job pendant la période de creation.*[33]

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[28] Martin Verbeke, "Rappers and Linguistic Variation" (PhD diss., University of Stirling, 2016), 157. https://dspace.stir.ac.uk/bitstream/1893/22915/1/martin.verbeke.doctoral.thesis.pdf.
[29] Throughout this section and others, I will use the name Mélanie Georgiades when referring to her in her normal life, and the name Diam's when referring to her public persona.
[30] Denis-Constant Martin, "Rap as a Social and Political Revealer: Diam's and Changes in French Value Systems," *Culture, Theory and Critique* 51, no. 3 (2010).
[31] Featurings are appearances on other artists' albums. She writes about featuring on albums before recording *Brut de femme*: "*J'avais aussi participé à de nombreux featurings. Je ne pourrais pas tous les énumérer, mais j'en avais bien enregistré une quarantaine en quatre ans*." ["I had also participated in numerous featurings. I couldn't count them all, but I must have recorded over forty in four years."] Mélanie Georgiades, *Diam's Autobiographie* (Don Quichotte, 2012), 55.
[32] Black Mozart and Jamel Debbouze were very influential figures in her early rap years.
[33] Georgiades, *Autobiographie*, 42.

> [He committed himself to having me record an album, to producing my clips, to help me tour, to promote my titles to the radios, and to pay me a little money so that I wouldn't have to have a job during the creation period.]

Catillon also introduced Diam's to established artists, such as Jamel Debbouze, who helped bolster her career. Debbouze proposed to take Diam's under his wing, and he introduced her to many of his artistic connections. By collaborating with already-established artists, she was able to become a respected figure in France's rap scene. Due to both her mic skill[34] and to her unique voice, fans began to recognize her, and she was soon able to record and release a solo album, *Brut de femme* (2003). The album received much acclaim, but she primarily became known for her several upbeat, party tracks because no one would take her seriously as a "*gosse de banlieue*."[35] In fact, the most popular track from the album, "DJ," mainly a party track, became a 2003 summer hit. However, she also had many serious, autobiographical tracks on the album, such as "*Ma Souffrance*" ("My Suffering") in which she talks about her experience with domestic violence. She uses her rap as a platform to talk about her experiences and to encourage other women to seek help. Because of her vulnerability in expressing her tragic stories and because of her empowering verses, people started to view her as a feminist icon.

Her track "*Ma Souffrance*" from the album *Brut de femme* details a difficult part in her life in which she encountered domestic violence:

Durant 6 mois j'ai enduré j'ai pris des coups sans rien dire	For 6 months I endured I took the hits without saying anything
En me promettant que s'il recommençait, et bien j'allais partir	While promising that if he started again, and I was going to leave

[34] She is known for her fast rhyming ability, as demonstrated in the track "Suzy." About this track, she says "*L'originalité de ce titre se trouve à la fin de la chanson: à ce moment-là, le tempo double et je me mets à rapper extrêmement vite*." ["The originality of this title is found at the end of the song: at that moment, the tempo doubles and I start rapping extremely fast."] Georgiades, *Autobiographie*, 41.
[35] "Chick from the banlieue" Georgiades, *Autobiographie*, 76.

Mais à chaque fois c'était la même, j'avais trop peur qu'il me tue	But each time it was the same, I was too afraid that he would kill me
Trop peur de lui, de ses faits et gestes, peur d'être battue	Too afraid of him, of his facts and actions, afraid of being beaten

After releasing this track and giving emotional live performances, Diam's was completely unprepared for the reaction she received. Many women sent her letters, describing how they had been victims of domestic violence, and they said that by sharing her story, Diam's had inspired them. She writes about some of her fan mail in her autobiography, including that women wrote to her because she wouldn't give them bad advice like to wait for their Prince Charming. She writes "*Alors ces jeunes filles ou jeunes femmes se livraient à moi qui parlais de la vie simplement*."[36] By writing tracks about her experience as a woman and about women's issues, Diam's was able to help women who had been in her situation, a feat impossible for male artists. She owned her identity as a woman and as a result, was able to help others. However, even with her newfound feminist association, she was still treated differently in the media than other male rap artists.

During the time of her "*Brut de femme"* release, Diam's was often compared to male artists, with the media dubbing her the "*Joey Starr au féminin.*" An interview with TV producer, author, and talk show host Thierry Ardisson makes clear how Diam's gender played a role in the consumption of her music, and is worth considering in some detail.[37] Ardisson begins by asking Diam's if she fits the stereotype of the "bad girl," and follows up by asking her how old she was when she smoked her first joint, when she had her first boyfriend, and if she's had a girlfriend.

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[36] "So these young girls or young women confided to me who speaks simply of life." Georgiades, *Autobiographie*, 75.

[37] Mélanie Georgiades, "Interview Diam's," by Thierry Ardisson, *Tout le monde en parle*, France 2, Tout sur l'écran, March 13, 2004, directed by Serge Khalfon, produced by Thierry Ardisson, Catherine Barma, and Laurence Tricoche. https://www.ina.fr/video/I09012125.

He then asks if she knows how many boyfriends she's had since then, and if she's had multiple at a time. These types of questions, focused more on salacious tidbits than on musical style or cultural value, would almost never be asked of a serious male rapper. Because of Georgiades's gender, however, Ardisson chooses to discuss "feminine" matters such as boyfriends. He then goes on to ask further questions regarding the "bad girl" reputation: whether she has engaged in self-harm, how many packs of cigarettes she smokes per day, and if she's been to prison, for example. Finally, he transitions to talk about her music, but chooses songs to discuss that involve her relationships with men, such as "*Ma Souffrance*" and "*Daddy*." These lines of questioning reveal Ardisson's lack of respect for Diam's as a woman, but also indicate that even though *Brut de femme* had been a success, she still had to justify her worth via her relationships with men. As the interview continues, it grows increasingly distasteful. As if the gender disparity were not evident enough already, Ardisson concludes the interview by talking about how Diam's is becoming "*une vraie femme*,"[38] asking if she has high heels, whether it's difficult for her to walk in them, whether she cries when she breaks a nail, whether she's looking for a prince charming, and how many children she wants. He even goes so far as to make a comment about parallel parking. Again, these types of questions would never be asked of a male rap artist, especially not one who had been as successful as Diam's.

Along the lines of becoming "*une vraie femme*," in her book, *Autobiographie*, Diam's mentions how difficult it was for her to adopt a more feminine clothing style, opting instead for a more "masculine" look in her early years. She claims to have "adopted aggressive 'masculine' behavior" growing up in the *banlieue*, so the interview gave her a chance to prove her femininity

[38] "A real woman"

for the first time.[39] This interview forced her to confront her changing style to fit a feminine stereotype, but she also claims that it resulted in her being less respected in the rap world. In her autobiography, she discusses when she first started working with personal stylists and how they started urging her to wear less baggy clothing and more jewelry:

> *Alors que je ne me maquillais pas, ne portais pas de vêtements très féminins et n'attachais pas de grande importance à l'image que je renvoyais, j'ai fini entre les mains d'une styliste et d'un maquilleur qui m'ont incontestablement transformée.*[40]
>
> [While I didn't wear makeup, I didn't wear very feminine clothing and didn't attach much importance to the image I was sending, I ended up in the hands of a stylist and makeup artist who unquestionably changed me.]

She claims that as she took on this new femininity, she started to feel unrecognizable—but for the first time in her life, she also felt beautiful. Young girls often feel pressure to have their image match that of the celebrities in the media. She even addresses this fact in her autobiography: "*et, puisque dès l'enfance la société nous prépare à cela, je crois que je n'aurais pas pu le refuser*."[41] Society had prepared her to play this part, so she felt as if she had to submit to playing a more feminine role. For the first time in her life, Diam's image matched the media ideal because now she was one of the icons in the magazines. She believed herself to be pretty, but as she states, "*c'était comme si je perdais une partie de moi-même*."[42] As she gained more notoriety, Diam's started to conform to the ideals of the media and submitted to commercialism: she altered her identity to maximize her profitability. She explains that in order to gain respect and to become a star, one must first look the part: "*tenue de star exigée*."[43] This is seen in every

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[39] Anna Kemp, *Voices and Veils: Feminism and Islam in French Women's Writing and Activism* (Routledge, 2017), digital file.
[40] Georgiades, *Autobiographie*, 71.
[41] "And, because since childhood, society prepares us for this, I thought that I couldn't refuse it" Georgiades, *Autobiographie*, 72.
[42] "It was as if I lost a part of myself" Georgiades, *Autobiographie*, 71.
[43] "Outfit of a star required" Georgiades, *Autobiographie*, 72.

job market: to attain a professional job, one must dress the part.[44] So, Diam's makes the concession of "looking the part" of a female rap artist so that she can compete with others in a similar position. Like two people competing for a job, commercial musicians are competing for the public's attention.

Diam's also asserts her feminine identity through her *nom de guerre*, or stage name. Her name, "Diam's," is short for "*diamant*," which means diamond in French. She writes on why she chose this name:

> *J'avais trouvé cette definition dans le dictionnaire: '(n.m.) pierre précieuse, la plus brillante et la plus dure de toutes.' Le diamant n'est compose que d'éléments naturels et, en poussant mes recherches, j'ai appris que, selon la légende, il ne peut être brisé que par un autre diamant.*[45]
>
> [I found this definition in the dictionary: '(noun) precious stone, the shiniest and hardest of all.' Diamond is composed only of natural elements, and while pushing through my research, I learned that, according to the legend, it can only be cut by another diamond.]

In modern culture, diamonds are typically a feminine phenomenon.[46] By choosing this stage name, Diam's exerts her femininity while also showing her toughness and candidness. The diamond is a beautiful, precious gem with a brilliant sparkle, used in all sorts of jewelry usually worn by women, but especially in engagement rings. This positions the diamond as a gem given as "a token of love and marriage, something given by a man to a woman."[47] Diam's, however, claims the diamond as her own, not as a gift from a man, but representing herself as a woman. She also takes the beauty associated with the diamond and combines it with the naturalness and toughness of the stone. She says that diamond is composed only of natural elements, representing

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[44] Helen Scholar, "Dressing the Part? The Significance of Dress in Social Work," *Social Work Education, The International Journal* 32, no. 3 (2013).
[45] Georgiades, *Autobiographie*, 32.
[46] "Diamonds are a girl's best friend," engagement rings, etc.
[47] Rachel Garrahan, "Diamonds Unleashed," *The New York Times*, December 6, 2015. https://www.nytimes.com/2015/12/07/fashion/diamonds-unleashed.html?partner=bloomberg.

her frank honesty in her music. She tells real stories and communicates real emotions during her live performances, and she pours her heart and soul as well as all her energy into her craft. The toughness is also brought through in her performances. The last part of her diamond definition states that diamonds can only be cut by other diamonds. If she truly considers herself a diamond, this shows that only people on her caliber can hurt her. This gives her a tough external shell, just like a diamond. It forces her only to recognize people on the same level as her, promoting her rise to the top of her genre. By choosing this *nom de guerre*, Diam's proves to herself and to her fans that she is not only precious, but also nearly unbreakable.

While Diam's had already reached notoriety with previous albums, it was her controversial album*, Dans ma bulle* (2006), that brought Diam's to the forefront of feminist and political discussion in France. *Dans ma bulle* sold more than 800,000 copies, more than any other CD that year.[48] One reason for buying this CD was that it became controversial, and the public was curious to see what this female artist had to say. Prominent topics of the album include "love, ambition, family and women's issues" as well as politics such as in her tracks "*Ma France à moi*" and "*Marine*."[49] Through her own identity as a woman, she was able to talk about women's issues and quickly became a feminist icon.

Diam's feminism is very much focused on respect: she believes men should treat women with respect as well as women treating each other with respect. She talks about this in her track "*Dans ma bulle*" ("In My Bubble") while saying that in her bubble there is a lack of love, or respect. She denounces men and women for not showing themselves or each other the respect they merit:

Dans ma bulle, on fait tout en douce et en scred	In my bubble, people do everything sweetly and in secret

[48] Martin, "Rap as a Social and Political Revealer."
[49] Ibid.

Les jeunes fument et font l'amour dans des chambres d'hôtel	The young smoke and make love in hotel rooms
Des filles en manque de rêves couchent pour qu'on les aime	Girls lacking dreams sleep [with men] so that people love them
Des mecs en manque de respect poussent pour qu'on les craigne	Guys lacking respect fight so that people fear them

This excerpt shows that Diam's demands respect from both men and women in society, and that she's disappointed by the lack thereof: "*Dans ma putain de bulle, j'étouffe d'un manque affectif.*"[50] She denounces young women for giving themselves so easily and denounces young men for resorting to violence in order to be feared rather than respected. Overall, the song is a critique of how modern society has evolved to where sex is a commodity readily available ("*les actrices de film X sont devenues des artistes*,"[51] "*Loana baise dans la piscine*"[52]), and where actual love is lacking, as seen in the refrain: "*Nan, nan, nan sortez-moi de ma bulle, le manque d'amour me rend folle*."[53] Diam's believes this favoring of easy sex versus true love is a result of a lack of self-respect. Diam's feminist narrative isn't necessarily about girl power: it's about respecting oneself.

This idea of respect plays strongly into her religious identity of being a Muslim.[54] Respect is a fundamental value of Islam,[55] so after her conversion, her religious and gender identities went hand in hand. However, as will be discussed in the following section, many viewed her conversion as a limiting feature of her strong feminist ideals.

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[50] "In my bitch of a bubble, I'm suffocated from a lack of affection"
[51] "X-rated actresses have become artists"
[52] "Loana fucks in the pool"
[53] "No, no, no get me out of my bubble, the lack of love is driving me crazy"
[54] In 2008, Mélanie Georgiades made a controversial conversion to Islam.
[55] Mustafa Erdil, "The Value and Respect Given to Humankind in Islam: Tolerance and Respect for Human Beings," *International Journal of Religion and Spirituality in Society* 3, no. 3 (2014), Academic Search Ultimate (95942048).

RELIGIOUS IDENTITY

After photos were released in 2009 of Georgiades and her husband walking to a mosque, her media identity shifted. Gone was Diam's the rapper, replaced with Mélanie Georgiades, the author, the humanitarian, and, most importantly, the Muslim. So many media articles were written about her conversion to Islam that it is difficult to find any about her actual music during this time period. A decade later, she remains more famous for her religious identity than for the art that propelled her to fame in the first place. Far from "*Ma France à moi*," media sources now debate whether or not Georgiades even still lives in the country.[56] While she only wrote one album after her conversion, *SOS* (2009), her religious life played a significant impact on her media image and how her music is perceived today.

Georgiades's exposure to Islam began when she was still a child, as the Parisian *banlieues* contain a high concentration of Muslim families.[57] As a result, she had multiple Muslim friends growing up, and she always felt drawn to the faith. She was raised in a Catholic home and baptized a Christian; however, she never felt any strong connection to the faith, not fully understanding the importance of Mary and Jesus, and why they are venerated.[58] Nonetheless, she attended Catholic classes and partook in some of the rituals. She even wore a cross necklace as a "*besoin d'identité et de repère*."[59] However, soon her regional identity came to a crossroads with her religious identity. She recounts taking off her cross and joining an association to learn more about Islam during her teenage years. When she was 16 or 17, she started to observe the month of Ramadan and stopped eating pork.[60] From this time forward, she

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[56] "Concert: Vitaa sera à l'Espace Julien ce soir" ["Concert: Vitaa Will Be at the Espace Julien Tonight"], *La Provence*, October 5, 2018. https://www.laprovence.com/article/sorties-loisirs/5182686/vitaa-semancipe.html.
[57] *Banlieue de la République*, October 2011. http://www.banlieue-de-la-republique.fr/.
[58] Mélanie Georgiades, *Diam's Autobiographie* (Don Quichotte, 2012), 198.
[59] "Need for identity and for a personal compass" Georgiades, *Autobiographie*, 200.
[60] Georgiades, *Autobiographie*, 201.

started to *feel* Muslim, but it wasn't until some ten years later that she learned what it really meant to *be* Muslim and converted.

While Georgiades claims to have always identified with the Muslim faith, her official conversion happened following a suicide attempt. After reaching stardom, Georgiades started to become depressed between projects, such as between a concert tour and the recording of her next album. She made a few visits to a mental hospital, but always felt discouraged by the over dosage of medicine and the lack of actual healing.[61] Eventually, after a final trip to the mental hospital due to overdosing on sleeping pills, Georgiades found peace through Islam. She recounts visiting friends in the countryside after the incident and praying her first prayer with one of them.[62] Finally, after reading through the Quran multiple times, Georgiades made the decision to convert at Mauritius, her favorite vacation spot. She did so alone, with no one watching her—a sign that she hoped to keep her religious life as part of her personal life, and not to let it interfere with her public life. As soon as photos were published of her leaving a mosque, however, her religion became the most identifiable feature of her identity. A stolen photo of her private life suddenly made its way into her public life, and her media image was never the same. She became engulfed in what the media called a scandal. The most controversial decision made after her conversion, however, was her decision to wear the veil.

At first, Georgiades tried just to cover her extremities and hair with clothing; however, she eventually switched to more traditional clothing and now wears the jilbab.[63] Georgiades

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[61] "*Petit à petit, je n'ai plus fait que ça: me lever tard, allumer la télévision, rester au lit, espérer que la journée passe vite et reprendre des médocs pour dormir un peu*." ["Little by little, I didn't do more than that: wake up late, turn on the television, stay in bed, hope that the day passes fast, and take some meds to sleep a little."] Georgiades, *Autobiographie*, 167.
[62] Georgiades, *Autobiographie*, 189.
[63] A religious garment that covers the whole body except for face and hands Bronwyn Winter, "Secularism aboard the Titanic: Feminists and the Debate over the Hijab in France," *Feminist Studies* 32, no. 2 (Summer 2006), Gale Business Collection (GALE|A154448565).

recognized after joining the Muslim faith that she should wear the veil, but she had difficulty reconciling the veiled image with her identity as Diam's. Ultimately, she decided to cover herself, showing her commitment and submission to God's will. She continued making rap music after her conversion, altering her public image to be more modest. However, after the making of *SOS*, she decided to retire from rap and to lead a relatively quiet private life. She has only made two public appearances for video interviews since her retirement: both were to promote her books, speak out against the stereotype of Muslims in France, and to speak about her humanitarian efforts. She also wore a jilbab in both interviews.

Seeing a feminist idol like Diam's in a jilbab was a shock for many French citizens; it was also an extremely controversial choice, given France's veil laws. As I have already mentioned, mainstream French society tends to exclude populations that don't reflect with the stereotypical image of "Frenchness." This exclusion was codified into law via the veil bans in France. In 2010, France issued a law banning face veils from public places. This prohibition includes the niqab and burqa—two Muslim garments—and offenders could be faced with a monetary fine.[64] This law was preceded by another law created in 2004, banning the wearing of religious symbols in French public schools. The clothing items prohibited under this law include but are not limited to "the headscarf, a Jewish skullcap or a large Christian cross."[65] The purposes of these bans were to protect women from oppressive religious commitments as well as to promote conformity to a nationalistic culture. Since they are limiting freedom of religion, however, it has been debated whether or not these laws violate human rights. As a result of this institutional prejudice against Muslim women in France, where submitting to the veil meant

[64] Jill Marshall, "S.A.S. v France: Burqa Bans and the Control or Empowerment of Identities.," *Human Rights Law Review* 15, no. 2 (June 2015).
[65] Justin Vaïsse, *Veiled Meaning: The French Law Banning Religious Symbols in Public Schools*, March 2004, https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2016/06/vaisse20040229.pdf.

submitting to a system of oppression, many were shocked when Mélanie Georgiades wore a jilbab for the first time on national television.

After Georgiades made it public knowledge that she had converted to Islam and had begun wearing a jilbab, many were quick to criticize her, claiming that the woman who had taught French girls about feminism was now submitting herself to oppression. Because the first picture published of her veiled in 2008 was taken with her husband while leaving a mosque, the media made an association between being married and wearing the veil since no one knew she had married either. Magazine articles suggested that Georgiades had gone against everything she'd taught about self-respect and had submitted herself completely to her new husband.[66] It was so different from all the music she had written about respect and self-reliance that many of her fans turned against her. In reaction, Georgiades defended herself, saying that the veil actually made her feel freer and that she finally felt peace and happiness in Islam. As Georgiades became more at peace with herself, her priorities began to shift, and she started work on a humanitarian initiative. She began to think less about herself, and more about helping others. Her conversion to Islam helped her to be less self-involved and to use her gifts to promote charity in the world. During the time of the foundation of her humanitarian project the Big Up Project which aids orphaned children in Africa, Georgiades decided to end her music career since her private religious life was not compatible with her public life in show business.

Before leaving her performance career, however, Georgiades released one last album: *SOS*, released in November 2009. Through this album, the listener can hear how her conversion to Islam affected her musical style. Her music seems to have softened as she doesn't sound so angry in her tracks. The musical style is lighter, without hard drums and with a gentler lyrical

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[66] Adnane Bennis, "Diam's Conversion to Islam Annoys French Media," *Morocco World News*, October 2, 2012. https://www.moroccoworldnews.com/2012/10/59035/diams-conversion-to-islam-annoys-french-media/.

approach, and her lyrics are more introspective rather than critical. Her new softer approach is reflected in the text of "*Enfants du désert*" ("Children of the Desert") on top of a quiet piano-vocal beat. The lyrics concentrate on her trip to Africa, which inspired her to start her charity there:

Je suis sortie de ma bulle	I left my bubble
J'ai pris le temps de regarder le monde et d'observer la lune	I took time to see the world and to observe the moon
Donc voici la nouvelle Diam's, en paix avec elle-même	So here's the new Diam's, at peace with herself
Je préfère que ça parte aux enfants du désert	I prefer that it begins with the children of the desert

This entire track documents her personal journey through her depression and conversion. This excerpt, from the intro, makes a direct reference to one of her previous songs/albums, "*Dans ma bulle*,"—a 2006 song that explores life inside her own bubble. In "*Enfants du desert*," she says that she's left her bubble and has explored other countries with more diverse people. The reference is significant because it shows that Georgiades has evolved to concentrate on people other than herself, showing personal growth and empathy rather than selfishness and greed. In "*Enfants du désert*," she makes reference to her previous greed, rapping about all sorts of materialistic goods that she had.[67] In contrast to the celebratory materialism of much rap music, however, in this context she mentions these things to denounce her lifestyle of extravagant spending: "*Moi comme une tache, j'ai couru après le commerce et les dollars, au point d'avoir*

[67] "*Hélicoptere, taxi et jet, je suis montée sans mes tickets*" ["Helicopter, taxi, and jet, I boarded without tickets"], "*Black ou Gold, après le iPhone, il me faut le Bold et le iPod, et puis la Xbox connectée à la WiiFit, soirée Sim's entre filles, on se connecte en wifi!*" ["Black or Gold, after the iPhone, I needed the Bold and iPod, and then the Xbox connected to the WiiFit, Sim's evening between girls, we connected via wifi!"]

au poignet la même Rolex que Nicolas!"[68] She seems incredulous about how much she spent on seemingly pointless things, but uses this feeling as momentum to promote her humanitarian efforts. The track ends with a call to action for her listeners: "*J'ai besoin d'aide dans ma révolte, besoin de vivres dans ma récolte, besoin des cris de mon public, car j'ai besoin de bénévoles*!"[69] In this verse, she acknowledges her fans while explaining how they can still be a part of her life even while she transitions out of the public sphere. She says that she still needs her public so that she can have donors for her new humanitarian work. While Georgiades evolved as a person following her conversion, she also cites ways in which her public could evolve with her. In her transition, she used music as a means to launch the next part of her career: the Big Up Project.

The Big Up Project began after Georgiades's African music tour, during which time she visited several orphanages. After confiding to her inner circle that she wished to help orphaned children in Africa, she planned another extended trip to multiple countries so she could visit more orphanages and get an idea of what exactly they needed. Once she had done more research, Georgiades founded the Big Up Project. This project is a direct response of her religion working in her life, bringing her more peace and happiness. In 2019, the Big Up Project operates in Mali, Senegal, and Cameroon, helping to build wells, schools, and orphanages. During her transition from music to focusing on her private life, she also explored the paths of writing her autobiographies as well as becoming a mother.

In the midst of finishing her music career and beginning her private life, she gained attention from the *Ni Putes Ni Soumises* (Neither Whores nor Submissives) movement because of her religious choices. *Ni Putes Ni Soumises* is a Muslim, feminist movement promoting the

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[68] "Me like a stain, I chased commerce and dollars, to the point of having on my wrist the same Rolex as Nicolas!" This is a reference to Nicolas Sarkozy, previous president of France.

[69] "I need help for my revolt, need supplies for my collection, need shouts from my public, because I need help from volunteers!"

equality and respect of Muslim women, particularly in the *banlieues*. The journalist Daniel Strieff explains the movement's name:

> The group's name is provocative — and intentionally so. "Not whores" is aimed at young thugs who refer to all women except their mothers as whores, while "not submissives" is directed at intellectuals, politicians and other observers to alert them that merely because these women are oppressed, it does not mean they are simply passive.[70]

The group pushes for a modern version of Islam: one that adapts to mainstream society so that young girls can feel free to wear what they want, go out when they want, and can marry who they want without fear of violence. One of the ways the former president of the movement, Fadela Amara, seeks to accomplish this goal is by encouraging women to not wear the veil. She says:

> You must consider, the veil, for me, is not a religious symbol. It is a symbol of the submission of women in a patriarchal society with a tribal function…The veil is what creates the separation of the sexes and draws the line that separates equality of rights.[71]

This positioning of the veil as a symbol of submission creates a bigger challenge for Georgiades to reconcile. Because of the rising popularity of *Ni Putes Ni Soumises* at the time of Georgiades's conversion, many people, including Fadela Amara, thought that she had renounced feminism and had become a bad role model for younger girls. Amara states that "*elle devient un vrai danger pour les jeunes filles*."[72] Far from her inspirational feminist music, Amara feels that Georgiades started promoting a negative image of womanhood, which could be destructive for young girls.

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[70] Daniel Strieff, "For Women in France's Ghettos, a Third Option," *NBC News*, June 7, 2006. http://www.nbcnews.com/id/12812170/ns/world_news-islam_in_europe/t/women-frances-ghettos-third-option/#.XMzp9JNKjJJ.

[71] Ibid.

[72] "She is becoming a real danger for young girls." Yannick Very, "Amara: 'Diam's est un vrai danger'" [Amara: "Diam's Is a Real Danger"], *Paris Match*, February 12, 2010. https://www.parismatch.com/Actu/Societe/Amara-Diam-s-est-un-vrai-danger-150197.

Since Georgiades also married a Muslim man around the time of her conversion, many believed her veil was a sign that she had submitted to her husband, conforming to the stereotype of the oppressed Muslim woman.[73] In true "Diam's" fashion, she responded to *Ni Putes Ni Soumises* in one of her songs from *SOS* (2009). In the song "*Cause à effet*" ("Cause to Effect") Georgiades writes, "*Moi, je suis une future maman qui emmerde Ni Putes Ni Soumises*!"[74] Instead of trying to explain why she has chosen to wear the veil and to defend herself as a healthy role model for young girls, she chooses to denounce the organization and to further distance herself from it. In a later interview, she explains that it was too tiring having everyone talk about her, and that is one of the reasons why she chose to remove herself from the public eye.[75]

After releasing *SOS* and promoting her new charity, Georgiades effectively retreated from the public eye, focusing instead on writing her life story and raising two children. She released her books *Autobiographie* in 2012 and *Mélanie, Française et Musulmane* in 2015 (both of which have been primary sources for this study). The first autobiography served as a means for her to communicate with her fans while still keeping her distance from the public eye. The second autobiography was written after she felt compelled to justify her faith of tolerance in relation to the increasing terrorist activity in France. One interesting point, however, is that she appeared a few times on national television to promote her books. These television interviews marked the first time France had seen Georgiades wearing her jilbab; before, while touring to market *SOS*, she had tried to cover herself, but did not wear religious garments. This was a striking image for the national French public, which as I mentioned previously, many were quick

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[73] Gilles Médioni, "Diam's: 'Je me bats pour porter le voile'" [Diam's: "I Fight to Wear the Veil"], *L'Express*, September 21, 2012. https://www.lexpress.fr/culture/musique/diam-s-je-me-bats-pour-porter-le-voile-sereinement_1164402.html.

[74] "Me, I am a future mom who doesn't give a shit about Neither Whores nor Submissives!"

[75] Yannick Very, "Amara: 'Diam's est un vrai danger'" [Amara: "Diam's Is a Real Danger"], *Paris Match*, February 12, 2010. https://www.parismatch.com/Actu/Societe/Amara-Diam-s-est-un-vrai-danger-150197.

to criticize. Seeing the feminist rapper almost completely covered from head to toe brought about many suspicions, disappointment, confusion, and anger.

In 2012, Georgiades gave her first television interview in four years, appearing completely changed in her jilbab. The reactions were decidedly mixed: some expressed happiness for her that she had settled down and become a mother, but some were extremely hostile. Bruno Jeudy, a prominent journalist, took to Twitter, saying "*La promotion de Diam's voilée de la tête aux pieds c'est très dérangeant…ça alerte beaucoup sur le parcours de cette jeune femme qui est passé du survêtement à ça*."[76] Even more shocking is the testimony from Rost, a French rapper with Togo heritage who is president of *Banlieues Actives*: "*L'image pour moi elle est violente parce que je la connais. Je la connaissais avant cet episode-là*."[77] In this quote, Rost calls the new image violent and even changes from present to past tense when talking about knowing her. By adopting a new faith, Rost implies, Georgiades had effectively become a new person. While some argue that she had become brainwashed or was serving an agenda to popularize Islam in France, Georgiades is visibly happier during this interview and continues to be so because of her religious identity. This aspect of her identity has almost overtaken all other aspects because she has renounced them by renouncing her former career.

Georgiades nonetheless argues that she can maintain the balance between religious identity and gender identity and that she can still be feminist and wear a veil. In an interview with Gala magazine, she states: "*Si être féministe, c'est mettre en lumière les violences faites aux*

[76] "The promotion of Diam's veiled form head to foot is really disturbing…that says a lot about this young woman's path who went from wearing underwear to that." Atika Nasri, "Diam's voilée: l'interview de Sept à Huit affole certains journalistes!" ["Diam's Veiled: The Interview from Sept à Huit Panics Certain Journalists!"], *Pure Break*, October 2, 2012. http://www.purebreak.com/news/diam-s-voilee-l-interview-de-sept-a-huit-affole-certains-journalistes-video/47770.

[77] "The image to me is violent because I know her. I knew her before this episode."

femmes battues ou victimes d'injustices, alors je le suis."[78] Even veiled, Georgiades still fights for equality among women and argues that women should have choices in life, just as she chose to wear the veil. Georgiades's version of feminism relies heavily on respect, so she fights for women to be respected and to respect themselves and others. She ascertains that being veiled and being a feminist are not mutually exclusive, and she still fights against injustices around the world, as seen through her humanitarian efforts. She continues to have the same good heart as Diam's, but in the private sphere.

Today, Mélanie Georgiades leads a quiet life with her two children and husband. Since the publication of *Mélanie, Française et Musulmane* she has kept from the media's eye, to the point where little is known about her activities or whereabouts. Her longtime friend, the artist Charlotte Gonin (alias Vitaa), has revealed that Georgiades no longer lives in France. There is speculation that she has now settled down in Saudi Arabia, thousands of miles from the *banlieue* where she began.[79] Now that Georgiades has truly settled down away from the media, it is possible that she may continue to live her life peacefully, and in private, because of the peace she has experienced herself through Islam.

[78] "To be a feminist is to shed light on the violence done to beaten women or victims of injustices, so I am one." "Diam's: Voilée et féministe" ["Diam's: Veiled and Feminist"], *Gala*, May 29, 2015.
[79] "Concert: Vitaa sera à l'Espace Julien ce soir" ["Concert: Vitaa Will Be at the Espace Julien Tonight"], *La Provence*, October 5, 2018. https://www.laprovence.com/article/sorties-loisirs/5182686/vitaa-semancipe.html.

CONCLUSION

Through her poignant accounts of her French experience, Diam's shows how rap can be used for social change. During her active musical years, she encouraged political activism, promoted equality among genders, and gave a voice to members otherwise left out of mainstream French society. Even though hardly studied, her music had a significant impact on French presidential elections, reaching more people than news sources. Through the genre of rap, Georgiades effectively deconstructed mainstream French society and redefined what it meant to be French while also serving as an icon for young people through her songs about women's issues such as domestic violence and self-respect.

By examining Mélanie Georgiades through the lens of identity, one can see how each aspect played into shaping her style and her music. Georgiades reached fame because of the unique combination of regional, gender, and religious identity. These combine and evolve throughout her career; however, it is the blend of the three that allow her to reach stardom. For example, being a young girl from the *banlieue* launched her career because she had the experiences to rap both about women's issues and about regional issues. Later in her career, she had to fight to maintain her identity as both a free woman and a Muslim. These forces interplay and influence the music she's written as well as the books she's authored.

By examining Mélanie Georgiades as a single case study, I hope to shed light on the possibility of rap being a legitimate musical genre that pushes for social change. In a modern society where music may be more readily available than reliable news sources, rap (and hip-hop) serve to educate listeners. Just by checking Spotify, one can see that music such as rap or hip-hop is consumed daily around the world, so it's worth examining to see what messages are being spread to society. The genre is gaining popularity and subsequent academic recognition, as with

Kendrick Lamar's Pulitzer Prize for music win in 2018;[80] however, in the classroom setting, there are still more discussions about composers who have been dead several hundred years than musicians who are currently changing society. Through this essay, I hope to promote the study of mainstream musicians not only for their musical achievements, but also for the sociological (and sometimes political) implications. We consume popular music on a daily basis, so it is important to understand what we are listening to.

While the genres of rap and hip-hop often get dismissed as being too sexual or violent, the music also carries important messages relative to modern society as is seen in Diam's commentary on modern French society. Music is made for a reason, so it is important to think about the purpose and message behind the songs. Rap and hip-hop are no longer underground genres: they are changing the way our society functions and deserve to be recognized and studied as such.

[80] In 2018, Kendrick Lamar became not only the first rapper, but the first nonclassical or jazz musician to win the Pulitzer Prize for music for his album *DAMN.* This was seen as a major accomplishment for the genre of hip-hop to be recognized in a formal setting. Joe Coscarelli, "Kendrick Lamar Wins Pulitzer in 'Big Moment for Hip-Hop,'" *The New York Times*, April 16, 2018, https://www.nytimes.com/2018/04/16/arts/music/kendrick-lamar-pulitzer-prize-damn.html.

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