Scandal, Choice and the Economy of Minority Literature

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Abstract:
This essay proposes to examine minority literature, and the scandals often associated with it, as a function of economy and choice. Rather than weighing the political strategies of identity and representation available to minority literature, this approach aims to dissect the ways its circulation is conditioned both by the modern liberal principle of self-ownership and by the flexible conversion of value among different economies characteristic of late capitalist forms of recognition. The entanglement of these spheres of value becomes explicit in the moment of choice inherent to scandal, where the political or philosophical questions of minority identity are reduced to a matter of expenditure. Using the insights of Amartya Sen and Jean Baudrillard on the prerogative of choice in the constitution of capitalist subjects, I argue that it can offer a more comprehensive account of the political valence of minority literature, and its scandals, than the hermeneutics of representation.

Keywords: minority, scandal, literature, choice, economy, Paul Smaîl

Is it possible or useful to conceive of an economy of minority literature? Can one identify a network of channels through which ‘minority’ becomes an aegis for the exchange of certain kinds of value within the field of cultural commodification? And if so, what critical insights does an economic perspective on minority literature make available that are not already covered by the analytics of identity and representation most commonly deployed to study it? The answer to this question may begin at the crux between symbolic economies and materialist analyses of political economy, the two major thrusts of economic approaches to literature in recent decades. While the former, first theorized in the work of Pierre Bourdieu, alerts us to the
existence of internally regulated economies that ‘[function] as a specific market, generating a specifically cultural type of scarcity and value irreducible to (...) economic scarcity and value’,¹ the latter have led the charge against poststructuralist trends of culturalism by retraining debates over culture on the real problems of poverty, inequality and global divisions of labour that drive its circulation.² One articulates cultural meaning from within, the other inscribes it from without, but both approaches aim to discern the political, social and economic investments parlayed in the fabrication and consumption of cultural products.

This essay begins with the assertion that, while the interplay of symbolic and market economies has become a fixture of most contemporary forms of cultural production, it exerts a peculiar mechanism of control in the putative category of minority literature—that is, texts that are construed by producers, marketers or consumers to be somehow representative of a marginalized group, whether or not their content or the conditions of their production bear out such interpretations. I purposely adopt a pragmatic understanding of minority here—pace more narrow definitions based on hyphenated immigrant identities of First-World countries or subversive positionalities within dominant languages and cultures³—to allow a fuller account of the many parallels in the management of cultural difference at the national and global levels. Shu-Mei Shih has investigated the multi-tiered process of minoritization in Asian and Asian-American cultures, observing that ‘what is national in the Third World is turned into ethnic culture during minoritization after immigration, and, similarly, even those who are outside Western metropoles are metaphorically and oftentimes practically minoritized’.⁴ Parsing the lineaments of minority as a category of literature is not then so much a matter of deriving empirical taxonomies as it is of documenting processes, what Shih calls ‘technologies of recognition’: ‘mechanisms in the discursive (un)conscious—with bearings on social and cultural (mis)understandings—that produce “the West” as the agent of recognition and “the rest” as the object of recognition’ (GL, 17).

Shih’s characterization of the management of difference as a series of technologies invites us to probe the ways minor literature is patented and evaluated at the nexus of uneven and mobile chains of value. Even within the circuits of what James English calls the ‘economy of prestige’, it is especially difficult to sort through the factors shaping those investments where the standard offices of representation carry
the additional burden of multicultural agendas of social justice and the commercial networks that co-opt them.\textsuperscript{5} It may seem impossible to disinter the moment of choice, the node of intentions and judgements that motivate economic actors, from the concatenation of interests involved in the writing, selling and reading of minority literature, but this essay will make a case for the benefits of isolating, or at least imagining, that moment: specifically, my intention is to demonstrate how choice becomes explicit in scandals over minority literature, in effect pitting all the answers anticipated in Foucault’s hypothetical question near the beginning of ‘What is an Author?’ (‘What does it matter who is speaking?’)\textsuperscript{6} against real economic stakes (‘Are you willing to pay for it?’). The finality of choice announces one conclusion to the struggle between economics and culture, in that it gestures toward the all-pervasive encroachment of capital. In order to gauge or even refute that conclusion, I believe, cultural debate must open the lines of inquiry beyond the dispute between epistemological and political subjectivities, and prepare to follow the conflict between them to its ends in the undifferentiated array of the market.

Scandal offers a productive place to examine the economy of minority literature, not only for the starkness but also for the frequency with which it lays bare the expectations behind technologies of recognition and other First-World rituals of recognition: indeed, the archive of minority literature of the past half-century abounds with polemical cases of mistaken identity, literary pilfering and purported malfeasance. Among several well-documented examples, one may recall the scandal surrounding the testimonio of activist and Nobel laureate Rigoberta Menchú, who in 1998 was accused of making up several details in her account of the Guatemalan military dictatorship, or the humiliation of Malian Yambo Ouologuem, whose prize-winning, ‘authentic’ African novel \textit{Le Devoir de violence} (1968) was removed from distribution over accusations of plagiarism. Specific to the United States context are the case of \textit{The Education of Little Tree} (1976), an autobiographical tale of a young boy learning the ways of his Cherokee grandparents, which was eagerly adopted by Native American and ecological movements and in 1991 found to have been authored by radical Ku Klux Klan member Asa Carter; and the controversy over \textit{Famous All Over Town} (1984), the Bildungsroman of a boy in a Los Angeles barrio whose author turned out to be not a gang-scarred Chicano writer but Dan James, an elderly white man with an established screenwriting career. Many readers may also be familiar with the furor caused in certain French media outlets by the alleged
plagiarisms of Cameroonian writer Calixthe Beyala, or with the recent campaign of a group of Australian journalists to question the accuracy of *A Long Way Gone*, Ishmael Beah’s account of his forced recruitment as a child soldier during the civil war in Sierra Leone. As long as the list may seem, these are only a few instances of a phenomenon that has become symptomatic of the very category of minority literature. Lies, plagiarism, imposture — why are such allegations unusually common in texts presumed to represent minority constituencies, and what investments do they upset?

The prevailing line of argument in scholarship on minority scandal begins with the tautological nature of terms like authority, originality and ownership, which regulate engagement in literary fields and are overtaxed when they are conscripted to serve as the guarantors of minority representation. This discursive triumvirate provides the judicial grounds for modern authorship under the liberal cynosures of political and economic autonomy, thus positioning the rational subject as the linchpin of the authorial institution. In other words, the authority of the modern professional writer stems both from his right to hold goods individually and from his agency or ‘personhood’: not only are these states mutually dependent — pointing up the ambivalent relationship between the classic definition of ‘property’ and its capitalist scion — but they are also each buttressed in the notion of authority itself, in circular fashion. The dual agency of property is first evident in John Locke’s assertion in *Two Treatises of Government* that ‘every man has a property in his own person (. . .). The “labour” of his body and the “work” of his hands, we may say, are properly his’.7 Locke’s principle of property in the person or self-ownership turns on the paradoxical union of two different orders — persons and things, the alienable and the inalienable — without clearly privileging one over the other as the origin or keeper of the subject. The interdependence of the two categories, as Etienne Balibar has noted, leaves us to construe subjectivity as inseparable from the act of ownership, through which ‘the individual subject practically identifies himself with that property from which he forms his essence, [and] recognizes his identity in the actual process of appropriation and acquisition’.8 In these terms, people are, in a sense, what they have; their insertion in the community, as well as the existence of the community itself, comes from the contract of their labour or goods, which also represent their person. Indeed, C. B. Macpherson’s classic study of liberalism isolates possessive individualism as its ‘primary social assumption’, concluding that ‘human society can only be a series of relations
between sole proprietors, i.e., a series of market relations'. At the same time that self-ownership grows into a maxim of libertarian and contractarian variants of democratic thought, it lays the ground for modern authorship. Mark Rose handily explains that, in the Lockean rhetoric used to justify the passage of the first copyright laws in early eighteenth-century Britain, intellectual property is a measure of ‘ownness’ as well as of ownership: ‘A work was also the objec
tification of a writer’s self, and the commodity that changed hands when a bookseller purchased a manuscript or when a reader purchased a book was as much personality as ink and paper’.10

Insofar as the legitimacy and responsibility of the modern author is shored up in his proprietorship—his ability to own and sell the work of his labour—it fuels the reading institution with a clear fungibility from economic to cultural capital: a writer is proven trustworthy by virtue of his participation in the market. Within this general system of legitimization, however, the consecration of minority authors stands out in that it translates capital more easily in the opposite direction. One could say the marketability of minority authors, and indeed their ownership of their labour, is posited on their authenticity. This inclination supports the sound if somewhat trite complaint of critics that the reception of minority literature is often tainted with an expectation that the contents of the text present a verisimilar reflection of the experience and perspective of an identifiable political subject. Certainly, that expectation reflects the constraints of what Philippe Lejeune called the autobiographical pact, the signature contract of autobiographical writing by which author and reader agree that the character of the story is the same person as the name on the cover of the book;11 however, in the rubric of minority literature this pact has a tendency to ignore the parameters of genre and to inscribe every act of reading within the identity-seeking paradigm described by Lejeune. During the 2007 court case over Sarah—an American novel about a transgender teenage prostitute from Appalachia whose author, the pseudonymous J. T. LeRoy, made public appearances in the persona of the protagonist but was later discovered to be Laura Albert, a middle-class housewife—press coverage remarked upon the irony of this tendency: the plaintiff, a production company that had bought the film rights to the novel, maintained that they had ‘bought the rights to the identity of the book’s author’, successfully fixing the terms of the dispute as one over a falsified autobiography and signalling the ease with which Lejeune’s pact extends to fiction.12
Viewed within the hermeneutics of economy, the premium placed on identity highlights the fact that the value perceived in the text of LeRoy and those of the other authors mentioned—what made readers, critics and prize committees decide to recognize them as worthy of special notice—was stored largely in the equity of their presumed minority status. When the value assigned to difference within multicultural programmes of inclusion becomes a general good that is redeemable across cultural, commercial and political economies, the recognition awarded minority literature is a joint venture in which different actors, including readers, editors, academics and corporations, are invested through their desire to capitalize on the difference it is esteemed to contain. Oprah Winfrey’s juggernaut Harpo is perhaps the most powerful example of the ways corporate initiative can streamline consumer guidance, together with a vague promotion of social ‘awareness’ and personal development, into a cohesive product portfolio, but it is only one example. Take for instance the selection of Ishmael Beah’s *A Long Way Gone* as a featured title of the Starbucks Book Club in 2007. The company’s press release for the occasion shows how smoothly products of cultural difference (Beah’s book is billed in the statement’s subtitle as a ‘compelling, eye-opening memoir . . . a rare, first-person account of a child soldier in war-torn Africa’) translate into accoutrements for the affectively charged branding strategies of responsible business: ‘When recommending books to our customers . . . our goal is to complement the overall Starbucks Experience, building on the trust our customers already feel for the music and films we recommend’. By effectively incorporating Beah’s memoir to the Starbucks trademark as another part of the consumer experience, the copy of the release evinces a commutability among different spheres of value strong enough to portray the company as a trusted arbiter both of good taste and of ethical global stewardship (‘You owe it to yourself to read this book’, says Starbucks Chairman Howard Schulz), which, along with Beah’s remarkable experience of ‘war-torn Africa’, are on offer in its cafés.

In the typical configuration I have just outlined, minority literature travels through a curious matrix of value-coding, confounding the property-personhood dyad of self-ownership with late capitalist technologies of recognition. For if the latter express a predilection for what is different and exotic, qualities to be ensured primarily by the person of the author, the former remains the bulwark of institutional authorship, which it verifies through the same dialectic of identity (I own, therefore I am/I am what I own) that grounds contractual
liberal society. Without appealing to its circularity, one could describe this matrix as follows: the value of minority literature depends upon its representation of a culturally different, oppressed and/or exotic life, which is only valid if it can be attributed to the real life of a free, inalienable subject, who is free and inalienable because he or she made and sold the story. The anomalies inherent in this logic, if they serve to reveal the tenuous grounds of the entire enterprise of minority literature, also help explain the causes of minority scandals: these result from a lack of self-ownership and hence a lack of personhood on the part of the author, as well as from a disappointing or faulty investment on the part of the reader, who was not able to enjoy the thing he or she purchased. Both of these failures are scandalous in that they violate the norms of moral and economic contract that adjudicate public discourse in the modern liberal world. In her thoroughgoing examination of plagiarism, Marilyn Randall signals its inscription precisely as a transgression of one or both of these contracts: ‘Primarily, plagiarism is unethical because it contravenes the fundamental right to the exclusive enjoyment of and control over one’s property, either real or symbolic—that is, it is a form of theft—and, second, it is a misrepresentation of one’s self in situations where the justified expectations of others entail honesty and authenticity; in other words, it is a form of fraud’.14

If it can reasonably be assumed that other sources of scandal, such as imposture or inaccuracy in life stories, are also considered reprehensible for the reasons explained by Randall, then the scandals resulting from Menchú’s lies and Asa Carter’s or Dan James’s impostures would seem to hinge not so much on the falseness of their minority status as on their subversion of established conventions of literary propriety. Yet even where possessive individualism, weighted with the legal gravitas of words like fraud or theft, becomes the final vocabulary of scandal, it is still cathected by symbolic economy and thus offers a nodal point for residual racial and colonial anxieties. It is well known that the Menchú scandal served as a venue for the US culture wars, colouring the commentary of her detractors with the rhetoric of a last stand for the liberal principles of truth and personal accountability: articles from the debate brand Menchú as a ‘brazen confabulator’, a ‘crafty accomplice’ to leftist propagandism, terms that subtly channel racial stereotypes and evolutionist sentiment through their moral indignation.15 Eric Sellin, the first critic to denounce the plagiarism of Le Devoir de violence, similarly locates Ouologuem’s offence not in the act of copying itself but in the intent to betray the
Scandal, Choice and Minority Literature

trust of readers: his treachery, Sellin explains, casts doubt on the good faith emulation that ‘young writers’ such as Christopher Okigbo, John Pepper Clark or Léopold Sédar Senghor (all of whom, of course, are African) attempt of the styles of European authors, ‘without [their] effort being anything more than apprenticeship derivation or the result of a spontaneous kinship’. Historic commonplaces of the French mission civilisatrice, such as the strabismic image of the childlike yet treacherous native on display in Sellin's comments, continued to play a key role in the controversy over Calixthe Beyala's plagiarisms two decades later: Nicki Hitchcott details how the writer's marketability pivots on the aura of the sensuous black woman, which Beyala herself manipulates both in her books and as a public personality. As with Menchú and Ouologuem, the assessment of Beyala's propriety, her ownness and ownership, is caught up in the ideological tangle that, from historical discourses of imperialism to technologies of recognition, mediates her minority status.

So far I have attempted to sketch a general economy of minority literature as a structure that straddles both symbolic and market exchange. Broadly speaking, this economy inheres in the unstable relationship between the modern safeguards of authority — understood as a paradoxical dyad of self-ownership or property in the person — and socially, morally and economically conditioned desires for representations of cultural difference. The confrontation between these two forces provides for a reassertion of political and economic autonomy as first principles of modern subjectivity and literary propriety. It thus assumes a collective investment in the myth of continuity between author and work, a collusion that can boast both of claiming an identifiable political subject and of projecting a narrative in the maintenance of hegemonic systems of representation. Scandals figure in this economy as productive venues for the consolidation or deconstruction of the systems through which minority literature is read. It comes as no surprise that so many scandals of minority literature become centrepieces for major debates on the politics of difference, given the candidness with which they pose the choice between modern and un- or postmodern strategies of representation. The arduous disputes over the notion of ‘truth’ in both mainstream and academic media in the Menchú debate, the challenge plagiarists like Ouologuem or Beyala present to the latent colonialist orientation of the French publishing industry and other big issues brought to the fore by scandal, offer a pragmatic reprisal of the central question of minority studies: as R. Radhakrishnan puts it, ‘do minority discourses
do politics the old fashioned way, or do they have the nerve to transform the very model of the political and make room for a different kind of engagement with (...) agonism and antagonism?’.18

The chestnut reviewed by Radhakrishnan posits a choice between the strategic use of binary structures of representation for progressive political agendas, thereby running the risk of perpetuating ‘minority’ as the (mis)identifiable other; or, on the other hand, forgoing those structures altogether but sacrificing the power of ‘minority’ as a concrete and historically situated constituency. Henry Louis Gates, Jr. has weighed the same alternatives from a reader’s standpoint on the dubious concept of minority authenticity, paring them down to a matter of passing: for Gates, the vagaries of verisimilitude to which all reading institutions are ultimately subjected make it impossible to determine just how minority discourses ‘do politics’, prompting us to conclude that ‘like it or not, all writers are cultural impersonators’.19 As unappealing as that option may seem, intellectual work dedicated to minority discourse more often than not has turned to the same set of political choices, ranging from essentialist, atomic constituencies to purposefully slippery or interstitial subjectivities, inevitably opting, however cautiously, for the second. This is the course charted in Radhakrishnan’s second defence of ‘minority theory’, which ideally would use deconstructive critique to usher in an awareness of the de facto heterogeneity of the world — in effect, ‘minoritize’ the world — thus obviating the minority label as a shelter for disaggregated solidarity: ‘Within the double bind [of minority theory], the critical endeavor would be the unsettling of the binary matrix while the utopian move would be the generalization of heterogeneity over the entire body politic so that there will be a time when binarity will be no more’ (MT, 52). Despite the differences between Radhakrishnan and Gates, both leave readers with the same programme for interpreting minority literature, and minority scandals: the identity of the minority author either is important or it is not; but its importance, even when it must be recognized for the sake of solidarity, is at bottom simply a mirage of ideological binaries, nothing more than a manipulation of stereotypes and expectations.

Without forfeiting the redoubtable inroads made possible by the deconstructive rephrasing of readerly and writerly schematics, refocusing minority literature and scandal through the lens of economy would allow one to index several methodological and material considerations that remain unexamined in the discursive/political bind of identity and representation. From the view of political economy,
any account of global or minor literature is dependent on a sedulous enumeration of the flows of capital across and within borders that make such categories legible to producers and consumers. What is more, as actors in late capitalist market regimes, producers and consumers still interact as the self-owning individuals Locke envisioned: not only do their extratextual decisions — to write, publish, purchase, recommend, teach or study literature — constitute the identities and representations negotiated by minority literature in equal or greater measure than the textual decisions usually analysed in literary criticism, they also attest to the fact that identity and representation in many ways continue to be a function of liberal economic principles. Instead of limning the epistemological and political strictures of minority identities, then, a more practical documentation would begin at the invisible sites of their determination, in the moment of individual choice. There are two critical perspectives on choice that I find useful for this task. First, rational choice theory — most notably in the studies of Amartya Sen — has successfully wrested the purview of economic behaviour from the constraints of the self-interested ‘rational fool’ used by classic models, expanding the factors influencing economic decisions, as well as the terrain of the properly economic, to include commitment, cultural norms and identity. The speculative nature of Sen’s proposals, which are aimed at delineating those aspects of human behaviour that complicate rational prediction rather than proposing a conclusive econometric paradigm, provides an apt template for the kinds of aggregation necessary to divine what individuals invest, and why they invest, in minority literature. From a far-removed standpoint, Jean Baudrillard in *Symbolic Exchange and Death* also extends the realm of the economic, understood as the structural law of exchange, to choice as one limit-point of value maximization. I would like now to consider in detail a recent controversy of minority literature — one which, if borne of unique circumstances, nonetheless displays many of the predicaments of minority representation explored earlier — in order to extrapolate some ways the theorization of choice can provide a more muscular framework for the evaluation of scandal.

*Vivre me tue*, a novel published in France in 1997, is a tale told from the point of view of a young Beur (a French-born citizen of North African origin) named Paul Smaïl who lives in Paris and recounts his daily struggles to withstand the racism he faces as an Arab. The protagonist is painstakingly portrayed as an iconoclast who refuses to fit any label: he has a graduate degree in Comparative Literature — a detail no doubt meant to jar the reader who thinks all Beurs
are uneducated—and is a voracious reader of the western canon, although he adamantly rejects identification with both Maghrebi and French tradition. In what seems to be a deliberate continuation of this protagonist, the author of *Vivre me tue* used the pseudonym Paul Smaïl and refused to appear in public or meet with the press, in his own account to avoid being pigeonholed as the ‘bon Beur’, that is, a model minority figure who lends himself to coercion by dominant French society. But instead of using the anonymity of his pen name to take refuge in silence, Smaïl used it to erect a persona who, even as he insisted upon remaining unknown, went out of his way to pique readers’ curiosity as to his identity—an identity which, judging by the trail of clues he left, was that of none other than Paul Smaïl the protagonist. In an exclusive interview granted to *Le Nouvel Observateur* and sent from Morocco (where Smaïl had purportedly gone to ‘find himself’ after his first novel) the author summons readers’ intrigue with all the melodrama of a Hollywood star hounded by the media: ‘Je me laisse vivre. Thé sur la corniche, course à pied tôt le matin dans le parc de la Ligue arabe, je bouquine et j’écris. J’habite aux Palmiers chez une amie, et je vous en ai déjà trop dit. N’envoyez pas de paparazzi, je vous prie: il y a des tunnels ici aussi’21 (I’m taking life as it comes. Tea on the terrace, a run early in the morning in the park of the Arab League, I read and I write. I live in the Palmiers area [of Marrakech] at a friend’s house, and I’ve already told you too much. Please don’t send paparazzi, I beg you: there are also tunnels here). This game of hide-and-seek was in fact a publicity stunt: a slew of articles in national newspapers followed the trail of the literary hoax through three more novels by Smaïl until in 2003 the real author revealed himself. He turned out to be Jack-Alain Léger, a novelist and former pop star, and clearly not a Beur.

The Paul Smaïl affair is made more ironic by the fact that, of course, if Léger had really wanted to combat ethnic profiling in literature, to emancipate the ‘bon Beur’ and other exploited minorities by exposing the absurdity of social identity, he could have used a French-sounding pen name; a North African pseudonym—even Paul Smaïl, if it had really been meant to provide anonymity—would also have served to test and betray the public’s preconceptions of Beur literature. The spectacle surrounding the author/protagonist character of Smaïl suggests a more muddied set of intentions, some more consistent with the personal ambitions of a seasoned writer who was perennially disdained by the media (and as an openly gay author, a victim of discrimination himself) than with a crusade for individuality and free
expression. Both of those possibilities seem to be contradicted, in turn, with Léger’s self-defence that Beur readers appreciated his novels as a faithful representation of their lives, as in his assertion during the aftermath of the controversy that ‘j’ai su toute de suite que j’étais dans le vrai avec Vivre me tue (. . .) [puisque] Ali, Moh, Mourad, [et] Salim (. . .) s’étaient reconnus dans le héros du roman et approuvaient sa, ma volonté de rester (. . .) insaisissable, introuvable, imprenable’22 (I knew right away I was in the right with Vivre me tue [since] Ali, Moh, Mourad, [and] Salim had recognized themselves in the novel’s hero and approved of his, my will to remain (. . .) elusive, inaccessible, untouchable). Whatever sort of investment the Paul Smaïl scheme had banked on attracting, it worked: Vivre me tue made bestseller lists, was translated into English and was made into a film in 2002. The financial and cultural wagers made on the book panned out. But what did the consumers who made it a success think they were paying for?

From a political viewpoint, there are two main explanations. On one hand, Paul Smaïl’s emptying out of the category of author offers the pleasure of reading a story that, in theory, is attributable to anyone: it is thus well marketed to readers who delight in the free-floating signifiers associated with postmodern textuality. On the other hand, the suspense Léger conjured through his flirtatious engagement with the press can be summed up as a sort of bet. Readers interested in solving the mystery necessarily made an investment in confirming their own conjecture. Paul Smaïl either was a Beur, in which case the reader would be gratified by his narrative of exceptional achievement; or, he was not a Beur, in which case those who always doubted a Beur could write so well would be satisfied in having guessed correctly. These are the possibilities to be imagined through an appraisal of the controversy as an either/or proposition on minority identity. However, such a form can only be imputed to the controversy in its outcomes, in the success or failure of the book; the motives for its success are almost infinitely variable, and it is precisely their variability that can register the political valence of minority literature as a function of choice. Heeding Amartya Sen’s convincing articulations of the dynamism of preference as an indispensable component of utility maximization, one finds a panoply of reasons why readers may ‘prefer’ Smaïl’s book, depending on the menu from which it is chosen (students reading Vivre me tue as a course requirement have a different menu to choose from than a reader who selects the book from recommended titles on Amazon.com), goals (a reader who has personally suffered discrimination may pursue a different set of goals than a reader acting on a curiosity about Beur
culture) and the process involved in making the decision. It is with especial insistence that Sen restitutes this last element to economic calculations of choice, shifting the ground of liberal autonomy from maximization or optimization back to the inalienable right to choose. He states as a manifesto at the beginning of *Rationality and Freedom*: ‘To deny [the diversity of reasons that may sensibly motivate choice] in favor of conformity with some preselected mechanical axioms (...) or with some prespecified “appropriate” motivation (...) would involve, in effect, a basic denial of freedom of thought. Our motives are for us to choose (...) unregimented by the authoritarianism of some context-independent axioms or by the need to conform to some canonical specification of “proper” objectives and values’. According to Sen, the fact of choice itself is the cornerstone of economy, rather than what or why people choose. That is why assessments of minority scandal according to representation tend to dissatisfy: one can adduce the case of Paul Smaïl to support Gates’s statement that, indeed, all writers are cultural impersonators, as well as one can agree with Azouz Begag, the former French Minister of Equal Opportunities—and a renowned Beur author—when he declares himself to be ‘appalled by the fact that *Vivre me tue* is now being taught in (...) numerous universities around the world (...) as representative of Beur literature’. Both positions are equally correct or false as two sides of the same coin, but neither can comprehend that the very act of the coin toss already fulfills the fundamental concern of scandal and the general marketing of minority literature, which incorporate difference into the network of capital by refashioning it as a choice. In fact, all the actors recruited to the propagation of minority as a category of capital are invited to deliberate on its proper constitution within the terms of self-ownership and exchange laid out by Sen.

The priority of choice is also featured in Jean Baudrillard’s *Symbolic Exchange and Death*: here it serves to indicate capital’s retreat from production, carried out in political economy, to reproduction, manoeuvred from behind the scenes in the consolidation of the symbolic code. Whatever the distance between his project and the pursuits of Sen, Baudrillard fully concurs that the prerogative of choice is a requirement for the formation of capitalist subjects. The elevation of political economy from an agent charged with the determination of value through production, to a simulation of capital’s symbolic function, an ‘alibi’ that masks the structural law of value, depends for Baudrillard on the proliferation of options from which subjects apperceive the trajectory and the possibility of change: ‘power is
only absolute if it is able to diffract into various equivalents, if it knows how to divide in order to become stronger. This goes for detergent brands as much as for peaceful co-existence.25 The fabrication of choice, as through tests and referenda, permits and even encourages plurality and inclusion, because in giving variety it controls the choosing subject. Whether the choice act is framed as part of Sen’s determinant political economy or Baudrillard’s hyperreality, the choices people make are real, and they constitute them as real, free subjects. Despite the divergence of their paradigms, then, Sen and Baudrillard help us to tease out the duplicity of choice in the Paul Smaïl scandal. This duplicity is situated, once again, at the ambivalent construction of self-owning individuals, which anchors the inalienability of the subject in the right to alienate his or her person through goods or labour. When identity becomes the content as well as the authoritative structure of exchange, as is the case with the economy of minority literature, the choice of Sen — the hallmark of free, rational people — becomes indistinguishable from the choice of Baudrillard — the endless and unqualified commutability of individuals. The Smaïl hoax makes such a conflation patent by usurping a certain kind of choice (Beur literature, imbued with the ethnicity of the writer) with the prerogative of choice. This confusion, which no doubt had a hand in the success of Smaïl’s novels, is apposite to the directions institutional policy in France has taken to address the economic and social disenfranchisement of African and North African minorities. Among First-World ‘host’ nations, France is notoriously averse to the politics of recognition embraced by its Anglo-American counterparts: the government’s grudging concessions to multicultural policy, such as the appointment of a Minister of Equal Opportunity or new laws to prevent discriminatory hiring practices, evidence a tense negotiation of the universalist ideals of the Republic and the demands of its underrepresented and largely ghettoized minority communities, manifested most recently in the riots of 2005 and 2007.26 The Smaïl affair suggests that, in the cultural marketplace, this tension is likely to be resolved through the surreptitious resurgence of the universal individual in the place of the culturally different particular: indeed, more than one critic has attributed the popularity of Smaïl’s books to the obsessive individualism of his protagonists.27 The sphere of consumer choice, then, may provide a more exact account of the path of multiculturalism’s development in France than the arena of political debate alone.
But the *Vivre me tue* controversy incites another question that is perhaps of more consequence: does the choice elicited by scandal qualify as a referendum in Baudrillard’s sense? This would mean that the verdicts arrived at over controversial minority literature represent nothing so much as the renewed commitment subjects make to their freedom as it obtains in the market, and thereby recommit to the real power of its symbolic code. Sen and Baudrillard agree on this point, differing only in their understanding of the ‘real’ location of power, and neither is wrong, for once the mind is made up the autonomous individual lives on, either as the master or slave of his or her own existence. However, it is not the consequences but rather the act of choice that must be considered, its existence as a moment where a series of unlikely equivalences—between people and things, difference and identity and cultural and economic capital—are secured. Balibar captures this moment in the category of labour, which serves as a metonymic converter for the alienable (the ‘owned’) and inalienable (the ‘own’) that make up the self-owning person; it is ‘the process where the places of the subject, the self and the own, are continuously exchanged’ (*PL*, 304). This dialectic of the proper involves the loss of part of oneself through work and the simultaneous retrieval of a whole and inalienable self. Much like labour, the act of choice invites or coerces the creation of subjects through a dialectic of loss and gain: the sacrifices it requires grant the chooser a place as a free subject. As Balibar points out, though, such a thesis of the individual supposes a constitutive exchange that is forever already completed. That is, the return anticipated by the alienated or choosing self—the return of the inalienable and free individual—has already, ex nihilo, founded that self in order to accept its sacrifice; its choice is the eternal exchange that upholds the surface of the symbolic code.

Balibar exposes this lack at the heart of possessive individualism to undertake a deconstructive ‘reversal’ of its operations; here, the same move opens a hypothetical space to imagine the moment of choice, extracted from the self-perpetuating narratives of the market or identity, where the subject-to-be surveys the available options. In the choice forced by scandal, as we have seen, these options belong to different orders of value: the decision not only entails a judgement of personhood in the terms of political economy, it also enjoins a reconsideration of the intraconversions among different forms of capital that solidify ‘minority’ as a consumer niche. All of these concerns are explicitly bound to the economic ‘price’ of the choice
itself, ultimately funnelling the epistemological or philosophical issues raised by scandal to a question of expenditure: are you willing to pay for it?

The question is structured as a referendum, but I would like to conclude by suggesting that it need not always play out as one. This possibility has to do with the directness of the equivalences built into the ultimatum, which, even if they are implicit in any decision regarding minority literature, acquire a special artificiality through the lens of scandal. The candour with which choosers are asked to ‘pay’—for acceptable representations of difference or freedom from representation, for their right to choose, or any combination of these and many more—may be so disingenuous as to introduce a hiatus in the codified narratives of subjectivity that project possessive individualism and choice as their limit and lack. In one of the notes to his discussion of simulation, Baudrillard describes the obscenity of a bank advertisement that announces to consumers, ‘I am interested in your money. Fair is fair: lend me your money and you may profit from my bank’ (SED, 46). The complicity assumed by the ad, says Baudrillard, can only signal the completeness with which capital has fled the realm of economics. The obscene directness with which it proposes economic transaction contains an innuendo of the symbolic exchange it is really asking for. One need not subscribe to Baudrillard’s vision of semiotic reproduction to appreciate the ken it lends to examining the equivalence between contractual self-ownership and the instant fungibility of the market that informs the reception of minority literature. In insisting on that equivalence directly, even lewdly, the choice of scandal affords choosers the opportunity to pause momentarily the signifying chain between the identity of political economy and the semiotic field of late capitalist markets. That is, when scandal asks readers to vote for or against writers like Smaïl, the vote they first cast for themselves as self-owning individuals concatenates the value of the authorial institution with the flexible codification of difference, collapsing all three (re)productive spheres into one choice more crudely than at perhaps any other moment in the consumption of minority literature. In this very crudeness, the choice incited by scandal can provide the space of what Brett Levinson calls ‘(in)decision’, a space to take stock of the symbolic and economic investments it demands, even if it is impossible in the end to refrain from those investments. Insofar as it suspends subjects in an instant of (in)decision, scandal offers a comprehensive glimpse of the entanglement of different orders of value threaded through
minority literature, and perhaps an alternative account of the ways this literature can ‘do politics’. Apprehending the ways minority scandal inheres as a function of choice and economy, rather than of identity and representation, may open up that possibility.

NOTES

3 This last refers to the definition given to ‘minority’ in Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari’s ‘What is a Minor Literature?’, in Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature, translated by Dana Polan (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986), 16–27.
5 James English, The Economy of Prestige: Prizes, Awards, and the Circulation of Cultural Value (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2005). English plots out this economy through the specific phenomenon of the cultural prize as a sort of calibration of cultural, economic and social systems of measurement in the exercise of power under the guise of cultural authority.
10 Mark Rose, Authors and Owners. The Invention of Copyright (Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard University Press, 1993), 121.
13 http://news.starbucks.com/article_display.cfm?article_id=123, consulted 21 August 2010, 2.00 p.m.


21 ‘Smâl nous écrit du Maroc’, *Le Nouvel Observateur* 1718, 9 October 1997, 60. The tunnel reference is to the death of Princess Diana, which occurred less than two months before the interview was published.


26 Indeed, the very concept of ‘minority’ in its Anglo-American sense does not have a place in the French civic idiom, although the exclusion and discrimination of citizens of Caribbean, African and North African descent mirrors that experienced historically by British or North American minorities. Karima Laachir (‘France’s “Ethnic” Minorities and the Question of Exclusion’, *Mediterranean Politics* 12:1 (2007), 99–105) offers an excellent overview of this dynamic.


28 Levinson suggests, in terms apposite to the alternatives presented by Radhakrishnan and Gates, that ‘[p]olitics (…) rests in the situational “in(a)decision” between groundedness and groundlessness, closure and openness, exclusion and inclusion, essence and contingency’ (Brett Levinson, ‘Sex without Sex, Queering the Market, the Collapse of the Political, the Death of Difference, and AIDS: Hailing Judith Butler’, *Diacritics* 29:3 (1999), 81–101 (100)).