



# 99

## INTERVIEW WITH MARC NAMMOUR

### What does the number 99 mean?

**Marc Nammour:** The first time I encountered that number, I was eight, filling out a registration form for school that asked for my name, date of birth, and department of origin. That day, I learnt that, according to the French administration, my department of origin was the 99. I looked around me and realised I was the only "99." I felt a little marginalised. Afterwards, when I started looking for that department, I realised it didn't actually exist. It's a catch-all creation: no one knows where it begins or ends. It covers everyone born outside of France, whether they are French citizens or not, who work on French territory.

### Many see it only as a convenient means of classification. What does that number evoke for you?

It's a question that's always been there, although it wasn't at the heart of my reflection. I think that the place you were born doesn't define you, whereas the idea of social origin, which is very present in my work and in my writing, seemed more interesting. But for the past four or five years, the often-nauseating debates about identity that have shaken our society have forced us to pick a side, to define our position. It's only after hearing question after question about this so-called national identity that I started wondering again what I represent for France. That question became even more pressing recently, when the idea of depriving people of their nationality took centre stage in those debates. I was trying to have my nine-year-old daughter be granted my dual citizenship. I meant it as a transmission of cultural wealth, but I started wondering if it was really a gift I was giving her. It is to question what society says on that subject that I wanted to work on that number, 99, which doesn't refer to anything in particular, neither a place nor a culture, but is only a sign that those it covers are "not from here." If I have to decide for myself, if I have to claim something for myself, it is that I'm both from here and from elsewhere.

### Of all the department numbers, wouldn't the 99 be the least offensive of all, the least reductive, as it doesn't box people in?

Indeed, I am from "department 99," whose inhabitants are of all colours, all cultures, speak all languages. I'm very happy about it. My identity is complex, and I fail to see how that would be a danger. Explaining in the show the complexity and richness of that identity, which shifts and evolves with every new encounter or journey, tends to show that we are all 99. It's also the name of a movement that has nothing to do with nationality and highlights a feeling of community shared by people from all over the world: we're the 99%, faced with the 1% who rule the world "through" finance. There's an echo of that in the status of 99: it's based on the same idea of recognising a shared strength in a multitude of individualities. If we're all "99," we can hope to overcome the consanguinity of a boxed-in society. Finally, faced with the rise of the National Front, I want dearly to talk about the human aspect of things: behind a number, there are destinies, lives, exiles, and an enrichment of the country that welcomes those people.

### Isn't the existence of borders between countries, musical genres, and languages necessary for people to play with them?

It's not borders that allow this kind of play. I hate classifications and boxes. I refuse to slap a label on my creations: rap, slam, poetry... The future belongs to fusion. Borders, in all domains, are never drawn by the ones affected by them. They're always fixed by those in power. They don't say anything about identities. Why should welcoming someone be seen as a threat to a country's identity? The identity of a territory is made up of the identities of people who are there, who live, and therefore change. It's obvious. I bear no slogan or vision; all I want is to remind people that *it's not a big deal*. The phrase "citizen of the world" may seem naïve or romantic, but it's one in which I recognise myself. Today, I live in France, but who's to say I'm not going to spend the next twenty years in Argentina? If I did, Argentina would also be part of my identity. Who would have a problem with that? My hope is for laws to correspond to reality. It's time to bring down walls. To stubbornly rely on outdated notions of identity is to refuse to move, to travel, to ever live somewhere else or meet someone different. It's terrifying.

**You've invited four artists to come mix their music and poetry to yours. Is your unease about that question what brought you together?**

Yes, and above all the desire to overcome it, along with the people who'll come listen to us. The ghost department "99" is a free territory where we can invent a beautiful story. I invited Abdullah Miniawy, whom I met in 2014 in Alexandria, and who's been like a long-lost brother to me. We share a certain humanism, a healthy anger, and a need to shout our refusal to wear the uniform some would want us to. He has to face very serious questions of identity. In Egypt, where the Muslim Brotherhood smothered the winds of freedom by fanatically strengthening religious principles, it's become essential to come up with a different Arab identity. Abdullah Miniawy is a staunch opponent of standardisation. Together, we talk about what it means to be a foreigner, about integration—a word that's been used so much that it now means the opposite of what it once did—and so about disintegration, which are deemed necessary to fit in. Of course, his presence also has something to do with the artistic pleasure there is to create a form at the junction of western and eastern music. We've therefore surrounded ourselves with Lorenzo Bianchi-Hoesch, with whom I created an "operap,"  *Ici le bout de la chaîne (Here the end of the chain)*. He'll create an electro-acoustic base, will treat the music live, and conceive the diffusion system. Amir ElSaffar, whose identity straddles both Iraq and the United States, will bring his trumpet and santur. His virtuosity owes as much to jazz as it does to Iraqi maqams, which he both studied at a very high level. Finally, Jérôme Boivin will play the bass, double bass, and keyboard. Combining oriental scales and occidental rhythms with ease, he also likes to play with and between codes. This formation is therefore a "99" in and of itself.

**How was your show built?**

Lorenzo Bianchi-Hoesch suggested a minimalist tempo and atmosphere to create a specific world. Using that as a foundation, Abdullah Miniawy and myself wrote separately, before the energy of the collective and the sharing of our conceptions led to the final version of the texts. We'd decided that I would work on the theme of the departure and that Abdullah would adopt the point of view of the one who stays behind and watches the other go. Those two aspects, inherent to the status of "99," feed each other and manage to tell a long story, understandable through other means than just intelligible meaning, as it is weaved of both French and Arabic, the words constantly crossing without ever being translated. Sometimes, our voices come together, sometimes they follow each other, sometimes they grow quiet to give way to the music... There won't be any system—it should be obvious by now that I'm not a fan! As for the instrumental side of things, the songs were built through successive improvisations from which we extracted the best bits after a number of rehearsal sessions. I didn't want to close off this shared world, or the individual ones each of us brought to the project. I trusted in the meeting of these people, I knew their individual talent, I knew they could come together. But I wanted us to find the way to that harmony freely.

**Can't the convening of this group and the way you work together be seen as a proposition to recognise our multiple nature?**

What I'm afraid of has nothing to do with those threats of terrorist attacks, of invasions... What scares me is the fear of the other. I want to fight it through words and artistic associations that show that meeting the other leads to mutual enrichment. It's essential for poetry to be political. In times as dark as ours, cultural projects must have meaning. The word "poetry" is often linked to silly, hollow things that claim to speak to everyone but end up saying nothing. In the noble sense of the word, though, poetry is a language that can rise against the words of politics, of institutions, of the media. It provides a salutary shift in perspective, frees us from the blinders imposed by standardised speeches, and leads to an enlargement of the small place society assigns us. It is proof that another form of expression is possible. Poetry is the most beautiful, but also the most powerful thing.

Interview conducted by Marion Canelas  
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