

## **Hip Hop in Relation to Minority Youth Culture in France**

*Amanda Cottingham*

In 1991, the French Minister of Culture, Jack Lang, invited three rap groups to perform at the prime minister's garden party at the Matignon palace for members of the National Assembly<sup>1</sup>. French rappers today are not all on such amicable terms with politicians but are widely popular among the younger generations, a fact that was noted when riots broke out in 2005. Many of these rappers embrace immigrant communities, bringing their issues to the forefront because several are of foreign descent themselves, particularly Arabic North Africans. While the government might want to preserve a traditional view of French culture, modern musicians are celebrating the cultural diversity immigrants bring to the nation. The rap genre has grown in popularity in France to such an extent that despite degenerating relationships with the government, rappers are able to show support for minority groups while maintaining a broad base of popular support from the youths. Unlike other popular forms of music that act simply as a form of entertainment, developments of rap in France show that it is closely linked to social issues facing minority youths.

Hip hop is not, however, native to France but rather an imported style which originated in the United States, the South Bronx of New York in particular. In the early 1970s, a former gang member, Afrika Bambaataa organized a group called The Zulu Nation to draw disaffected youths away from gang fighting and instead towards music, dance, and graffiti in order to introduce them to the various elements of hip hop culture.<sup>2</sup> The genre's growth from origins in African-American culture has created debate as to

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<sup>1</sup> Barry James, "French Rap and the Art of Vandalism," *The International Herald Tribune*, 4 July 1991.

<sup>2</sup> Andy Bennett, *Popular Music and Youth Culture: Music, Identity and Place*, (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2000), 134.

whether or not the genre is uniquely African-American, with criticism on its commercialization pointing to groups such as the commercially successful, non-African American, hip-hoppers the Beastie Boys, who have not given a voice to the black community or highlighted the experience of African-American youths.<sup>3</sup> Some American rappers have shifted the focus of their songs away from the traditional expression of inner-city discontent while continuing to use the standard rap style of vocal delivery over a continuous beat. French rap is often the opposite, as the musicians cover issues similar to those of original hip-hop songs in the Bronx, themes relating to the young and poor living in housing projects, without always following the traditional compositional patterns of rap. When rappers in France draw inspiration from the conditions of residents in subsidized housing though, the issues they address are often ones regarding France's immigrant population.

Many rappers in France have emerged from these suburban subsidized housing projects, *Habitations à Loyer Modéré* (HLM), which similarly to the American ghetto, are seen as areas embodying negative aspects of society and facing issues with drugs and violence. A noted difference between the two is the great ethnic diversity in the HLM, which houses French families as well as immigrant ones, particularly "from many areas of the former French colonial empire: Blacks from Africa and the French Caribbean, Muslims from Algeria, Morocco, and Tunisia."<sup>4</sup> Personal experience in these multi-cultural communities provides French hip-hop artists with inspiration for their work, expressing their negative feelings towards the government as members of the lower echelons of society. The cycle of poverty and lack of opportunity is a widely addressed

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<sup>3</sup> Bennett, *Popular Music and Youth Culture*, 136.

<sup>4</sup> André J. M. Prévos, "Hip-Hop, Rap, and Repression in France and in the United States," *Popular Music and Society*, 22 (Summer 1998), 68.

theme in the genre and the direct experience of the musicians themselves creates stronger ties to their listeners, rather than acting as a third party observing a negative situation.

Reaching out to these communities provides hip hop artists with a large fan base among the approximate fifteen million residents that are foreign or ethnic minorities.<sup>5</sup> The genre of music reached France in the autumn of 1982 when the radio station Europe 1 brought a tour to France featuring the three elements Afrika Bambaataa had focused on in the Bronx (music, dance, and graffiti) with Bambaataa himself representing the music branch. The impression this music left on ethnic minority regions prompted André J. M. Prévos to write in the *French Review* that French rappers “express opposition to the social order and to political and economic systems which have led to what they call ‘oppression’ of minorities (Arab immigrants in particular). French rappers tell about the hardships of everyday life in the poorer suburbs which they often characterize as *le ghetto*.”<sup>6</sup> Their open discourse of the suburbs not only appealed to the residents who sympathized with the lyrics, but French hip-hop was also seen as an art form by many politicians and professors as well.<sup>7</sup> Although public perceptions of the movement differed from Americans’ associations with the genre, American rappers continued to play a nurturing role in the still developing movement.

As seen by the transposition of US hip-hop culture to France, New York City in particular played an important role in the development of French hip hop. Furthermore, Phillippe Fragione, better known as Akhenaton, of the Marseillais rap group IAM created a culture channel by traveling between New York and Marseilles annually in the 1990s

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<sup>5</sup> Hugh Dauncey and Steve Cannon, *Popular Music in France from Chanson to Techno: Culture, Identity and Society*, (Grand Rapids: Ashgate, Limited, 2003), 191.

<sup>6</sup> André J. M. Prévos, “The Evolution of French Rap and Hip Hop Culture in the 1980s and 1990s,” *The French Review*, 69 (1996), 716.

<sup>7</sup> James, “French Rap and the Art of Vandalism.”

which allowed the group to draw influence from sources other than the concurrently developing Parisian scene and create their own unique style.<sup>8</sup> Four of the six members of IAM were Marseilles-born with one born in Algiers and only one Marseillais parent between the six of them. The others were primarily descendants of Italian, Algerian, Senegalese, and Spanish parents.<sup>9</sup> Rather than proliferate French nationalism, the group instead celebrates the cultural diversity found in Marseilles. Despite at times harsh treatment by the mainstream press with accusations of incendiary behavior in the 1990s, Akhenaton continued to preach non-confrontational conduct to his listeners.<sup>10</sup> The worst accusations against French rappers and the nation's minority youths, however, were yet to come.

Tensions between rappers and the government escalated in 1995, resulting in a 1997 court case against the rap group NTM. In June of 1995, three neofascist *Front National* members were elected mayors in southeastern French cities where populations of Algerian and other Muslim immigrants are high due to decolonization. Reacting quickly, opposition parties organized a "Freedom Concert" set to take place July 14, 1995 and include musical performances as well as an appearance by the then former Minister of Culture Jack Lang.<sup>11</sup> Bastille Day (July 14) traditionally celebrates Liberty, Equality, and Fraternity of all French citizens and served well as a backdrop for this concert following the election of anti-immigrant politicians. On this festive occasion, however,

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<sup>8</sup> Dauncey and Cannon, *Popular Music in France*, 196.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 195.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>11</sup> Prévos, "Hip-Hop, Rap, and Repression," 73.

members of the rap group NTM were unable to keep out of the political radar when they linked fascism with the French police during their onstage conversation between songs.<sup>12</sup> In November of 1996 the musicians were sentenced to three months in prison, three months suspended, and six months of no public performances. It is perhaps no coincidence that judge Claude Boulanger, was a resident of Toulon, one of the three cities in which a fascist mayor had been elected one year prior, showing the possibility for bias due to local politics.<sup>13</sup> The sentence was suspended after the rappers appealed the ruling and their case came to a close in June of 1997, this time with less-harsh punishment.<sup>14</sup>

NTM's court process was short in comparison to that of Mohamed Bourokba, better known as Hamé in the group La Rumeur, who was informed in March of 2003 that he was being sued by the government for libel against the national police. His wrongdoing was tied to his inclusion of an article in the insert of La Rumeur's 2002 debut release, in which this son of Algerian parents wrote, "[t]he reports of the Interior Ministry will never acknowledge the hundreds of our brothers killed by the police ....The reality is that living in our neighborhoods today means you have a greater chance of experiencing economic abandon, of psychological vulnerability, of discrimination in the job market, of unstable housing, of regular police humiliations."<sup>15</sup> After five years and two appeals, Hamé's case was cleared in 2008, which he saw as a victory for freedom of speech in the nation. His article was a peaceful expression of frustration, urging the group's fans to take a look at current events, not telling them to take up arms, yet by

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid, 75.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid, 76.

<sup>15</sup> Katrin Bennhold, "Rapper in France is acquitted of libeling the police," *International Herald Tribune*, 23 September 2008.

slandering state officials, he joined the ranks of several other French rappers who have gone through court cases for similar reasons.<sup>16</sup>

Claims against rappers for promoting rebellious behavior among their fans reached a high following the period of civil unrest in 2005, initiated by the deaths of two North-African adolescents by electrocution in an electric sub-station while hiding from the police. Youths took to the streets, expressing their discontent in protests while burning cars and carrying out acts of vandalism in a wave of chaos and riots that lasted from October 27 through November 18 sprawling out from their point of origin in the suburbs of Paris. Reporting on November 4, 2005, ABC News pointed to France's ethnic make-up as one source of the problem, with forty percent of the population descending from foreign nations and the difficulty of non-European ethnicities to assimilate into French culture.<sup>17</sup> By reaching out to these youths, French rappers were associated with them to the extent that in some cases, they were actually blamed for the riots.

National Public Radio's *Morning Edition* reported in December of 2005, "[t]wo hundred members of the French parliament are calling for legal action against several rap musicians for allegedly inciting violence and racism in last month's suburban riots."<sup>18</sup> French officials were not the only ones pointing fingers; David Brooks wrote an op-ed piece for the New York Times giving an exaggeratedly negative view of the French suburbs which, like ABC, singled out a particular group of immigrants. His article opens with:

After 9/11, everyone knew there was going to be a debate about the future of Islam. We just didn't know the debate would be between Osama bin Laden and

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> "Paris Riots in Perspective," *ABC News*, November 4, 2005.

<sup>18</sup> Sylvia Poggioli, "French Rap Musicians Blamed for Violence," *Morning Edition, National Public Radio*, 14 December 2005.

Tupac Shakur. Yet those seem to be the lifestyle alternatives that are really on offer for poor young Muslim men in places like France, Britain and maybe even the world beyond. A few highly alienated and fanatical young men commit themselves to the radical Islam of bin Laden. But most find their self-respect by embracing the poses and worldview of American hip-hop and gangsta rap.<sup>19</sup>

His article not only heavy-handedly generalizes the lower-class French but it also draws connections between fans of French rap and fans of American rap simply because they are listening to the same type of music. Brooks should have focused instead on the parallels between inner-city matters in both nations.

Rappers responded to these accusations by calling the situation a case of shooting the messenger: Mateo Ferran, co-owner of Street Skillz record label, replied, “[r]appers have been saying the same thing for ten years, warning about what goes on in the suburbs, where kids are miserable.”<sup>20</sup> One of France’s female rappers, Keny Arkana, responded to the riots by releasing the single “La Rage” in 2006, denouncing the same social oppression Hamé spoke out against in 2002. She raps about the lack of opportunity for these youths and unites them with the shared sentiment of outrage for their condition. Arkana sums up the feelings of the suburban youths in “La Rage” with, “*La rage de voir nos buts entravés, de vivre en travers, la rage gravée depuis bien loin en arrière,*”<sup>21</sup> translating to, “[t]he rage to see our goals blocked, to live against the grain, the rage ingrained since long ago.”<sup>22</sup> The catchy rhythm and rhymes are appealing even to those who are not enraged by society, but the combination of meaning and sound works particularly effectively in uniting those who are.

In addition to turning towards Keny Arkana and for guidance, youths also looked to the Cyprus-born “rappeuse” Diam’s for unity following the riots. Katrine Bennhold

<sup>19</sup> David Brooks, “Gangsta, in French,” *New York Times*, 10 November 2005.

<sup>20</sup> Poggioli, “French Rap Musicians Blamed for Violence.”

<sup>21</sup> Keny Arkana, “La Rage,” *Entre ciment et belle étoile*, Because Music, 2006.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid. Trans. Amanda Cottingham.

wrote for the *International Herald Tribune* in 2007, “her hit song - “Ma France à moi” (My France, Mine) - has become the anthem of the disaffected youth in the suburbs where rioting broke out two years ago.”<sup>23</sup> Bennhold also wrote that Diam’s albums were selling in immigrant neighborhoods due to her rebuttal of traditional views of French culture by calling for an update of what it really means to be French.<sup>24</sup> Although born in Cyprus, Diam’s grew up in France and explains that her own beliefs are to embrace one’s own culture and show respect for those of others.

This sense of respect is largely what allows rappers such as Diam’s to thrive in French culture; they have found a balance between making youths feel comfortable with themselves and keeping the government satisfied enough to not intervene. Another example of a rapper who perfected this balance is Claude M'Barali, who performs under the name MC Solaar and first appeared on the charts in 1991 with the release of his first album, which “established him in high position both with rap fans as well as with older music fans who enjoyed the underlying humor as well as the highly poetic features of his lyrics.”<sup>25</sup> Intellect paired with a high quality of music proved to be a winning combination for Solaar, who rejected the traditional stereotype of what a rapper looks and acts like.

His defiance earned him criticism for rejecting rap music’s ideology, particularly in regard to the *banlieu*, in favor of reaching stardom. In defense, Solaar claimed that “his most notable contribution has been the erasure of clichés associated with the

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<sup>23</sup> Katrine Bennhold, “Rapper with Attitude Updates ‘Frenchness,’” *The International Herald Tribune*, June 5, 2007.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>25</sup> André J. M. Prévos, “Two Decades of Rap in France: Emergence, Developments, Prospects,” in *Black, blanc, beur: rap music and hip-hop culture in the francophone world*, Alain-Philippe Durand, ed., (Lanham, Md.: Scarecrow Press, 2002), 6.



*banlieu*,”<sup>26</sup> and therefore his critics were only proving his point as he emerged from those modest beginnings to attain success as an intellectual rapper. He maintained an educated posture his 1994 release, *Prose Combat*, which is about just that, combating themes such as politics and violence with his lyrics. His “prose combat” proved to be another controversial topic for Solaar as he kept his music mild enough to gain international popularity yet hear criticism from those who took the same political stance as him. The discord was not on what he was saying but rather the fact that speaking up was all he was doing; “...more self-described ‘hardcore’ groups have criticized his indirect approach and artistic style, arguing for more frank and hands-on political tactics.”<sup>27</sup> It was this same characteristic of his music, however, that allowed him to gain such popular support from youths and politicians alike; he voiced his opinion without encouraging violence or actions against the government. This style proved effective the following year when he was invited to perform at the July 14 “Freedom Concert,” shining alongside Jack Lang at the event organized by members of the Socialist Party.<sup>28</sup> With his commercial success and relative political activism, MC Solaar exemplifies one method of reaching out to disaffected youths while also receiving support from the government rather than court summons.

Although Solaar has not been in trouble with the government, his safe position between politicians and youths does not allow him to truly reach out to the younger generation as much as others do, possibly for fear or jeopardizing his profits or fame. While Solaar’s composure serves as inspiration to those still living in subsidized housing,

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<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

<sup>27</sup> Paul A. Silverstein, “‘Why Are We Waiting to Start the Fire?’: French Gangsta Rap and the Critique of State Capitalism,” in *Black, blanc, beur: rap music and hip-hop culture in the francophone world*, Alain-Philippe Durand, ed., (Lanham, Md.: Scarecrow Press, 2002), 57.

<sup>28</sup> Prévost, “Hip Hop, Rap, and Repression,” 73.

artists such as Hamé have taken more risks with their lyrics and other content such as writing an article that led to his court case for libel against the national police. This has clearly caused tensions between rappers and political leaders, including the current French President Nicholas Sarkozy, a member of the Union for Popular Movement, in contrast to the better terms between rappers and the Socialist Party. Regardless of political leadership in France, immigrants and ethnic minorities have felt excluded and often oppressed and musicians such as Keny Arkana write songs that speak to them in direct terms, placing solidarity ahead of commercial success or popularity.

Rap in France did not simply follow the American standards for hip hop and change the language; they made it a style of their own. With rhythms that at times are more similar to reggae than hip-hop, the musicians took note from the early forms of the genre in the South Bronx, giving a voice to the oppressed and underrepresented. French rappers have taken different approaches to their work, with some keeping their lyrics respectful while speaking out against issues facing immigrants and others using profanity to express outrage. By employing different tactics in their artistic expression as well as general behavior, rappers have shown the relationship between political activism, commercial success, and government tolerance. Although the balance in this relationship shifts for each musician, many have proven that it is possible to thrive in all three.

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