‘Prose Combat’: French Rap in the ‘80s and ‘90s

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When France won the 1998 World Cup politicians, newspapers and commentators hailed the success of France’s integrated multiracial team with the slogan *black, blanc, beur* [black, white, Arab] replacing the chant *bleu, blanc, rouge* [blue, white, red], a reference to the national flag.[1] France lauded their team’s example as a success of their integration programs, claiming victory over racism and racial separation.[2] In reality, however, racial minorities continued to hold a marginalized position in society. These minorities had been struggling in France for decades, especially after North African decolonization, which precipitated waves of immigration. By the late 1980s, a young and vibrant group of these immigrant minorities began to express themselves through rap music. The minority youths of the French ghetto (*banlieue*) respected rappers as the mouthpieces of their social condition. In its nascent stage, the primary audience and instigators of French rap culture were second-generation immigrant youth. Through rap music, they began to define and express themselves as a unified group, constructing their identity as French citizens of immigrant parents in a postcolonial world. These young French rap artists from the *banlieue* highlighted the need for integration, calling for unity and change.

In this paper I will explore several aspects of rap as a form of French youth identity during its development in the eighties and nineties. First, I will look at the context in which rap music evolved, both through the social and political climate and its urban and multiracial dimensions. Secondly, I will examine the diversity of backgrounds among the early French rap artists. Within this backdrop I will then turn to the music itself to explore the significance of rap as a medium of communication and the role it plays in constructing these youths’ identities. Lastly, I will look at the lyrics of four more noted artists and will discuss how their poetry expresses the need for political and social change

In the summer of 1981, demonstrations and protests turned violent in the *banlieues* of Lyon. Young delinquents from the *HLM* (low income housing) spent the summer in a quasi-war with the police.[3] Both the media and the police cast blame on the ethnic origins of the young rioters, often citing young Arabs as the main instigators of the violence.[4] Journalists took this opportunity to incite fear against the North African immigrant population, which had a very large presence in the all the major cites, including Paris, Marseilles, and Lyon. The newspapers claimed that France was now living with a "*sentiment d'insécurité*" [a feeling of insecurity].[5] Alan Riding, an American journalist for the *New York Times*, described the French as realizing that neither the police nor the legal system could truly protect them against the violence erupting out the of the *banlieues*.[6] Thus, while France began to grapple with the difficulties of integrating its large immigrant population, rap music was born in the late eighties.

The urban context is critical to the development of rap. American rap culture developed in the projects of New York City in the 1970s. It styled itself as the music of the urban ghetto bringing to light its poverty, violence, drug culture and racism. In 1982, Bernard Zekri, a French journalist for *Actuel*, introduced this American music phenomenon to France after encountering it in a visit to New York City. Two years later, Zekri convinced the radio station *Europe 1* to financially support a tour that showcased the American rap culture through its music, break dancing, and graffiti art.[7] The tour experienced only a brief popularity. Zekri later wrote, "*le Paris qui bouge enterre le rap…mais c'était compter sans la banlieue*"[trendy Paris was burying rap…but nobody told the banlieue].[8] In France, like America, this new musical movement would also be tied with the urban ghetto life of racial minorities.[9]

France had continued to receive a massive influx of North African immigrants in the postcolonial era of the seventies, eighties and nineties. Most of these immigrants went to the

major cities, looking for work, thus creating the now notorious *banlieues*. These areas were breeding grounds for gangs, drugs, violence, and other delinquent behavior. Moreover racial prejudice against the Arabs and Blacks living in the *banlieues* was very strong. Politicians like Jean-Marie Le Pen and other radical rightwing constituents argued for taking hard-line approaches to dealing with what they called the Arab "problem."[10] French rap evolved in the urban ghetto where living conditions are very poor and racial prejudice kept the Arabs and Blacks trapped in a socially and politically repressed environment.

The immigrant French youths of this climate yearned for a place of their own in a society that rejected them because of their ethnic backgrounds. These youths were being ignored by the country to which their parents had turned hoping for a better life. Their parents are often their only connection to their country of origin. They were born in France and they speak French. However, France refuses to integrate them into society and thus renders them social outcasts. Their frustration, confusion, and loneliness are apparent in their music, in their dancing, and in their graffiti. The anger and violence seen that summer in Lyon was an expression of that frustration.

Rap culture gave these youths a means of identification with and belonging to a group of peers embroiled in the same confusion and oppression. Hip-hop culture involves not simply music, but an entire lifestyle of posses, deejays, MCs (master of ceremonies), crews, and dancers.[11] These crews and posses allowed youths of different national and ethnic backgrounds to band together. The popular group Assassin wrote, "*Ma seule patrie est mon posse*,"[my only homeland is my posse/crew].[12] Assassin also wrote these lyrics in their song, "*Peur d'une race*" [fear of a racial group]:

Le drapeau de l'unité est planté dans le 18e
Emportant dans son flot des posse par certaines…Alliance d'idées,

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alliances de cultures
Le métissage est notre force, cette force le futur...[13]

[The flag of unity is planted in the 18th (*arrondissement in Paris)*
In its wake, leading posses by the hundred…Alliance of ideas,
alliance of cultures
This mixing is our strength, our strength is the future...]

These words contain ideas of sharing in a larger cause. They also express the need for unity despite differing racial and national backgrounds. Under the banner of rap music young people of different races unified to assert their identity on a nation that had rejected them.

By the early nineties multiracial groups of rap artists began clearly were rising in popularity. Some of the initial big groups include: Suprême NTM with white rapper Kool Shen and West Indian Joey Starr; Assassin's members include boys from Maghreb, Central Africa, Corsica, the West Indies, and Ireland; Lionel D has a white mother and black father; Saliha, a female rapper, has an Italian mother and north African father; MC Solaar was born in Senegal, but grew up in Paris and his parents are Chadian; and Alliance Ethnik's members come from Algeria, Italy, Congo, and France.[14] This musical uprising was not simply black against white, but minorities of all kinds against France's racial oppression. André Prévos describes these French rap artists as the "natural commentators" on the ignored world of violence and poverty in which the immigrants of France live.[15]

With these diverse backgrounds yet unified message, the French rap artists really saw themselves as the "us" vs. the societal "them." In this way they found a common identity among themselves despite their extreme diversity. Lionel D wrote these lyrics:

Peace and Unity, il fallait comprendre
Peace and Unity, il te faut comprendre
Et viens te joindre à ceux en augmentent le nombre
Amour et paix dans ton Coeur à l'abri de sombre...

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[Peace and Unity, it should be understood

Peace and Unity, you must understand it
Come on and join those who are adding to the number
Love and peace in your heart to shelter from the shadow...][16]

Here Lionel D sings about the need for an internal unity among "the number," those who stand against the social injustice of racism. This is the picture of the French rappers: a multiethnic group of disillusioned second or third generation immigrants who find commonality in their rebellion against racial and social oppression.

Within this social context of the eighties and nineties, the music and lyrics of the rappers can be better understood. In *Discourse on the Construction of Youth Identities*, Tore Kristiansen argues that language is a common means through which youth construct their identity. He writes, "we present a picture of ourselves by virtue of both *what* we say and *how* we say it."[17] In understanding French rap as a means of identity for these French youths, it is important to examine both the "how" and the "what" of rap music. The medium of music plays a key role in the dissemination and expression of both the rappers' and the audience's identity. The lyrics themselves reveal more than political and social messages. These rap artists play with language and use rhyme, thus asserting rap as a new and artistic expression of this rising multiethnic, multicultural, and multilingual generation.

First, I will examine the "how," that is, the use of rap music itself as a means to construct identity. Rap culture quickly became an international phenomenon. Therefore, as a medium of communication, rap music is itself a rebellion against traditional French culture. Much like jazz or rock n' roll before it, rap was imported from the United States. For a nation that stringently guards its cultural heritage, this importation is viewed as a transgression of the idea of "Frenchness" or French identity. Through rap music, French youth identify themselves as part of a global community not simply a national one. Rap was just a new musical genre for youths to

express their frustration, but it was a clear break with the traditions of France as their sole national heritage. More important, though, is rap's social commentary that made these young people identify with it so strongly.

The rap scene created a space where these minorities could watch their peers use creative language and rhyme to talk about the truth. Mtume ya Salaam argues that one of the most important features of rap music is its truthfulness.[18] This brings us to the "what" of rap music. The idea that rap is a ghetto narrative holds great value for these youths because it links their everyday lives directly to their music. In this light, the violence of the lyrics becomes more than simply an expression of teen angst or a youthful desire to shock older generations. In fact, the extreme emotions in French rap reveal the depth of both their confusion and their anger over their position in the French society. This is especially true of the rap music of this earlier period, which dealt mainly with *banlieue* life and racial separation. Several of the major groups that surfaced in these early years include Suprême NTM, MC Solaar, Assassin and IAM. Each of these groups championed a range of messages. They include calls for social and political change, the desire for unity, and an end of racial separation.

A group which typifies the early French rap scene was Suprême NTM. NTM was formed in the late eighties by the two, now famous, rappers Joey Starr and Kool Shen. Their name NTM stands for "*Nique ta Mère*," slang for "fuck your mother." This title can be interpreted as a slur referring to France as the "mother land." Despite the violence and vulgarity of NTM's language, this group uses their lyrics to criticize the government and promote social change. In their song "*Qu'est-ce qu'on attend*?" [What are we waiting for?] NTM directly addresses their audience, urging them to act to bring change:

> *De toute une jeunesse, vous avez brûlé les ailes*
> *Brisé les rêves, tari la sève de l'espérance…*

Il est temps qu'on y pense, il est temps que la France
Daigne prendre conscience de toutes ces offenses…
L'histoire l'enseigne, nos chances sont vaines…
Unissons-nous pour incinérer ce système…

[All of youth, you have burned out
Broken dreams, dried up waters of hope
It is time that we think about it, it is time that France
Deigns to realize all these offenses
History teaches that our chances are futile
We must unify to incinerate this system...][19]

Here NTM calls for a unified front among the marginalized racial minorities. They appeal specifically to youths with the first line, saying that we can't "burn out" our youth without acting against oppression. The last line invokes a strong image of the need to utterly destroy the current oppressive social "system." Often rap music, and especially the lyrics of NTM, seems overwhelmingly to consist of violence, crude language and sexual innuendo. However, at the heart of the appeal of French rap lay the fact that racial minorities were finally willing to openly condemn and criticize segregation and political disenfranchisement.

MC Solaar is a much more subtle artist than Suprême NTM, taking a more artistic approach. His lyrical style separates him from many of the other rising rap artists of the eighties and nineties; yet he too believes in the need for action. Solaar is considered, both nationally and internationally, as a superstar of French rap. Unlike many of his counterparts, he never entered into the gangster lifestyle that typifies the rap scene. Despite having experienced the same difficult childhood as many others, living in the *banlieues* of Paris, Solaar does not use profanity and violence to describe his life and also rejects the use of English, a common practice in French rap. In his enormously successful album *Prose Combat*, released in 1994, one of his songs is titled "*La fin justifie les moyens*" [The end justifies the means]:

C'est le fait d'être passif qui me fait tourner comme une toupie
J'éradiques donc de moi l'anémie de volonté…

Mes fins ne sont pas énormes et mes moyens sont réduits
Comme ceux de ceux que je soutiens, pour ma part je m'instruis
Aucune lamentation parler c'est rien! Agir, c'est bien!
Avec une fin, qui elle justifie les moyens…

[Being passive makes me feel like I'm going in circles
I, thus, take away from myself the weakness of volition
My goals are not very great and my means are limited
Like those of those that I support, for my part, I teach myself
Without any regrets, speaking is nothing! Acting is everything!
With a goal that justifies the means...][20]

Here Solaar criticizes the idea that political or social ends justify the means of achieving them. In the first two lines, his statement is ironic, saying that by doing nothing he has chosen to give up choosing or using his "*volonté*" or willpower. The word "*anémie*," meaning anemic, is a very physical image of weakness, criticizing physical inaction. Moreover, this word sounds like the French word for enemy "*ennemi*." Solaar also is playing with the wording of "destroying his enemy," but in this case it is the "weakness of choice" that he destroys. Therefore, he calls for civic action, saying that speech is not enough and action is what is important. The title of this album, *Prose Combat*, juxtaposes the ideas of literary prose and military fighting or combat. Solaar uses his words and his lyrics to fight the political and social problems around him.

Another famous early group is Assassin. This group was formed in1985 by Solo and Rockin' Squat, they were from the eighteenth arrondissement of Paris. Much like NTM, Assassin has a hardcore sound. In their lyrics Assassin constantly denounces France's continuing racist policies and calls for action and solidarity among the immigrant population of France. In their defiant song "*Note mon nom sur ta list*" [put my name on your list] they sing:

Je repars plus digne…
Il faut combattre si tu veux t'en sortir…
La couleur de ma peau n'altère pas l'intensité du message.
NOTE MON NOM SUR TA LISTE!

[I begin again with more pride

We must fight if you want to get your self out of it
The color of my skin doesn't change the strength of the message
PUT MY NAME ON YOUR LIST!][21]

Here Assassin calls for recognition of the marginalized population. Like Solaar, Assassin argues for fighting to end racial repression. The song powerfully states that their message must not be ignored simply because of the color of their skin. In the last line, Assassin challenges the authorities to put their names on the list. This idea of a "list" alludes to a government "black list," like the red lists during the years of communism or the lists of known terrorists. Assassin, therefore, compares the treatment they experience as racial minorities to the treatment of criminals. Yet, they challenge the government to put their name on that "list" as if to both accuse the government and to declare their willingness to fight the system. These rappers are asserting their willingness to openly criticize the government and are defending the importance of their message of racial equality.

Racial issues are a particular concern in the case of IAM, a group from Marseilles, a city that has been called the northernmost city in Africa because of its large black and Arab population. Their name "IAM" has several different meanings, the most well known is "*invasion arrivée de Mars*" [invasion from Mars]. Mars refers to both the idea of being an alien, but also is a reference to the city itself, "Marseilles." Thus in their very name, these men have distinguished themselves as both outsiders and members of French society. In their 1998 album, *C'est Ma Cause*, the group included a song, titled "*J'accuse*" [I accuse]. This title references the famous words of Émile Zola in his letter to the president condemning the unlawful and racially motivated imprisonment of Alfred Dreyfus:

J'accuse les rusés, voleurs déguisés, grisés par le pouvoir
Qui te font bosser jusqu'à ta mort…
D'avoir fait de nous des marionnettes sans têtes…
Par le soleil au Congo, j'accuse les lâches qui courbent le dos

Ceux qui frappent le petit par peur du gros…
La vengeance donc pas de chance, j'accuse la masse de somnolence…

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[I accuse the cunning ones, thieves disguised, intoxicated by power
Who make you sweat until you die
Of having made us into Marionette puppets without heads
Under the sun of the Congo, I accuse the cowards that bend the back
Those who hit the small for fear of the big
Vengeance doesn't stand a chance; I accuse the peoples of lethargy...][22]

IAM makes a clear criticism of racism here, saying that politicians have decapitated French Arabs and blacks making them marionette dolls "without heads," essentially taking not only their voice but their political will. They have made their message universal by referencing several different kinds of racism both historic and current through anti-Semitism, slavery in Africa, and the disenfranchisement of minorities today. The allusion to the Dreyfus affair through the title brings these rap artists into an educated and historic understanding of racism in France. Moreover, the notoriety of the Dreyfus Affair strikes a stronger chord with older and educated classes, thus putting IAM's call to end racism in terms that older generations understand and identify with. IAM has framed their message to reach across generational and racial boundaries.

These rap artists gave voices to the immigrants of the *banlieue* during this period of social upheaval in the eighties and nineties. Unlike traditional aspects of French cultural, this movement was multiracial, including men and women from the Middle East, Africa, the Caribbean Islands, and many whites as well. These youths expressed their identity through their lyrics and found belonging within the rap culture. Rap music in France today still contains many of the same criticisms, though it has grown in popularity across social boundaries. The rise of rap music has allowed all levels of society in France to hear the voices of those marginalized in their society. In this unique language of music, the youths of the *banlieue* have expressed their fears, their criticisms, and their desires for change.

Notes

[1] Elizabeth Ezra, *The Colonial Unconscious* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2000), 145.
[2] Claude Weill, "Le supporteur, sa vie, ses moeurs," *Le Nouvel Observateur*, June 1-7, 2006, 38-39.
[3] André Prévos, "Le Business du Rap en France," *The French Review* 74, (2001): 901.
[4] Ibid.
[5] Sebastian Roché, "Le Sentiment d'insécurité," Paris: PUF, 1993, as cited in Prévos, "Le Business du Rap en France," see above, n. 3.
[6] Alan Riding, "France Sees Integration as Answer to View of Immigrants as 'Taking Over,'" *New York Times*, March 24, 1991.
[7] Marie-Pierre Le Hir and Dana Strand, *French Cultural Studies: criticism at the crossroads* (Albany: State University of New York press, 2000), 152.
[8] Bernard Zekri, "Quand un journal visite l'histoire: 15 and de rap," trans. Steven Cannon, *Actuel* 48, (1994), 88.
[9] Marie-Pierre Le Hir and Dana Strand, *French Cultural Studies: criticism at the crossroads* (Albany: State University of New York press, 2000), 151.
[10] Robert Schneider, "Présidentielle Le Pen de nouveau au 2d tour?" *Le Nouvel Observateur*, June 1-7, 2006, 46-49.
[11] Marie-Pierre Le Hir and Dana Strand, *French Cultural Studies: criticism at the crossroads* (Albany: State University of New York press, 2000), 153.
[12] Assassin, *"Le future que nous réserve-t-il?"* Delabel, 1993.
[13] Assassin, *Peur d'une race "Le future que nous réserve-t-il?"* Delabel, 1993.
[14] Marie-Pierre Le Hir and Dana Strand, *French Cultural Studies: criticism at the crossroads* (Albany: State University of New York press, 2000), 154.
[15] André Prévos. "The Evolution of French Rap Music and Hip Hop Culture in the 1980s and 1990s," *The French Review* 85, (1996), 722.
[16] Lionel D, "*Y a pas de problème*," Squatt, 1990, trans. Anne Ball.
[17] Tore Kristiansen, "The Youth and the Gatekeepers," in *Discourse Constructions of Youth Identities,* ed. Jannis Androutsopoulos and Alexandra Georgakopoulou, (Philadelphia: John Benjamins B.V., 2003), 279.
[18] Mtume ya Salaam, "The Aesthetics of Rap," *African American Review* 29, (1995), 303.
[19] Suprême NTM, *Qu'est-ce qu'on attend* "*Paris Sous les Bombes,"* MSI Music, 1999, trans. Anne Ball.
[20] MC Solaar, *La fin justifie les moyens* "*Prose Combat*," Polydor, 1994, trans. Anne Ball and Maryse Fauvel.
[21] Assassin, *Note mon nom sur ta list* "*Note mon nom sur ta liste*," Delabel, 1991, trans. Anne Ball.
[22] IAM, *J'accuse* "*C'est ma cause,*" V2 Records, 1998, trans. Anne Ball.

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