
Rhymin' to (Re)Discover One's Africanité

How Racism and Exclusion in France Is Thematically Inspiring French Hip-Hop Artists to Rap about the Roots of Their Bicultural Duality

ABSTRACT This paper analyzes the presence and influence of Africa in French hip-hop music over time, giving particular emphasis to recent years where the continent has motivated deeper connections and more meaningful manifestations of one's heritage culture in songs and video presentations by popular artists. Contemporary rappers in France have been linguistically and stylistically shifting their sounds away from trends present in the United States as they increasingly focus their attention toward the African continent as a way to celebrate the duality of their bicultural identity. This international and transnational musical alteration of their sound toward Africa provides them and their fans much needed comfort against the marginalization that they face at home in France. Thus, these contemporary thematic types of transnational musical shout-outs to the African continent provide rappers and their consumers hailing from ethnocultural communities a means in which to confront the racism and exclusion they face in a country where youths of color are frequently viewed with suspicion and where issues relating their unique diverse social constructs are routinely ignored or dismissed by the French State. **KEYWORDS** Africa, French hip-hop, French Rap, French Studies, hip-hop, identity, racism, racism in France, youth identity

As the second market of hip-hop music in the world, rap music in France typically follows previously established models first made popular by artists from the United States in terms of style, substance, and sound. Since rap's nascent stage, French artists in the genre have been motivated by the power of hip-hop in the United States, and American rappers are frequent visitors to Paris and other cities. In terms of the consumers of hip-hop in France, styles first popularized in African American culture are frequently imitated and emulated, especially among French youths of color. However, the Americanized sound that has long-inspired French rap is now eroding, and the United States is losing its privileged position as the primary trendsetter for rap artists in France. In recent years, a thematic tide has shifted the focus of the music and now the African continent has become the inspiration for hip-hop's style and sound as rappers in France are increasingly giving Africa a prominent role in subject matter, lyrics, and visual presentations. Among those artists with African roots, they are not only giving a nod to their heritage culture in order to pay homage to their backgrounds, they are also increasingly emphasizing their duality for reasons of comfort in a country that is not always kind to its younger populations hailing from diverse communities.

Ethnic Studies Review, Vol. 44, Issue 1, pp. 75–95, Electronic ISSN: 2576-2915 © 2021 by the Association for Ethnic Studies. All rights reserved. Please direct all requests for permission to photocopy or reproduce article content through the University of California Press's Reprints and Permissions web page, <http://www.ucpress.edu/journals.php?p=reprints>. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1525/esr.2021.44.1.75>

Due to the legacy of several centuries of colonialism in Africa, most people of color in France trace their roots to that continent. Whether they are of Arab descent from the Maghreb in the north, or they have heritage ties to countries south of the Sahara Desert, Africa has long been an integral part of France's multicultural mosaic. However, any acknowledgment of the country's wide fabric of diversity is muted and dismissed by the politics and policies of secularism that demand complete assimilation to and identification with the French State; a place where on paper everyone is constitutionally equal. Yet, despite the cherished policies of *liberté, égalité, fraternité* in France, youths of color are often looked upon suspiciously by the media and dominant culture and they suffer from a higher unemployment and lower educational attainment rate when compared with their peers from the majority culture.

Among the many researchers who have published on the wide discrepancies existing between the majority culture in France and the country's citizens of color, Hervé Tchumkam labels these often-forgotten young people from ethnocultural communities as being "uncanny citizens" who are treated by the French State as the "enemy within" that is preventing France from maintaining its longstanding cultural and social traditions, and remaining culturally homogenous (read: European).¹ No matter where they live in the country, African and Arab youths in France share the same political and social frustrations vis-à-vis the authorities due to their shared common experience living in disenfranchised communities. Young Muslims in France, be they Black or Brown, are frequent targets by the government and media as being a segment of the country whose very presence runs in contrast to the conservative goals of State Secularism that aim to hide or completely nullify any acknowledgments of diversity in the French Republic. Moreover, apart from the entertainment industry and sports, young people from ethnocultural communities are virtually invisible in terms of political and economic representation in the country, and there are few outlets where they are able to bring attention to issues that affect them and their unique communities.

This type of invisibility and all things related to racism and discrimination have been a central thematic and topical focus of hip-hop artists and their music since rap's nascent stage in France. In a way, French rappers have been taking cues from early hip-hop artists in the United States where hip-hop songs spoke about topics facing African Americans and Latinos in ways never heard before and inspired many from around the world to discuss their own stories. This poetically spoken word musical genre has long provided youth of color in France a voice to air grievances, talk about their race and space, and most importantly, to be heard. As such, for these marginalized populations hip-hop is more than just music. Since its inception, French rap has been employed as a mouthpiece for youths of color to address a variety of social issues and to express frustrations of being limited to the fringes of mainstream society. In other words, rap music gives young people from ethnocultural minority groups agency in a country where otherwise their concerns would otherwise remain invisible. Similar to the paradigms once used by Afro-centric

1. Hervé Tchumkam, *State Power, Stigmatization and Youth Resistance Culture in the French Banlieues* (New York: Lexington Books, 2015), 20.

rappers in the United States, France’s hip-hop artists speak loudly and forcefully for and about the communities from which they come. In doing so, the trajectory of French rap has traditionally featured songs whose topical matter deconstructs divisive social issues and rejects racism.

Although subjects and themes that highlight issues faced people of color in France are still present as a leading subject in the music, Africa has now become a central part of the narrative for many rappers in ways that encourage more pride in their heritage identifiers on the continent as a reaction to the very racism that they face in France. Led by the most popular artists in hip-hop, French rappers are increasingly giving Africa a prominent role in their music. These artists are not only giving a nod to their heritage culture in order to pay homage to their roots, they are also increasingly emphasizing the duality of their self-identification for reactionary reasons of comfort. Although this is not the first time when French rappers have celebrated and educated their listeners about themes relevant to Africa, this latest move toward the continent may have a deeper meaning for youths of color in the country. This recent thematic move “back to Africa” by hip-hop artists is happening because of systemic racism that minimizes or dismisses issues faced by ethnocultural minorities in France. As the needs of ethnocultural minorities continue to be dismissed or devalued by the media, politicians, and others, the acknowledgment of one’s roots as a way in which to find comfort is both a recognition of one’s duality and a strong reaction against the racism and exclusion facing young people of color. In other words, the more youths from ethnocultural minority groups are marginalized by their home country (France), the more they embrace their heritage culture (Africa), and rappers are echoing this in their music. As the countries across Francophone Africa continue to develop economically, the sustainability of representing Africa in French rap is expected to increase substantially. This study briefly deconstructs the presence of Africa in French hip-hop over time. I analyze a few notable recent song examples that represent the latest and most contemporarily significant *virage* (turn) away from American trends and show how styles and sounds of major rap artists in France shift toward the African continent.

HIP-HOP, FRANCE, AND EARLY AFRO-CENTRISM

Rap music arrived in France in the early 1980s when famous New York–based artists of that time visited Paris during their European concert tours. The theory of Pan Africanism was a major part of hip-hop culture during the movement’s nascent stage in New York and that was taken to France when American artists toured that country. When concerts in Paris were given by popular New York–based artists in the 1980s, French fans and consumers of the sound were attracted to the message of Black unity and togetherness as rapped by these visitors from the United States. One of the biggest stimulators who gave birth to “*le rap français*” and its larger Pan Africanist view popular at that time can be traced to the frequent visits to Paris by the American artist known as Africa Bambaataa. Stève Puig argues that the attraction toward the Civil Rights struggle of African Americans and Black culture in the United States remains so strong in France that similar national issues facing France’s ethnocultural minority groups (or cultural trends furthered

by Black and Brown people in France) are sometimes forgotten.² One of the initial innovators of hip-hop in New York, Bambaataa was one of the first American DJs to gain international acclaim during the time when he was the founder and leader of the International Universal Zulu Movement. Followers of the Zulus used hip-hop to discuss social problems while also promoting the values of “peace, love, respect, unity and having fun.”³ These notions stimulated ethnocultural youths in France in ways not seen previously. For example, until this point people of color had been virtually nonexistent in French pop-culture, and the societal malaise that they faced in terms of acculturation and exclusion was ignored by all politicians, no matter their ideological affiliation.⁴ In addition to being attracted to the messages conveyed by this music, youths from ethnocultural communities across France also welcomed the sound. The four elements of hip-hop culture (DJing, rapping, graffiti art, and breakdancing) were quickly embraced by French youths of color, in particular those hailing from the aforementioned marginalized communities located on the periphery of Paris. At the same time, the French music industry took note of this budding youth cultural phenomenon and with that, local hip-hop culture took shape and grew substantially.

Hip-hop sounds in the United States during the 1980s and early 1990s were dominated by socially driven content that focused on the localized narrative of the rapper. Countless releases throughout the years of rap’s nascent era discussed a plethora of issues faced by Black America in ways no musical style had ever done before.⁵ Early American hip-hop featured deep and meaningful tracks such as “The Message” by Grandmaster Flash, whose lyrics detailed and analyzed life as seen by a resident of inner-city New York during the presidential administration of Ronald Reagan. Several years later, groups such as Public Enemy would further delineate on a plethora of social issues facing African Americans on each of their albums, of which one (entitled “Fear of a Black Planet”) generated much media buzz and controversy for its hard-hitting thematic matter. On the West Coast of the United States, rappers from California pushed a more combative and reactionary narrative against agents of the State in their lyrics in a style that came to be known as “Gangsta Rap.” Although the West Coast varieties of hip-hop tended to be more aggressive in both lyrics and subject content, the overall messages heard in songs by California artists mirrored what was being rapped about in New York. In other words, this type of analysis in terms of one’s “race and space” made hip-hop stand out from other genres of music as rappers became social commentators in regard to the local communities from which they came.⁶ This sort of educational presentation to the consuming masses

2. Stève Puig, “French Rapper-Writers and Activism: Global Black Solidarity and Invisibility,” in *Hip-Hop en Français: An Exploration of Hip-Hop Culture in the Francophone World*, ed. Alain-Philippe Durand (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2020), 77–92.

3. Manuel Boucher, *Rap: Expression des lascars. Significations et enjeux du rap dans la société française* (Paris: L’Harmattan, 1998); Mathias Vicherat, *Pour une analyse textuelle du rap français* (Paris: L’Harmattan, 2001).

4. Éris Marlière, *La France nous a lâchés! Le sentiment d’injustice chez les jeunes de cité* (Éditions Fayard: Paris, 2008).

5. Murray Forman, *The Hood Comes First: Race, Space and Place in Rap and Hip-Hop*, (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 2001).

6. Forman, *The Hood Comes First*.

followed a similar trajectory employed by previous generations of musicians. For example, songs such as Sam Cooke’s “A Change Gon’ Come,” James Brown’s “Say It Loud,” and Marvin Gaye’s “What’s Going On” are three notable examples of this type of protest narrative. In addition to rapping about various issues faced by people of color in cities across the United States, American hip-hop artists brought Africa into the narrative in the form of small nods to the continent via fashion trends and lyrical shout-outs heard in many songs. Cheryl Keyes analyzes several of the various “Africanisms” that were featured in some of the aforementioned tracks from the era of the 1980s–1990s, such as diction, time, beat, rhythms (etc.) used by rap artists with the music.⁷ In doing so, Keyes argues that due to the creative process of hip-hop, the music represents and mirrors a continuity of African-derived concepts consciously as well as unconsciously.⁸

The theory of Pan Africanism that formed the initial nexus of early hip-hop releases in the United States frequently manifested itself in a variety of manners. Among them, rappers frequently appeared in their videos giving clear nods to their roots by sporting necklaces adorned with African medallions or clothing that was colored in red, green, black, and yellow, which pays homage to Marcus Garvey. Additionally, Africa was also contemporaneous as themes related to Pan Africanism were the central subject matter of several popular releases in the late 1980s, among which is the track “You Must Learn” by KRS-ONE (a song whose accompanying video discussed the contributions of people of African descent to history). Other rappers also used their platform to bring in colorful African imagery as they intertwined current events of the day with American Black history. For example, in Queen Latifah’s popular video for the track “Ladies First,” viewers are visually educated about the ongoing struggle against Apartheid in South Africa. Throughout this particular videoclip, repetitive images show a map where a raised black fist is inserted throughout various regions of that country accompanied by visuals of police and military brutality against that country’s African population. In addition to this anti-Apartheid thesis, still images of famous African American women are shown at the onset of the song, which sets the tone for what is to come. Moreover, the strong feminist thesis that is discussed in “Ladies First” is reinforced by Queen Latifah’s backup dancers, all of whom are adorned in costumes that mimic uniforms of the Black Panthers. Although over the past two decades American rap has since commodified, the very African-based concept of lyrically testifying and storytelling via a rhymed rhythm remains intact as it continues to evolve thematically. Tricia Rose addresses this when she suggests that the “sonic forces” are an “outgrowth of Black cultural traditions” that address the changes occurring as inner-city life and traditions shift in the new “technological terrain.”⁹ In other words, as new technologies are introduced, rappers and other African American artists are finding different ways to revise their own sounds to renovate and adjust to changes in sound and technology. Rose goes on to dissect hip-hop’s oral

7. Cheryl Keyes, “At the Crossroads: Rap Music and its African Nexus,” *Ethnomusicology*, 4, no. 2, (1996), 223–248.

8. Keyes, “At the crossroads,” 223–248.

9. Tricia Rose, *Black Voices: Rap Music and Black Culture in Contemporary America* (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 1994).

traditions as they concern modernization (sampling, in this case) when she pays homage to the hybridity between Black music, Black oral forms, African storytelling, in ways that affirm and support the deep historical narrative of “Afro-diasporic people” that differentiate these sounds from a Western classical sound where an African sound based on rhythm is at odds with the harmony of European musical organization.¹⁰

One of the first French hip-hop groups to connect themselves thematically with the African continent was the Marseille-based rap group known as IAM. Once known as Massalia, Marseille is the oldest city in France and is a place that has long identified with the many peoples inhabiting the regions around the Mediterranean Sea, especially those from as the African continent. André Prévos discussed how IAM has made a career out of connecting their music to a larger African-driven narrative, often by employing Egyptian themes and historical subjects to their songs in a way called “Pharaohism,” which is the refutation of Europe as the sole cradle of civilization.¹¹ Seth Whidden also deconstructed IAM and maintained that the group evokes and echoes theoretical arguments made by the Senegalese writer Cheikh Anta Diop in his famous book *Antériorité des civilisations nègres*.¹² This important publication by Diop states that Egypt ought to be acknowledged to a greater degree because its history and culture far predate those of Greece and Rome. Moreover, Whidden goes further and states that by adopting a more Egyptian perspective in their releases (including the names of each of the members of the group), IAM was afforded the “opportunity to claim an African heritage without being immediately pigeon-holed into the role of colonized people speaking out against the French imperial power.”¹³ Although IAM have many songs that led the way for the lyrical shout-outs motivated by Africa, the track “*Tam Tam de l’Afrique*” is also worth denoting. This particular song contains strongly worded lyrics whose aim to educate listeners by giving them a realistic and more accurate historical overview of the era of French colonialism and the Atlantic Slave Trade. In other words, the creative wordplay used by IAM in this release takes back and reclaims the pejorative *Nègre* by uplifting those being racialized by the term as they lyrically rap their story. To solidify this point, Whidden further states the word *sauvages* is also given “new life as a description of the colonizers rather than the colonized.”¹⁴ In other words, the central focus of “*Tam Tam de l’Afrique*” is centered on the victims of global French colonization and the track is one of the best songs that paid homage to the African continent during the early years of hip-hop in France. Furthermore, another song entitled “Red, Black, and Green” from IAM posits on the strength and formidable historical character of the Black race as they concern human evolution. Isabelle Marc Martinez argues that lyrics from this track (whose English title pays homage to the flag of Marcus Garvey’s Pan Africanist movement) deconstruct the negativity

10. Rose, *Black Voices*.

11. André Prévos, “The Evolution of French Rap Music and Hip-Hop Culture in the 1980s and 1990s,” *The French Review*, 69, no. 5 (1996): 713–725.

12. Seth Whidden, “French Rap Music going global: IAM, They were, We are,” in *The French Review*, 80, no. 5, (2007), 1008–1023. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/25480875>.

13. Whidden, *French Rap Music*, 1010.

14. *Ibid.*, 1015.

associated with the word *noir* by empowering it as a humanistic unifier in order to remind listeners that Africa and people of African descent represent the cradle of humanity and that the color black should be viewed as a unifier, as stated here: “*Vois-tu ce noir, au fond de mes yeux. 40 frères à mes côtés, et il parle pour eux. Notre pouvoir est tel qu’il scie les barreaux de toute prison. Noir est la couleur de l’unification.*” (Do you see this black, deep in my eyes? 40 brothers by my side, and it speaks for them. Our power is such that it cuts through the bars of any prison. Black is the color of unification.)¹⁵

Other more recent rap songs have followed this same thematic “teaching Africa” type of schema set up by IAM and other early rappers in France; most notably the releases “*Sankara*” by JP Manova (which discusses the Africa-first agenda put forth by the late-president of Burkina Faso) and “Black Out” by Youssoupha, which deconstructs various historical issues of neocolonialism as repeated in the refrain: “I was told: ‘France: you love it, or you leave it.’ I will respond to this offense when you give Africa back to us.” Rapped teaching approaches from these two examples serve not only to counter the colonialist narrative of current lessons in French schools, they are designed to uplift youths of color from economically marginalized communities by showing them that their history has importance and relevance.

However, aside from a few lines of an occasional song, no rappers in France seemed to dedicate much attention to the African continent as a primary thematic focus. As such, subject matter that *primarily* dealt with Africa was not present as a central thesis. Even the most famous artist of this era—MC Solaar, who is a rapper with deep connections to two countries on the continent, Chad and Sénégal—avoided giving too much militant attention to his own “African-ness.” Despite the massive platform MC Solaar was given in the French recording industry, he rarely discussed African themes in his songs aside from a few small examples, of which one track entitled “*Les colonies*” is worth mentioning. That particular track lightly critiques the era of French colonialism in Africa, but the song avoids being too revolutionary overall, as it ends with a more positive outlook where issues of education and an increased electoral participation across the continent are promoted by the artist. However, this is not to say that MC Solaar chose to dismiss Africa completely, as visual presentations of him on the album cover of his release entitled *Cinquième As* made clever reference to both traditional African clothing (the cover photo, which reflects his ethnocultural background) and Western dress styles (the inner photo, which denotes his current home in Paris). Despite small references to the continent here and there, an outright Pan African thematic focus was typically not seen in early French hip-hop.¹⁶

RAPPING AGAINST RACISM

Around the same moment when hip-hop songs such as those previously mentioned were enjoying massive airplay on hip-hop radio stations in France, the country itself enjoyed

15. Isabelle Marc Martínez. *Le rap français: Esthétique et poétique des textes, 1990-1995* (Bern: Peter Lang, 2008).

16. Karim Hammou, *Une histoire du rap en France*. Paris: Découverte, 2012.

a brief moment of social harmony in terms of any divisions based on race or one's ethnocultural origins. In 1998, at the same time when rap music was leading the music charts, Brazil was defeated by France in the soccer World Cup final by a team populated by the most culturally diverse players in French history, most of whom had roots on the African continent. This celebratory event went on to generate and inspire a national conversation about the country's often-overlooked multicultural mosaic, including an analysis of what it means to be French. In fact, many across France adopted the slogan "*Black, Blanc, Beur*" to describe their heroic World Cup winning team. The clever wordplay of this moniker (adopted from the usual description of the colors of French flag as "*Bleu, Blanc, Rouge*") highlighted the diversity of players on the field, which was said to give a realistic representation of France of that era; a country that was diverse and open to all, including to those citizens who can trace their roots the country's former colonies in Africa.¹⁷ However, despite the emotional swelling of national pride of that time period, not everyone was jubilant about the very visible changing demographics of the country. For example, Jean-Marie Le Pen of the far-right political party, the *Front National* (FN), frequently criticized the diversity of the soccer team by stating that the squad was made up of players from "foreign countries" even though nearly everyone on the roster was born in France (yet, with African roots). His comments about the country's growing multicultural mosaic resonated among many across the country as his party's popularity grew in subsequent years.¹⁸ In 2002, Le Pen stunned everyone in France when he advanced into the final runoff in that year's presidential elections in which he was soundly defeated by Jacques Chirac during the final plebiscite. Furthermore, in the years since the World Cup victory in 1998, backing for the FN has grown substantially across France. One example of the growing support for such far-right views culminated in 2016 when the current leader of the party, Marine Le Pen, bested her father's previous success when she was narrowly defeated electorally in the final runoff against current president Emmanuel Macron.

Despite the celebratory "*Black, Blanc, Beur*," of yore, other events from the early 2000s demonstrate that major issues remained in the ongoing and unresolved marginalization of the country's Black and Brown communities. For example, on several occasions throughout the early 2000s, massive rioting ensued following heavy-handed police violence against youths of color from the Paris suburbs. The largest of these types of social disturbances happened in the fall of 2005 after two teen boys of African and Arab descent were killed in the Paris suburb of Clichy-sur-Bois after being pursued by local police. This particular unrest was the largest seen in France in decades and massive rioting raged across several communities on the periphery of the City of Lights for several nights. Instead of attempting to calm things down via a more level-headed response, the government adopted a tough-on-crime type of approach. Then Interior Minister Nicolas Sarkozy labeled those protesting on the streets as "criminal scum" and he vowed to clean

17. Laurent Dubois, *Soccer Empire: The World Cup and the Future of France* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2010).

18. Dubois, *Soccer Empire*.

up disenfranchised areas and any rioters with an “*archer*,” a method of cleaning dirt and muck from sidewalks. Predictably, inflammatory rhetoric such as this from government officials only served to further enflame many youths and increase the anger. Yet, the events from 2005 also ignited support for right-wing political parties in France and contributed to the election of Nicolas Sarkozy as President in 2006, who ran on a platform of restoring law and order to the country. Since then, further protests have occurred, of varying sizes, based on the reactions of youths of color to perceived actions of perceived structural and systemic racism against them. Among these more recent manifestations, in 2017 the famous hip-hop artist Sofiane helped calm tensions to prevent a riot in the Paris suburb of Bobigny during a march honoring a youth from that community who was killed at the hands of the police.

Rap music in France has long discussed the issues that serve as the root cause of the aforementioned frustrations felt by the country’s populations of color and artists have continued to follow that thematic narrative in their songs. However, despite efforts made by rappers to teach, educate, and uplift those from within the social constructs of the *banlieues*, socioeconomic conditions in those communities remain stagnant. Among the myriad of problems, youths from many of suburban communities surrounding Paris suffer from an unemployment rate upwards of 75 percent and they have little hope for success in a country that many of them perceive as being hostile to their very existence.¹⁹ Feelings of exclusion such as these is dangerous and may even push some youths toward deviance as a reactionary coping mechanism.²⁰ To this day in municipalities where ethnocultural minority groups form the majority of the population, youths from diverse communities of color, most of whom trace their roots to Africa, are less educated than their peers in the majority culture and are more likely to be unemployed than the dominant group as well.²¹ These social discrepancies nourish feelings of malaise and despair, all of which rap music in France has thematically discussed for decades, and recent tragic events with more international roots further emphasize this point. When discussing the negative press that frequently stigmatizes youths of color in France, and especially as it concerns the Black population of France exclusively, Tchumkam states “writing about the *banlieue* means looking at the contested citizenship of French citizens who claim their right to exist in a country where they are all too often reduced to their African origins.”²² Séverine Rebourcet also explores this theme and argues that although many people within communities of color in France are citizens, discriminatory and exclusionary measures are causing them to form a diaspora from within their own country as a means to find comfort.²³ Nathalie Etoke also addresses subjects relating to the inequality of the postcolonial diasporic experience of French citizens of color in terms of their localized sense of belonging in France in the article “*Black-Blanc-Beur, Ma France*

19. Marlière, *La France nous a lâchés*.

20. Azouz Begag, *Ethnicity and Equality: France in the Balance* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2007).

21. Gérard Mauger, *L'émeute de novembre 2005: Une révolte protopolitique* (Paris: Éditions du Croquant, 2006).

22. Tchumkam, *Uncanny Citizenship*, 2.

23. Séverine Rebourcet, “La postcolonialité de la littérature urbaine: Vers une francophonie de l’intérieur?” *Romance Studies*, 36, no. 1–2, (2018): 18–31.

à moi” whose very title pays homage to both the 1998 World Cup soccer team and a popular hip-hop song by Diam, “*Ma France à moi*,” that illustrates the lives and value of the diverse people living in the “other France.”²⁴ Boubeker discusses this *second* France by studying the confusing duality that youths of color face daily as they navigate the conflicting external realities that classify them.²⁵ In other words, it is expected that young people from visible minority communities from the suburbs and elsewhere in France view themselves as fully functioning and accepted citizens of the French Republic despite any cultural ties they may have with Africa. Because of this, young people of color whose roots are African are reduced as being the suspicious “other” in a country that constantly questions their loyalty.

Being routinely excluded from mainstream French society may also bring other unintended consequences. Tchumkam argues that this very institutional, structural, educational, and media stigmatization of suburban youths may result in even more serious consequences in the future, such as providing a motivation for some to commit violence against the French State in the form of violence or sponsored terrorism.²⁶ Constant surveillance and suspicion of youths of color from the country’s ethnocultural minority groups is a prime motivator of the anger felt by some. Furthering on this point, Achille Mbembe analyses these circumstances when he states, “The threefold system of identity checks, screening, and expulsion, then with its procession of brutal acts, of physical violence and psychological warfare, is being inflicted once again, as under slavery, on the black body.”²⁷ International terrorist organizations have noticed the wide discrepancies between the French State and youths of color in the country and have sought to exploit it for their own gains. In other words, the alienation felt by some Arab and African young people in France sometimes provides international Islamic extremist groups an easy way to recruit new adherents to their cause via the use of new technologies, such as their active attempts at seeking out more vulnerable individuals on social media platforms.²⁸ Global terror organizations such as *Daesh*, the Islamic State, or Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) as known in France, seek to take advantage of the despair felt by unemployed young African Muslims living in France as a way to convince them to strike back against systemic racism.²⁹ International extremist terror groups are cognizant enough to know that hip-hop artists in France have commented on the topics of alienation and anger in

24. Nathalie Etoke, “Black Blanc Beur: Ma France à Moi,” *Nouvelles Études Francophones* 24, no. 1 (2009): 157–71, accessed February 2, 2021, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/25702193>.

25. Ahmed Boubeker, “Outsiders in the French melting pot: The public construction of invisibility for visible minorities,” in *Frenchness and the African Diaspora: Identity and Uprising in Contemporary France*, eds. Tshimanga, Charles, Gondola, Didier, and Bloom, Peter (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2009), 70–90.

26. Tchumkam, *Uncanny Citizenship*.

27. Achille Mbembe, “Figures of Multiplicity: Can France Reinvent its Identity?” in *Frenchness and the African Diaspora: Identity and Uprising in Contemporary France*, eds. Tshimanga, Charles, Gondola, Didier, and Bloom, Peter (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2009), 55–69.

28. Laurent Bonello, “The Control of the Enemy Within? Police Intelligence in the French Suburbs (banlieues) and its Relevance for Globalization,” in *Controlling Frontiers: Free Movement into and Within Europe*, edited by Bigo, Didier and Guild, Elspeth (London: Routledge, 2005), 193–208

29. Christian Lequesne, “French foreign and security challenges after the Paris terrorist attacks,” *Contemporary Security Policy*, 37, no. 2, (2016), 306–318.

songs and interviews for decades and these organizations seek to exploit these feelings as they attempt to recruit people to their cause. Former popular rapper Oxmo Puccino weighed in on how increased feelings of historical and societal exclusion facing France's youths of color is increasingly becoming dangerous when he gave this dire warning:

Le manque de réponse vis-à-vis de l'héritage colonial cause des frustrations que le pays finit par payer. Le terrorisme est l'une de ces conséquences. Les jeunes Français fils d'immigrés sont vus en Afrique comme des étrangers, et en France comme des éléments perturbateurs. En France, nous ne leur avons pas dit qu'ils étaient chez eux, et ils sont devenus des faux orphelins dans leur propre pays.

(The lack of response to the colonial legacy causes frustrations that the country ends up paying. Terrorism is one of those consequences. Young French sons of immigrants are seen in Africa as foreigners, and in France as disruptive elements. In France, we haven't told them that they are at home, and so they became orphans in their own country.)³⁰

In other words, because Black and Brown youths are unemployed at high percentages and they live in communities with little to no economic investment, with few opportunities of advancement, their frustrations and anger are real. Yet despite larger and more global challenges such as these, Christina Horvath posits, the *banlieues* and those who live within them are complex and diverse spaces where art forms such as literary narratives and hip-hop culture find a fertile ground of expression that are tied into the constant realism of daily life in all of its facets, positive and negative.³¹

SOCCER PART DEUX: THIS TIME, AFRICA WINS THE WORLD CUP

Exactly twenty years after the French soccer team last won the soccer World Cup, France once again raised the championship trophy in 2018. Similar to their previous victory two decades prior, the national team was once again made up of a diversity of players that reflects the country's multiculturalism in a disproportionate way vis-à-vis real population demographics. For example, more than 80 percent of the 2018 squad traced their roots to migrant backgrounds, primarily from Africa. Because of this, people around the world affectionately referred to these new French stars as "the sixth team from Africa" because under current rules only five teams from that continent can qualify for the final round. However, the comparisons between the 1998 and 2018 World Cup winning squads end there. Unlike the previous victory, in 2018 there was not a swelling of national pride and deep discussion in terms of France's racial diversity as an immigrant-receiving nation, nor has the refrain "*Black, Blanc, Beur*" been widely reintroduced or rebranded by the French public to celebrate the multiculturalism of the country. Instead, individual players have been fêted by the French media (especially the young star Kylian Mbappé) and political parties from across the spectrum unilaterally celebrated the team's victory *without*

30. David Doucet, "Oxmo Puccino: En Afrique j'ai assisté à des miracles," *Inrockuptibles*, March 26, 2017, <https://www.lesinrocks.com/2017/03/16/musique/musique/oxmo-puccino-en-afrique-jai-assiste-des-miracles/>.

31. Christina Horvath, "Banlieue narratives: voicing the French urban periphery," *Romance Studies*, 36, no. 1-2 (2018), 1-4.

highlighting the ethnocultural (African) backgrounds of the players. Perhaps new technologies that favor a more individual rather than a collective mindset are the motivator for this noteworthy distinction that differentiates the two winning teams from 1998 and 2018. Another explanation could be that right-wing parties in France are now focusing their ire on ethnocultural minorities and refugees who were born *outside* of the country rather than any native-born players who wear the national jersey of *Les Bleus*, even if their backgrounds are African. No matter the change in tone, topics related to structural racism against youths of color in France remain increasingly problematic, even when France's African-ness is celebrated on the soccer pitch.

Although France's official legislation dictates that all citizens are fully equal under the cherished ideals of the *République*, official policy of equality and the daily realities felt by youths of color run in contrast with one another.³² For example, when crimes or other negative events happen in areas inhabited by Black and Brown youths, the media is quick to point out the ethnocultural origins of those involved.³³ Matters such as these negatively affect young people of color. Moreover, as Isabelle Garcin-Marrou further argues, this sort of heightened suspicion by authorities of the State is one reason why many youths from ethnocultural backgrounds retain strong attachments or bonds with their heritage culture, even in those cases where the ancestral language is no longer spoken in the home.³⁴ In other words, feelings of exclusion felt by young people with African roots in France help to nourish stronger bonds and attachments to their heritage cultures. Consequently, this wave of nostalgia for the distant lands of one's ancestors as a reaction to, and a rejection of racism and exclusion has also greatly motivated hip-hop music in recent years. Thus, socioeconomic malaise felt by youths of color toward the institutions of the State is once again motivating rappers to attach themselves to Africa, and far more meaningfully than what was heard before during hip-hop's early years in France. Yet, themes that support notions of African Pride and a correct historical description of Africa's relationship with France are still invisible, as they counteract the official "positive" (and incorrect) connotations and images put forth by public school curricula.

Despite the educational and cultural praise lavished on France for its achievements over many centuries, French colonialism has also been responsible for centuries of injustice and inhumanity regarding its treatment of Africa and Africans. To this day in the Paris suburbs and across France, young people of color whose roots are of African descent are less educated and more likely to be unemployed than those from the majority culture.³⁵ The emotional impact of these types of education and social dichotomies faced by France's citizens of color vis-à-vis French majority society is frequently omnipresent in the lyrics of hip-hop releases past and present. Popular artists in rap music have long-focused their work on the uneven historical, educational, and cultural realities faced by people of color in France. However, recently rappers have been seeking to promote the

32. Begag, *Ethnicity and Equality*.

33. Isabelle Garcin-Marrou, "Des 'jeunes' et des 'banlieues' dans la presse de l'automne 2005: entre compréhension et relégation," *Espaces et sociétés*, 1-2, no. 128-129 (2007), 23-37.

34. Garcin-Marrou, *Des jeunes et des banlieues*.

35. Michel Kokoreff, *Sociologie des émeutes* (Paris: Payot, 2008).

African continent as a place of comfort and refuge that is far away from the racism and discrimination that defines France's relationship with its citizens of African descent, be they Black or Brown.

LOOKING SOUTH TO AFRICA FOR COMFORT AND IDENTITY

Starting in the early 2000s, French hip-hop began to redefine itself from solely being motivated by American trends as artists have increasingly looked to the African continent for inspiration. Although an Afro-centric approach has been mildly present in rap songs over the past decades, the continent has by and large been sidelined from rap music as a central thematic inspiration, even if at the same time media conglomerates in France have increasingly played a part in supporting Africa.³⁶ For example, the French television industry has substantially expanded their footprint throughout Francophone Africa, which included the launching of two satellite stations devoted to a more urbanized musical sound. Two such channels (MCM and Trace TV) visually exposed Africans to various genres of global Black music such as R&B, Zouk, Jazz, Caribbean music, and French hip-hop while becoming enormously popular in Francophone countries. Perhaps unexpectedly, these new television channels also boosted the visibility of Afro-Caribbean musical styles in France itself, with many global Black artists achieving significance across two continents. This transnational movement of musical styles and trends also made its presence known in hip-hop music.³⁷ Sounds from the African continent made their way into rap songs as more artists embraced their own ethnocultural backgrounds as they composed their albums. For example, several members of Ministère AMER and other popular groups such as Arsenik and Neg'Marrons came together to develop a side project that became the group named *Bisso Na Bisso*, which is translated from Lingala, a language spoken widely in the two Congos, as "between us." The lead member of this ensemble was Passi, who attained considerable acclaim both as a member of Ministère AMER and as a solo artist. Led by his star power, Bisso Na Bisso released the album *Racines* ("Roots") in 1999. Songs from this release featured collaborations with many legendary African and Caribbean artists, Ismaël Lo, Papa Wemba, Kassav, etc, and its subject matter covered a wide variety of thematic issues such as African unity, political violence, good governance on the continent, and identity and emigration, among others. Because of Bisso Na Bisso's Pan African approach, and due to the huge market of listeners in both France and Francophone Africa, the album *Racines* went on to be a huge success and the group earned three *Kora* awards. Moreover, the idea of concretely fusing African sounds with those omnipresent in French hip-hop was born. Because many rappers in France can directly trace their roots to Africa, the *mélange* of hip-hop with rhythms from Africa seemed like a natural progression for French rap.

Bisso Na Bisso led the way for other rappers to join together and fuse African sounds into their music, with one notable example being the ensemble known as 113. This

36. Florent Mazzoleni, *Africa 2000: La traversée sonore d'un continent* (Paris: Le Mot et le Reste, 2012).

37. Cheryl Keyes, "At the Crossroads: Rap Music and its African Nexus," *Ethnomusicology*, 4, no. 2 (1996), 223–248.

multicultural group was made up of artists with links to the Maghreb, the Caribbean, and sub-Saharan Africa, and they had some mild success with the song “*Tonton du bled*,” which discusses the issue of a migrant who returns home with the point of views held by a second-generation resident of France. At the same time that all of this was occurring, even well-known French pop artists started to mix African sounds into their music. Perhaps one of the most notable examples of this was Mylène Farmer’s remix of the 1960s *yéyé* track “*La poupée qui fait non*,” when she sang a popular duet with the popular Algerian Raï music singer Khaled, who brought that genre’s sound into the song’s repetitive refrain.

Over the past decade, the African continent has gone from being a mere occasional mention in rap lyrics to becoming one of the primary inspirations of thematic matter and sound. The past five years in particular have seen an impressive move toward including Africa into songs in ways not seen since the late 1990s when Bisso Na Bisso enjoyed success. While the latter were one of the first French hip-hop groups to feature a full album of Pan African sounds, recent rappers such as Mokobé went even further by personally attaching himself to the continent with his popular release entitled *Mon Afrique* (My Africa), which is an album featuring many famous artists from across the continent. Unlike Bisso Na Bisso’s one-and-done album *Racines*, Mokobé continued to mold African rhythms and subject matter into his follow-up album named *Africa Forever*. This second release of his features some of the newer and more popular artists of the day from both France and Africa as contributors. Songs from this album featured the likes of popular Marseille-based rapper Soprano and the group Magic System from Côte d’Ivoire, among others. The popularity of Mokobé’s two albums set the stage for what now has become a massive movement toward the inclusion of Africa into contemporary hip-hop in a more forceful and meaningful manner.

One of the most popular musical ensembles of the past decade in France is the group Sexion d’Assault. Members of this group hail from several African countries, many of whom also have popular solo careers, including the enormously popular singer known as Maître Gims, who is the son of the popular Congolese musician Djanana Djuna, a vocalist from the popular African group Papa Wemba. Maître Gims has released two critically acclaimed solo albums, both of which have topped the charts in France in both pop and R&B categories. Perhaps owing to his unique upbringing where he was surrounded by various musical influences, each of Maître Gims’ releases are greatly influenced by, or outright feature, the sounds and beats of the Congolese musical style known as *Rumba*. One music critic for the widely distributed periodical *Le Parisien Magazine* posits on the success of this artist, stating, “One of the keys of Maître Gims’ success is the danceable energy of the music’s rhythms boosted by the sounds of these (Congolese) instruments.”³⁸ The title of Maître Gims’ most successful album is *Sapes comme jamais*, which makes reference to the Kinshasa-inspired fashionable *SAPÉ* movement, where men dress up in

38. Lucas Bretonnier, Lucas, “Un vent d’Afrique souffle sur le scène musicale française,” *Le Parisien*, April 1, 2017, <https://www.leparisien.fr/week-end/un-vent-d-afrique-souffle-sur-la-scene-musicale-francaise-01-04-2017-6807987.php>.

colorful suits and formalwear as they parade through the city. Seeing that Maître Gims is an R&B artist who prefers a smoother sound and style to his music and in the videoclips associated with these songs, the album title is fitting. However, as an R&B artist, the music released by Maître Gims does not give much of a *lyrical* nod to Africa in the same manner exhibited by regular hip-hop artists, despite the many *Rumba* and style influences that one can hear in his songs and see in his visual presentations. That said, Maître Gims' popularity demonstrates that African sounds melded with R&B are present for the listener, and album sales reflect its attractiveness with French consumers from across demographic lines.

Since rappers in France are on the forefront of bringing issues faced by youths of color in the country into the limelight, the subject of Africa has moved beyond merely being an occasional musical backdrop to become the central focus for many artists as a way to celebrate their roots despite the narrow confines of France's secular traditions. A perfect example to mention here to highlight this particular point is the collaboration between Sofiane (a French rapper of Arab descent) and Maître Gims in the 2018 song "*Africain*," a track whose very name highlights the origins of most people of color in France. In terms of thematic matter, the song highlights how the Black and Brown populations of France regard one another as one united people who live and work together in a country that often views both groups suspiciously. This distinction in regard to unity is an important thing to denote. Tchumkam argues that France no longer makes a "radical distinction" between Arabs and people from sub-Saharan Africa when he states that both groups of citizens are viewed as the same "enemy within" against which the country seeks to protect itself.³⁹ This particular song by Maître Gims focuses on the unity of all Africans, from north to south. The colorful videoclip that accompanies the song was filmed in Morocco and its lyrics address several issues related to inclusion and exclusion. The track starts out when the rapper Sofiane gives a nod to his heritage roots in the first couplet when he states: "*Papa m'a dit de préserver tous les liens. Je l'aime et grâce à Dieu, je sais d'où je viens.*" (Dad told me to keep all the links, I love him and thanks to God, I know where I come from.) Lines such as these confirm that despite official secularism in France, people from the country's ethnocultural communities are not shedding their ancestral ties in favor of identifying solely as French. After this intro, the rapper further mentions that "I want to feel at home, in my country or in yours" and then asks this question to his listeners: "And on that side of me, what will they say? On the other side of me, what will they say?" The track's videoclip helps make sense of the inquiry as it shows the rapper gesturing both northward toward France and southward toward sub-Saharan Africa, which in the latter case viewers are visually presented by images from that part of the continent. Later in the track Maître Gims enters the song and addresses his own heritage ties when he sings: "*Quand j'ai commencé dans la musique, je me suis retrouvé dans des pays, je me suis reconnu, dans des tribus qui n'avaient pas forcément, les attributs de ce que j'ai connu, depuis petit [. . .] Je suis de là-bas, et je suis d'ici. Je ne bougerai pas, je suis ainsi.*" (When I started out in music, I rediscovered myself in countries, I recognized myself

39. Tchumkam, *Uncanny Citizenship*, 20.

in tribes that did not have the attributes that I knew since I was little [...] I'm from there and I'm from here. I will not move; I am like that.) This excerpt is a perfect example of the split identity felt by many from within France's populations of color, discussed well in "*Arafricain*," and it illustrates how a gesture as simple as visiting the home of one's ancestors may trigger various emotions in a person where they are able to recognize themselves, even in those cases where the local "attributes" or cultural mores are not the same as France. Maître Gims ends his part of the song by affirming that he is "from there" (Africa) and also "from here" (France). Despite this duality, he, and many others from ethnocultural communities in France, is able to celebrate both aspects of his identity. One further refrain of this track strongly advocates for this type of unique dual descriptor when both artists engage in a duet led by Sofiano stating: "*Je ne suis pas un Arabe, pas un Africain; Un Arabe d'Afrique, un Arafricain.*" (I am not an Arab, not an African; An Arab from Africa, an Arafrican.) This sort of deep dual identifier is common among people of color, despite the expectations that people from ethnocultural communities, in particular youths, will align themselves solely with France. The African continent is more than just a thematic backdrop for many artists, including Maître Gims. For example, in addition to his massive popularity in the French-speaking world, Maître Gims also engages himself in subjects relating to the development of African countries. In April 2019 he signed a protocol agreement to collaborate with the Moroccan company Lamalif with which he created the investment group called *Lamalif Afrique*. The goal of this particular collaboration is to provide capital to and inspire young Africans to work in urban planning professions as they concern projects that focus on urban innovation, infrastructure, and human resources development as a means in which to construct the Africa of tomorrow.⁴⁰

Undoubtedly, consumers of French hip-hop will grudgingly agree that the biggest contemporary rapper in France is the artist named Booba. Over the past decade no one has sold as many records or achieved the same level of popularity and notoriety as the self-proclaimed "*Duc de Boulogne*" (The Duke of Boulogne). Since he first emerged onto the hip-hop scene in the early 2000s, Booba's sound has typically been associated with the more Americanized hardcore side of rap, and his videos often show him flexing in ways as to reinforce his characterization as an artist with a "gangsta" edge. Additionally, Booba had never shied away from the limelight, both positively, he is a businessman involved in several ventures, and negatively, he frequently spars with the French media, radio stations, journalists, and his rivals in the hip-hop industry.⁴¹ Adept at using social media, his constant presence online further amplifies these two points.⁴²

Born in France to a Senegalese father and a French mother, Booba never paid much attention to Africa in his initial early albums aside from occasional tepid mentions, such

40. Zoubida Senoussi, "Maître Gims s'aligne avec le groupe marocain Lamalif," *Hespress*, April 17, 2019, <https://fr.hespress.com/64804-maitre-gims-sallie-au-groupe-marocain-lamalif.html>.

41. Maxime Delcourt, "La radio de Booba OKLM a-t-elle gagné sa 'battle' face à Skyrock?" *Slate*, November 13, 2016, <http://www.slate.fr/story/127451/radio-booba-oklm-battle-skyrock>.

42. Arnaud Ramsay, "Booba: 'Karim Benzema et moi, on est les vilains petits canards de notre milieu,'" *Le Journal du Dimanche*, December 16, 2017, <https://www.lejdd.fr/Sport/Football/booba-karim-benzema-et-moi-on-est-deux-les-vilains-petits-canards-de-notre-milieu-3522647>.

as in the songs “*Ma définition*” and “Bakel city gang” with the latter title honoring the home city of his father. However, Booba’s style has evolved substantially in recent albums starting with his release entitled *Trône*. The lead single of this album is entitled “DKR” (an acronym for Dakar, the capital of Sénégal) and it quickly became a top song in France and beyond as soon as it hit the charts and videoclips associated with this album show the rapper returning “home.” In a certain sense, the new “place and space” for Booba as defined by Forman is no longer his local neighborhood, for that has now shifted to his ancestral home on the African continent.⁴³ Moreover, this sort of refocus and shift toward one’s home after perhaps denying or nullifying one’s roots follows, and perhaps was inspired by, the literary model put forth by Aimé Césaire in his epic work “*Cahier au retour au pays natal*” (Notebook of a Return to the Native Land).⁴⁴ In this masterpiece of French literature, Césaire focuses on the self and his own cultural identity through the use of accepting and understanding what he lists as the many travails that once forced him to deny his African heritage through the use of storytelling, analogies, metaphor, surrealist writing. The long piece written by Césaire eventually crescendos and culminates with the author’s triumphant acceptance of his own origins in order to return home standing tall. Consumers of the song “DKR” may be able to draw many parallels to Césaire’s famous work and Booba’s recent musical oeuvre on this album.

The track “DKR” opens with the sounds of the *kora*, a traditional Senegalese instrument and thematically it features several noteworthy references to the African continent. Moreover, the launching lines of this song signal a major rhetorical change in terms of Booba’s usual hardcore subject matter. For example, the very first rap lyric that listeners hear in this opening track of the album is: “*Ce n’est pas le quartier qui me quitte, c’est moi, je quitte le quartier*” (it’s not the ‘hood that is leaving me, I’m leaving the ‘hood). In other words, while songs on Booba’s former albums focused solely on hardcore subjects or themes that one may find prevalent in the marginalized suburbs of Paris, or they discussed topics typically echoed in American rap (with an emphasis on the streets), this new release ventured to a completely new place thematically: Africa. Following this initial statement that pays homage to the rapper’s physical and geographic space in the videoclip, the song goes on to give several lyrical shout-outs to the continent that discuss Africa’s long history when the rapper states, “Africa, you have no age. They want to marry you.” As the cradle of all civilization, Booba is suggesting here that the African continent is ageless. However, this excerpt also presents listeners with other pertinent information: Despite the historical richness of Africa, Booba reminds everyone that wealthy nations have controlled and exploited the continent for centuries, and that this sort of domination continues to this day when he raps “they (contemporary outside interests) want to marry you.” Although no one is named directly in this song, and the use of a subject pronoun is cleverly employed in this case, perhaps the “they” of Booba is a call out and *clapback* to the many corporations and wealthy countries that give loans to or sign agreements with corrupt governments across the continent. Moreover, this can be further emphasized because the

43. Foreman, *The Hood Comes First*.

44. Aimé Césaire, *Notebook of a Return to the Native Land* (Middletown: Wesleyan Press, 2001).

following line of the track suggests by “marrying” the “they” suggested in the previous example, the continent will subsequently be “taken hostage” (“Your name will be taken hostage. What’s the point of being a caged lion?”). To address that topic directly, Booba then adds his own opinion by stating “what’s the point of being a caged lion,” which implores Africans to break free from outside domination and to develop the continent on their own terms.

In later lines of “DKR” this same defensive posture for the African continent remains fully evident. For example, after first discussing his own personal connections to his heritage country, Booba addresses those who want to do business with the new Africa when he raps: “I’m in front of a plate of *tiép bou dienn*. Even while Black, I can turn red with hatred. A slave does not have a remission from pain.” This example starts by connecting the rapper to the continent as it emphasizes the pain it has been through due to outside domination. After Booba names the national culinary dish of Sénégal (*tiép bou dienn*), he then raps that although he is Black, he too can become angry as slaves were not free from feeling pain or emotions. After establishing these connections with his heritage culture, Booba takes a strong stand against those who wish to exploit the continent further when he states: “Those who do not want to do business, I beg you: Get away from here. The value of your pussy is down. Give me a shot of Mandela.” The point of this particular excerpt warns outsiders who wish to exploit the continent unfairly, telling them to stay away. This is further accentuated by the choice of the pronouns in the original French that are used by the rapper “*ceux qui*” (those who) and “*je vous en prie*” (I beg you, plural). Although a vulgar term is employed here (in the original French, the pejorative “*schneck*,” or “pussy”), in doing so Booba argues that the dominant countries of the past are fading in terms of their global importance and that Africa is quickly rising. Finally, in the line “give me a shot of Mandela,” Booba is making it clear that because the African continent is ascending rapidly, it deserves to be taken seriously as an equal.

In the single “DKR,” Booba also makes several softer references to his heritage country of Sénégal. Among them, he name drops two soccer teams: the first reference is to the Senegalese nation team “*Les lions de la Teranga*,” and the second mentions “*gris Bordeaux ou Bombardier*,” which pays homage to players from Senegal on the roster of the French league team in Bordeaux. Moreover, in this track the rapper also name drops the “*Génération Boul Falé*,” which speaks directly to the sentiments of young people of Sénégal. Among Senegalese youths, this particular term from the Wolof language is translated to mean both “never mind,” or “we have had enough.” The “*boul falé*” to which Booba makes reference is how young people from Sénégal see the world differently from the old ways and mentalities of past “*générations*.”

Perhaps it is fitting and even intentional that Booba chose this particular expression, as both the future of hip-hop music *en français* as well as the French language itself is firmly entrenched in Africa, and similar to young people globally, youths are the primary consumers of rap. Moreover, consider that the majority of the world’s Francophone population lives on the African continent and people under the age of 30 years old make up to three quarters of the population of many African countries, including Sénégal.

Because of these demographics, Booba may be suggesting that youths across Africa are increasingly rejecting the old ways of dealing with the world (hence, “*boul falé*”) in favor of taking the continent into a new direction on *their* terms. The song “DKR” is not the only song from the album *Trône* that features African thematic matter, style, or rhythms. In the second release entitled “*Friday*,” Booba discusses his dual identity when he raps “*allez les Bleus, allez les Lions, moi je suis un peu des deux*” (Go Blues, Go Lions [the nicknames for the national soccer teams of France and Sénégal], I’m a bit of both), and in the track’s videoclip he is dressed in traditional clothing worn by the Tuareg ethnic group.

Other established artists in French hip-hop are increasingly featuring African themes, styles, dances, and sounds in their music. The Belgian rapper Stromae, of Rwandan background, often mixes his songs with guitars that play the equatorial African *Soukous* sounds, most notably in the track “*Papaoutai*.” Another popular hip-hop artist, Niska, of Congolese descent, frequently melds a variety of styles in his music, among them the “*n’dombolo congolais*,” which is a fast-paced popular dance and music style first made popular in the Republic of Congo. That said, despite these small types of giving homage to their ancestral roots, neither Stromae, nor Niska have released tracks where the continent is the primary source of lyrical or thematic matter.

In addition to the aforementioned rappers, more recent younger hip-hop artists are also increasingly featuring Africa in their music. The most important of these newcomers is a rapper named MHD (Mohammed Sylla), of Guinean and Senegalese descent who burst onto the scene in 2016 by creating a new style of sound called “Afro Trap” that is directly tied to the African continent. The name of this technique is characterized as a blend of the Atlanta-based Trap prominent in American hip-hop with African and Caribbean influences. Lyrics from MHD’s songs are lighthearted in subject matter and are rapped in a French that is peppered with lines and refrains from various African languages. Videos of Afro Trap songs additionally feature the artist and others dancing to choreographed dance moves from West Africa. MHD’s quick rise in popularity is unique because he is one of the first French rappers to capitalize on the power of new and emerging technologies (i.e., social media) in order to launch a career. His self-titled debut album, *MHD*, was ranked number two on the French charts in 2016, and he has since toured with the industry’s heavyweights, notably Booba.⁴⁵ Although the subject matter in his songs may not always be exclusively about Africa, the sounds, beats, instruments, and even the language heard in his releases all pay homage directly to the African continent, for example, a popular song is named “*A kele nta*,” from the Bambala language. Similar to those popular rappers who came before him, MHD’s music acknowledges his dual roots and this presentation of rapped duality provided by him and others is designed to remind all French people of color to be proud of the total *mélange* that represents who they are. This type of notable detail heard in MHD’s music (and shown in his videoclips) is important, given that it runs contrary to the ideals of State secularism that favors a unified and equal citizenry. Yet, in light of Africa’s increasingly central presence across the

45. Bretonnier, *Un vent souffle*.

spectrum of French hip-hop and music in general in France, perhaps a larger question to ponder would be to measure its thematic sustainability over time.

Since the early stages of this new trend for French rappers to be stylistically inspired by Africa (2016 to the present), consumers and critics of French hip-hop may be skeptical about the continued longevity of these trends. More specifically, since musical styles and genres are always in flux, inclinations toward the continent such as these may be seen to represent nothing more than another one of the many passing styles that influence hip-hop until being displaced by the next technique or approach that becomes *en vogue*. However, when it comes to French hip-hop, *Afrique* as a motivator may be here to stay. When the sounds of the African continent started reappearing into French rap in 2016, an article published by *Le Mouv'* (a popular hip-hop radio network in France) addressed skeptics of the growing "*Africanisation*" of rappers in France by arguing: "What [who] is the best barometer of rap tendencies? (. . .) Booba. Whether considered as a precursor or a follower, the result is the same: what Booba does, the rest of French rap follows (Mouv')." ⁴⁶ In other words, if the king of hip-hop music in France is moving his visual and thematic focus toward Africa, others in the industry, especially those rappers with African and Arab heritage roots, would surely emulate him. Interestingly, at the time of that article's publication, Booba had just released "*Validée*" that gives a nod toward the continent, and his heavily Africanized song "DKR" would not be released for another year and a half. Moreover, *Le Mouv'* further suggests that by moving their focus to Africa, French rappers are paving the way for African artists to gain success in France as well. The latter point has yet to be fully realized, but rappers from the continent are increasingly collaborating with their French peers while others have toured France and are growing in popularity, notably MOD Gang.

CONCLUSION

Regardless whether Africa remains a centerpiece in French hip-hop, as Francophone African countries continue to develop themselves economically and grow in terms of prestige and power in the French-speaking world, one can expect rap and other musical styles from the continent to achieve greater success and visibility in France and elsewhere. This is especially true when one considers shifting demographic trends occurring in the global south. Most of the planet's French speakers live in Africa, and of the five largest Francophone cities on Earth, four are located on the continent, with Kinshasa, Democratic Republic of Congo, set to displace Paris from the top position in the next few years. The African influence in music extends beyond hip-hop as the continent's sounds are influencing other musical genres in France as well. Because the African continent and African American culture is the source of nearly all types of American music, Mazzoleni argues that many types of beats now used by French DJs in electronic music are also inspired by Africa. ⁴⁷ Lastly, musical nods toward the African continent by the hip-hop

46. Mouv', "L'Afrique réveille le rap français," *Mouv'*, January 18, 2016, <https://www.mouv.fr/rap-fr/l-afrique-reveille-le-rap-francais-231619>.

47. Mazzoleni, *Africa 2000*.

industry in France may also be prompted by other notable factors that have savvy ulterior motives related to simple economics and capitalism. For example, in demographic terms the continent is young with an estimated 70 percent of Africans under the age of 30. Therefore, it is safe to assume that rappers and record industry executives recognize that these youths represent a burgeoning market for French rap. In fact, many hip-hop artists have indeed started to include Francophone African countries on their concert tours. Furthermore, as countries across Africa become more economically developed, augmented by an enlarging middle class, an increased visibility and popularity of the brand that is *le hip-hop français* throughout Africa becomes even more important concerning the overall global popularity of the music, which translates to increased record sales.

Despite economics and demographics, recent thematic nods to the African continent by rappers in France are increasingly intentional due to unresolved issues relating to structural racism that adversely affects youths of color. Much more work is needed in terms of analyzing questions related to the long-term stylistic and sonic sounds of African influences in French hip-hop as well as examinations regarding gender and the postcolonial commodification of Africa, among other subjects. In terms of the current study, as long as marginalized young people of color in France do not feel fully included as equals in all sectors of French society, they will continue to embrace their heritage cultures as a means in which to provide them comfort in a country that has yet to come to terms with their presence. French hip-hop has long been the barometer that best reflects the thoughts, issues, and feelings of the country's populations of color, and rappers have used the visible platform of their music to discuss and deconstruct subjects occurring in the *quartiers*. In this sense, Africa's inclusion into hip-hop music in France is intentional, not coincidental, and for this reason one can expect further and deeper connections to the continent to influence rap music in France in the years to come. ■