

## Intermediality, Rewriting Histories, and Identities in French Rap

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### Recommended Citation

Marc Martínez, Isabelle. "Intermediality, Rewriting Histories, and Identities in French Rap." *CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture* 13.3 (2011): <<https://doi.org/10.7771/1481-4374.1804>>

This text has been double-blind peer reviewed by 2+1 experts in the field.

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**Volume 13 Issue 3 (September 2011) Article 18**

**Isabelle Marc Martínez,**

**"Intermediality, Rewriting Histories, and Identities in French Rap"**

<<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol13/iss3/18>>

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**Contents of *CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture* 13.3 (2011)**  
**Thematic issue *New Perspectives on Material Culture and Intermedial Practice***

**Ed. Steven Tötösy de Zepetnek, Asunción López-Varela,  
Haun Saussy, and Jan Mieszkowski**

<<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol13/iss3/>>

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**Abstract:** In her article "Intermediality, Rewriting Histories and Identities in French Rap" Isabelle Marc Martínez analyzes aspects of French hip hop culture. As an example of resistant cultural manifestations, hip hop scenes all over the world develop strategies to subvert mainstream values and to replace them by new de-localized, contesting identities via intermedial and intertextual processes. In France during the 1990 rap was intended to reassess French national history and national self-perception. Foundational hip hop bands such as Assassin, Ministère AMER, IAM, and NTM aimed at discrediting official narratives concerning the French culture's colonial and social past. hip hop artists, who viewed themselves as poets in a romantic vein, invested themselves with a responsibility that was political, ethical and aesthetic. From this position of poetic superiority, they attempted to alter official narratives by questioning and reviewing the educational system of France. The outcome of these resistant strategies was the forging of new multicultural and multiethnic identities of French culture, which have been in fact partly appropriated by mainstream culture and politics.

## Isabelle MARC MARTÍNEZ

### Intermediality, Rewriting Histories, and Identities in French Rap

Cultures often recur to historical discourses and narratives in order to legitimize their existence. This is particularly true in hip hop culture, which constitutes a new space of representation for communities in search of a new identity which will be partly founded in the articulation of historical narratives different from official and hegemonic ones. Like in other forms of resistant and subversive music, rap music gives individuals who feel socially and culturally dispossessed an aesthetic experience which helps them building their identity in relation to their immediate world, their physical appearance, their common denial of superstructures, and also in relation to their memories, their traditions, or their real or symbolic origins. In this context, reclaiming the past and questioning dominant historiography, while rejecting mainstream views and values, become discursive strategies aimed to (re-)build their de-localized identities, situating them in new socio-cultural vernacular spaces. In hip hop — a genre that is a prime example of intermedial cultural production — the construction and expression of identity against mainstream society represents social relevance in several cultural spaces including France.

I begin with the question of how is music able to contribute shaping identities? As an aesthetic manifestation, music plays a prominent role in the semiotic community that forms a culture. "Serious" music but also folk and popular music constitute core elements in shaping cultural heritage and cultural identity. In its relation to society, music is an aesthetic experience which is created, produced and received in a specific social group to which it is complexly related. As Brian Longhurst points out, understanding music requires taking into account its production system, its own form and objectives and the readings of its audience (249). Music, especially contemporary popular music because of its ubiquity and accessibility, is a cultural product and practice with symbolic and ideological content. Moreover, on the individual level, music is a core element in the process of forging symbolic identity, both individual and social. Music plays an important role in the way people situate themselves in society, that is, in the way they create their identity, defined as the process by which a subject symbolically positions himself or herself in a specific community (see, e.g., Frith, *Popular Music: Music and Identity*). In fact, "music, like identity, is both performance and story, describes the social in the individual and the individual in the social, the mind in the body and the body in the mind; identity, like music, is a matter of both ethics and aesthetics" (Frith, "Music and Identity" 294). Therefore, musical experience (as performance and as listening) helps the subject locating himself/herself in relation to a socio-economic group and to an aesthetic, ideological, and symbolic community. Music does not express a social group's beliefs or values; on the contrary, as Simon Frith affirms, "social groups only get to know themselves as groups (as a particular organization of individual and social interests, of sameness and difference) through cultural activity, through aesthetic judgement" (Frith, "Music and Identity" 296). In everyday life, as Tia DeNora points out, "music has power. It is implicated in every dimensions of social agency ... Music may influence how people compose their bodies, how they conduct themselves, how they experience the passage of time, how they feel — in terms of energy and emotion — about themselves, about others, and about situations" (DeNora 17). In this complex process of building identity, music contributes to the narrativization of place, that is, to the representation that links the subject to his or her location, to his or her "territory" (real and imaginary). The same is true when it comes to the ways in which the subject relates to time, traditions, and cultural heritage: music narratives are set in time, both past and present and music forms themselves are related to each other in the chronological continuum forming a complex semiotic system. Studies about musical diaspora, ethnic music, and national music have shown to what extent music is essential in the formulation of identity on the cultural and the individual level (see Gilroy, "Sounds Authentic"; Slobin). However, when analyzing the relation between a genre of music and a specific social or ethnic group we should avoid falling into the trap of essentialism (socio-economic, national, ethnic). In fact, because music is movable performance, fostered by musical globalization, and despite the fact that it is rooted in specific contexts, whenever and wherever it is listened to, and whoever does experience it, the subject becomes a participant of those original coordinates (spatial, historic, socio-economic, symbolic), that conformed that distinct musical identity, both bodily and symbolically, absorbing it (rejecting,

transforming or admitting it) in his/her own identity. When today a young Parisian from the fifth arrondissement listens to Public Enemy, he/she can be re-located in the US-American ghettos of the 1990s and his/her identity can be transformed consequently; the same is true when an Afro-New Yorker listens to Bach, because she/he can re-experience symbolically and bodily baroque music identity. In this sense, music can be then considered as "the cultural form best able both to cross borders ... and to define places; in clubs, scenes, and raves, listening on headphones, radio and in the concert hall, we are only where the music takes us" (Frith, "Music and Identity" 310).

hip hop music represents a paradigmatic example of the complex interactions between music and identity and between music and intermediality (see, e.g., Rose; Krims; Potter; Lapassade and Roussetot). Historically, as Tricia Rose shows, hip hop was born in the urban ghettos of the post-industrial U.S., within oppressed social groups formed mainly by the Afro-US-American and the U.S. Latino population. As socio-economic pariahs, cast out of mainstream society, they sought for a new cultural allegiance and found in hip hop culture (e.g., rap music, but also graffiti, tag, break-dance, looks, and attitudes) a way to recognize themselves as a group. This specific historic and socio-economic context was determinant in creating hip hop's powerful message of racial and ethnic claims, ideological contestation and formulation of a revolutionary utopia. One of the most visible features of hip hop's message is precisely the representation of Black culture as one of the foundations for a new identity. By opposing and privileging African-US-American heritage over Western culture as symbolic reference, the identity that resulted from hip hop experience was deviated and opposed to the dominant culture. Hip hop identity was no longer US-American, but Afro-US-American, a post-slave Black identity (see Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic*). Instead of national, it was ethnic and vernacular and linked to other Black diaspora populations. In the process of creating a resistant identity, narratives of origins were important because the new cultural group needed to find a common history to refer to. Thus, national historiographical representations, mainly Western, were replaced by new ones, now African centered. In this context, reclaiming the African past and rejecting national US-American identity were strategies aimed to (re-)build their de-localized identities, situating them in a new cultural framework. However, rooted in that definite context this new yet traditional culture has nowadays spread globally (see Mitchell, *Global Noise*), adopting different forms, different languages, different sounds linked to different historical origins, but always maintaining a feeling of belonging to the global culture of hip hop which is thus simultaneously global and local in its various "national" reformulations (Potter 146). Rap music has thus become "a vehicle for youth affiliations and a tool for reworking local identity all over the world" (Mitchell, *Global Noise* 1). Not surprisingly, communities that adopt hip hop are often multiethnic and multicultural. Hip hop, as a cultural experience of resistance, offers these communities the possibility to deny dominant values and to affirm their own identity.

France is one of the places outside the U.S. where hip hop has emerged more conspicuously. What is important here is that, despite being tightly and consciously related to its US-American origins, French hip hop has created a singular identity which assimilates Afro-US-American traditions, which are actualized and reinterpreted by its vernacular context. hip hop culture was in fact imported in the stream of the US-Americanization of French society during the 1980s and in the years between 1990 and 1995 rap consolidated in the market, the media and the cultural realm, with artists such as IAM, MC Solaar, Ministère AMER, and NTM (see Marc Martínez). Since 1995, hip hop has evolved as a commercial product as well as a means of aesthetic and ideological expression. Artists in the last ten years such as La Rumeur, Diam's, Abd al Malik, Java, or Akhénaton, among others, confirm the position held by hip hop in contemporary French popular music. In its more "hardcore" forms French hip hop has assimilated the ethnic and revolutionary message of hip hop culture, but has (re-)located it in its own context of production. Certainly, Afro-US-American referents remain, but it conveys a singular discourse, rejecting mainstream Frenchness and creating a new identity based upon socio-economic, ideological, historical bonds. However, to fully understand hip hop we should consider its production system and its reception as a cultural experience and as commercial product. Indeed, the very evidence of its national and international success refutes its marginalized vocation. By the 1990s, the artists and bands mentioned above — except for Assassin with its own label — signed with major record companies and gained wide commercial success. In this sense, hip hop has been commoditized by the very system it tries to contest. Moreover, rappers soon became media stars and their audi-

ences wider and more heterogenic. The paradox inherent to this process of incorporation fits perfectly in the pattern of subcultures' evolution: "Hip-hop, from the first, has been a social movement, which has come to bear all of the full-blown contradictions of a counterculture in its own right. Having emerged in the Bronx as an explicit alternative to gangland culture, hip-hop's subsequent rise to international prominence has been shaped by the tension between its status as sociopolitical commentary and its status as a commodity" (Ross qtd. in Mitchell, "Australian Hip-hop" 41).

The success of hip hop as a commodity seems to jeopardize its message for rappers take profit of the very structures they try to subvert. With regard to reception, rap audiences passed from being local and restricted to being broadly accepted. Nonetheless, all these processes of dilution of hip hop into mainstream should not make us forget that its cultural strategies of resistance, though perverted or misunderstood, actually existed and should be accounted for. That it precisely what we aim to do here: to present how French hip hop texts address history, race, and identity. The conscience of marginality (social, cultural, economical) and the apprehension of the "true" logics of history are related processes which both lead French rappers and audiences to fully assume the revolutionary dimensions of hip hop culture. Indeed, hip hop is opposed to any idealized concept of art in whatever form because it has always been conceived as a tool through which the social group — linked to specific context of production and consumption — could recognize itself. Hip hop songs intend to be acts of speech, essential at both ends of the process of building identity since they appropriate speech and give it back to otherwise voiceless populations. In this sense, there is a didactic purpose in many French rap songs which attempt to cause an actual effect on the conscience of their audience. As a means of cultural but also political action, hip hop has a pragmatic purpose by which its discourse intends to turn into action. In this way, rappers engage themselves in their hip hop experience and are consciously responsible for it. Further, this pragmatic conception of art is linked to the notion of commitment. The committed artist denies the poetics of silence and believes that his art can cause a change in the world (I am using the masculine pronoun to refer to rappers because in France most of them are men, especially in the period between 1990 and 1995). Therefore, together with Pascal, Hugo, Camus, or Brassens, French rap finds its place in *littérature de l'engagement* ("literature of commitment," a broader concept than Sartre's *littérature engagée*) (see Denis), a literary continuum ruled by an ethical project which aims to have an actual impact on society. The artist is conscious of the essential historicity of his being, of his contemporary status being directly connected to his past. The artist considers himself a poet and a master, a truth-revealing prophet. French rappers assume the role of the *poète citoyen*, a civic poet who, in a romantic way, acquires the qualities of authenticity, wisdom, and clarity. But this revival of romantic attitude should not make us forget that hip hop is a post-modern experience, for it transgresses tradition not only by means of a new form of artistic expression, but also by replacing historians in their role of official interpreters of history. The didactic commitment in French hip hop is articulated in several thematic axes: a commitment to history, a commitment to contemporary time and space, a commitment to utopia and a commitment to hip hop culture itself.

In hip hop, bonds of solidarity are based on the acknowledgment of a heritage distinctively separated from institutional views and values. In an attempt to forge its identity, rap music tries to recover its unofficial stories, confronting with them the dominant historical narratives. Unlike US-American hip hop where its actors were mainly Afro-US-Americans, French rappers and audiences do not belong to a unique ethnic group but they come from varied immigrant origins: Morocco, Algeria, Senegal, Turkey, Italy, rural and urban France, etc. What ties this multiethnic community together is the fact that they are aware of their different backgrounds because they have not been assimilated into the French mainstream even if they were born French. Their marginalized place in French society is epitomized by the *cités* where they live or that they recreate in their texts, those truly suburban ghettos in the country of human rights. These young *Beurs* ("Arabs") and Blacks, but also White immigrants, find in hip hop a way to re-visit the historiographical discourse conveyed by the Republic's institutions. The rapper's claim to voice the narratives of those estranged by the colonial discourse of the West is a post-modernist stance because it subverts and reassesses the notion of historiographical authority. Consequently, one of the major subjects of French rap is the imperative of reviewing history as expressed and practiced in text and music, a quintessential intermedial practice. Thus, French hip hop's commit-

ment towards a newer and truer vision of the past is developed in interlinked forms such as in the critique of the educational system because it spreads a false and deceiving version of history, the subsequent revision of those false narratives and the search for new ones, and by the appropriation of Africa and Négritude as an ethnic and spatial paradigm.

With regard to the critique of the educational system and the revision of historical narratives, rappers think that history as it is taught in French schools is contrary to objective history by the exclusion of minorities and by presenting a vision of France exclusively Western and white. In an intent to standardize the past around the majority, these historical narratives have forgotten the lower socioeconomic communities where rappers belong. Being aware of the fact that only by retrieving their past they would be able to recover identity, rappers seek historical narratives which are able to explain their present status. As autodidacts, rappers conceive to be able to link to the republican ideal of history while also serving as a catalyst for cohesion and criticism. This educational project in hip hop confirms the romantic perception of the artist and his work: rappers rediscover and actualize the revolutionary spirit of Romanticism and intend to assume the role of educating the people.

In the 1992 song "À qui l'histoire" by Assassin, the anarchist band, we find criticism of the dominant French historiographical discourse: "Today, we will talk about the educational system / the famous, the unique, the faithful system / ... The educational system must be reviewed / The history of humanity can be easily manipulated" ("Aujourd'hui nous allons parler du système éducationnel / Le fameux, l'unique, fidèle à ses modèles / ... Le système scolaire doit être remanié/ L'Histoire de l'Humanité est un sujet facile à manipuler" (unless indicated otherwise, all translation from the French are mine). Assassin rebels against the strategies of manipulation and asks young people to get a proper education: "I find my own way and I shout out loud ... To all the young people: education is the only way to fight the power" ("Mais moi je m'en sors et je crie fort ... A tous les jeunes qui m'écoutent poursuivez vos études! / Pour avoir l'aptitude à contrer le pouvoir en place"). Then, addressing power, they sing: "Your history is not my history, bastard / but it is your history that forces me to live in your territory" ("Ton histoire n'est pas forcément la mienne, connard! / pourtant ton histoire fait que je me retrouve dans ton territoire"). The educational revolution called for by Assassin asks for attention to the multicultural factors in contemporary France: "We claim a revolution in education, because the educational system doesn't study all the civilizations / it manipulates the younger generations / we must understand the world's history in order to build a future for every nation" ("La révolution dans l'éducation / car le système scolaire ne tient pas compte de toutes les civilisations / Manipulant le peuple dès les plus jeunes générations / La compréhension de l'histoire du monde est prédominante pour le futur des différentes nations"). Global and comprehensive historical awareness, gained through education, becomes an imperative in order to build a future of dignity for the new hip hop generation, that is significantly called "new nation": "get down for a future for my nation" ("get down pour un futur pour ma nation").

Along with the educational system, the text also undermines national identity by quoting the first article of the French constitution: "France is an indivisible, laic, democratic, and social republic" ("La France est une république indivisible, laïque, démocratique et sociale"). In "À qui l'histoire", the Republic's ideal of standardization is confronted by a different reality. This rejection of national belonging stands out in many other instances such as "I spit on my blonde, on the deep France" ("Je crache auprès de ma blonde dans la France profonde") (Ministère AMER, *L'Intégrale*); "France is bitch" ("la France est un garce") (IAM, *De la Planète Mars*); "France is a country of knights / which will always live in the past" ("la France est un pays de chevaliers / Qui ne cessera jamais de vivre dans le passé") (IAM, *Ombre est lumière*). Ministère AMER, the radical Black band from Sarcelles, also denounces official history and pledges for self-conscious education. In "Le Savoir" the group refers to the suffering of Black people such as slavery or forced participation in Western wars: "Five centuries ago, triangular trade would take our wives and children away / our ancestors were sold to the West because of their virtues / Some would fight and die in your streets / against Hitler / In the country of freedom, our hands are tied / ... My band knows better and dismantles all these false beliefs / Since my childhood, with the beautiful history of France, which are the lies? / We must review our knowledge, I'm cast out of history / ... Knowledge is a weapon, now I Know" ("Cinq siècles auparavant, le commerce triangulaire prend femmes et enfants / Nos parents dans l'Occident, vendus pour toutes les vertus / D'autres

combattirent et moururent dans vos rues / Au cours de la guerre face à Hitler / Dans ces pays des libertés, nos mains sont liées / ... Mon groupe s'illustre et frustre les croyances qui nous mettent en transe / Depuis l'enfance, avec la belle histoire de France, où sont les manigances? / Le savoir est à revoir, j'suis à part dans l'histoire / ... Le savoir est une arme, maintenant je sais") (Ministère AMER, *L'Intégrale*). Here, both the "the beautiful history of France" and its epistemological and historical system are reviewed and re-appropriated. In this way, education becomes an engine for rebellion. However, the recovery of the past is not only about identification, but also about understanding the present. In the 1997 song "Damnés" ("Damned"), Ministère AMER links the pitiful situation of Black communities in contemporary France directly to their history. They are the damned, "heroes at war, zeros in life, last to work / first to be dismissed, prisoners of the dusty pages of history / called to France to work as street cleaners" ("héros à la guerre, zéro dans la vie, derniers embauchés / premiers renvoyés, prisonniers des pages poussiéreuses de l'histoire, / appelés en France pour balayer les trottoirs"). In this song, official history is regarded as a lie against which the rap subject rebels: "I speak and I'm aware of their monopoly / I shout, I despise their government which wants me to be part of the damned / those who are never listened to, who are broken by history, paralysed by history" ("je reprends la parole en sachant qui monopolise / je crise, méprise leur gouvernement me gardant une place assise / parmi les damnés, sur qui personne ne mise, / que l'histoire brise, que l'histoire paralyse") (Ministère AMER, *L'Intégrale*).

In its quest for origins, French hip hop developed as a multicultural and multiethnic heritage. By choosing intertextual and intermusical references, it challenges traditional views of Frenchness. For instance, IAM perceives the past as a syncretic heritage projecting itself into present time. Its vision of France is no longer Westernized: "Our culture is Mediterranean / and I remind the morons that the Maghreb is the same" ("Notre culture est méditerranéenne / Et je rappelle pour les crétins que celle du Maghreb est la même"), affirms the band in "Où sont les roses" (Delabel) where the sample of a traditional Neapolitan song emphasizes musical intertextuality. In fact, history presented by hip hop is a collage made up of snippets of stories, legends, myths, and facts, all put together in order to subvert the dominant status of official narratives. However, we know that hip hop's originates mainly from Afro-American culture (see, e.g., Rose; Lapassade and Rousselot). Thus, from a musicological point of view, hip hop continues the tradition of slave songs throughout their further evolutions, such as funk, soul, jazz, and reggae; from a discursive point of view hip hop relates to literature of commitment. Drawing on this heritage — both actual and imaginary — in French rap, Africa, as the original myth, and Négritude become major references. In this sense, within the Francophone context, there are similarities between rap and the so-called *poésie nègre*, as they both proclaim their African heritage and turn Africa to a myth. For the *poètes noirs* writing in French, Africa is simultaneously the original land and the Promised Land, and this is obsessively present in their works: "Africa, I have kept your memory Africa / You are in me / Like the splinter in the wound / Like a titular fetish in the center of the village" ("Afrique j'ai gardé ta mémoire Afrique / tu es en moi / comme l'écharde dans la blessure / comme un fétiche tutélaire au centre du village") (Roumain xli). Similarly, IAM's 1991 "Tam tam de l'Afrique" describes rap's allegiance to Africa. The song tells the story of slavery from the rape of paradise to the traumatic journey, to torment and endless work in the fields:

They arrived one morning by dozens, by hundreds  
On wooden monsters with guts of chains  
without questions or explanations  
They settled and became the masters  
Then they became true barbarians  
And humiliated the people to the core of their souls  
They beat children, they killed and tortured old people  
They raped and insulted women  
Powerless, chained men suffered  
The painful lamentations of their oppressed people  
...  
The children's destiny was settled  
To work in the fields till their last day  
For them, no parties nor playground  
Heat and whip were their only companions

Ils sont arrivés un matin par dizaines par centaines  
Sur des monstres de bois aux entrailles de chaînes  
Sans bonjours ni questions, pas même de présentations  
Ils se sont installés et sont devenus les patrons  
Puis se sont transformés en véritables sauvages  
Jusqu'à les humilier au plus profond de leur âme  
Enfants battus, vieillards tués, mutilés  
Femmes salies, insultées et déshonorées  
Impuissants, les hommes enchaînés subissaient  
Les douloureuses lamentations de leur peuple opprimé...

...

Les enfants qui naissaient avaient leur destin tracé  
Ils travailleraient dans les champs jusqu'à leur dernière journée  
Pour eux, pas de "quatre heures" encore moins de récré  
Leurs compagnons de chaque jour étaient la chaleur et le fouet. (IAM, *De la planète Mars*)

In the same song, despite of the suffering and humiliation recalled, music allows memories of past dignity: "Yet they would remember those idyllic landscapes / with the echoes of the African tam-tam" ("Alors ils revoyaient ces paysages idylliques / Où résonnaient encore les tam-tam de l'Afrique") and the song's persona knows that his music comes from that history: "My music is born in a cotton field" ("Ma musique est née dans un champ de coton"). This Négritude —coined by Jean-Paul Sartre to refer to Black identity with ideological (radical contestation), ethnic (Blackness), and aesthetic (poetic and somatic) features— is linked to the evolution of Black populations and constitutes a "state of mind" by which being Black means being revolutionary. More, Senghor expressed the universalism of Négritude which does not refer to Black people alone: "Mother be blessed! / Recognize your son amongst his comrades like you once did for your champion, Kor sanou! / Amongst the antagonist athletes ... / The nomad, the miner, the servant, the peasant and the artisan, the grant holder, the skirmisher / and all the white workers within the fraternal fight ... / Recognize your son by the authenticity of his look, which is the authenticity of his heart and his lineage" ("Mère sois bénie! / Reconnais ton fils parmi ses camarades comme autrefois ton champion, Kor sanou! / parmi les athlètes antagonistes ... / Le nomade, le mineur, le prestataire, le paysan et l'artisan, le boursier et le tirailleur / Et tous le travailleurs blancs dans la lutte fraternelle ... / Reconnais ton fils à l'authenticité de son regard qui est celle de son coeur et de son lignage" ("À l'appel de la race de Saba" 156-57). Africa and Négritude are global representations which discard an essentialist conception. Even in the more radical bands, like Ministère Amer, and in spite of a certain reverse racism, Blackness becomes a symbol of contestation. French rappers of the 1990s share, consciously or not, with the *poètes noirs* a similar perception of Black identity. In this sense, Négritude abolishes not only boundaries but also ethnic restrictions in favour of a truly "glocal" identity common to diasporic multiethnic populations.

The above examples show the cultural strategies of French hip hop that resulted in the creation of a new identity. Against institutional historiographical discourses, the hip hop persona assumes a responsibility to tell another history, which, for once, is his own. He commits himself in his discourse and becomes responsible for educating his community. He acquires the status of master, pedagogue, visionary, the true interpreter of past and future. Accordingly, thanks to hip hop cultural-aesthetic experience, audiences can recognize themselves as social groups sharing a similar identity. The fact that history is manipulated by schools and mass media leads rappers to retrieve the past, to look back to their roots, wherever they may be, especially to Africa while assuming Négritude as the existential quality of hip hop culture. The outcome of French hip hop's quest for origins is a multiethnic identity, which embraces its multicultural heritage proclaiming its departure from mainstream views and practices. It creates a new global nation, yet extremely local, based on culture and not on spatial or political boundaries. However, this multiethnic identity has been assimilated by mainstream media and cultural and political authorities and is now part of a so-called "politically correct" vision of France. But obvious as it may seem today, we must acknowledge the importance of old school hip hop music, along with world music (*musiques du monde*), in building this impure identity, truly subversive in the early 1990s. Although betraying the "authenticity" of hip hop, this assimilation could in fact be considered progress because it has brought attention to marginalized social groups and has legitimized their

cultural production. As a cultural practice, French hip hop has been successful in forging this hybrid identity. Nonetheless, the public favour for the multicultural and the multiethnic, for *métissage*, can no longer be taken for granted: in fact, when the French government publicly raised the question about French national identity in 2009, it implied not only an interest in reviving traditional national allegiance, but also an attempt to restrict Frenchness by limiting the concept to very specific cultural, ethnic, religious, and political features ("Le Grand débat"

<<http://www.gouvernement.fr/gouvernement/grand-debat-sur-l-identite-nationale-25-000-contributions-recues-des-la-premiere-semain>>).

With regard to the ambiguous relation of hip hop to capitalism, its commoditization process, and its predicament in mainstream culture make us wonder if hip hop bears today any of the resistant potential of its origins. As far as society is concerned in general, if we look at the state of affairs in contemporary France, social conflicts and fractures remain: the riots in 2005 were more violent than those in 1986; unemployment rates in *cités* are still much higher than in the rest of the country; having Black or Arab origins remains a handicap in contemporary France, and so on and so forth. Although hip hop has probably given a sense of belonging to dispossessed youth and although it has helped to elaborate a new identity which has in theory been accepted by French institutions and society, it does not appear to have had any major effects on politics and social organizations. There appears again the old accusation: art would be incapable to change the world, to change life. But the fact is that cultural practices, such as popular music, have power in everyday life and beyond; they are not isolated, selfless experiences. On the contrary, they are deliberate actions with consequences on the individual and the social level, for "to engage in cultural practice means to utilize existing cultural symbols to accomplish some ends" (Bonnell and Hunt 47). In that sense, French hip hop has played a significant role in questioning official narratives of Frenchness and in (re-)writing new identities in Universalist France. Hip hop as a prominent genre of an intermedial structure of music, discourse (aesthetic, historiographical, ideological) and performance (vocal and visual), may not have a strong political impact, but it surely possesses cultural potential of and for change.

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