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# RAP AND RESISTANCE: VISIONS OF SELF AND SOCIETY IN AMERICAN, AFRICAN, AND FRENCH HIP HOP MUSIC

Rosalind Hutchinson

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**RAP AND RESISTANCE: VISIONS OF SELF AND SOCIETY IN AMERICAN,  
AFRICAN, AND FRENCH HIP HOP MUSIC**

by

**ROSALIND G. HUTCHINSON**

**B.A., FRENCH, UNIVERSITY OF PUGET SOUND, 2005**

THESIS

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IN AMERICAN, AFRICAN, AND FRENCH HIP HOP**

by

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**ABSTRACT**

*Rap and Resistance: Visions of Self and Society in American, African, and French Hip Hop Music* probes the ties between the formation of subjectivity in rap and its strategies of resistance against state, cultural, and societal violence and control of minority groups. This study examines the themes of the body, economy, and social grouping through analyses of rap music and lyrics. The first chapter focuses on state control and violence, particularly in Black populations in the United States. The second investigates the practice of Female Genital Cutting in West Africa and the various responses and activism of African rappers. Chapter three discusses the identities of the economically disadvantaged populations and immigrants who reside in the space of the *banlieue* and how their image shapes their interactions with French society as a whole. Studying rap music as a cultural expression, a mode of thought, and a politics makes it possible to inform our understanding of the debates and social problems that are currently at the fore among young, marginal groups. Finally, this thesis aims to show how the local and global qualities of rap production make it a vital and revolutionary stage for social change, personal agency, and non-violent communication.

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## **Introduction**

From Paris to New York and back  
The sun's found in Dakar  
And them stars be black  
Who ya are? – Positive Black Soul

As this lyric from Positive Black Soul, a Senegalese group who has collaborated with both French and American rappers suggests, one of the biggest questions addressed in rap is that of personal identity. Rap and hip hop expressions from anywhere in the world ask directly who and where its listeners are, and also how they identify themselves. These inquiries lead to introspection, and to a questioning of the roles that individuals play in their societies and how they are valued. Much of the time, rap speaks to the people that are lacking advantages and input on a political level, so it frequently opposes and contradicts the power of dominant institutions and established ideas.

Studying hip hop as a mode of resistance makes it possible to more thoroughly understand and address the power arrangements of the places where it thrives. In most Francophone and Anglophone societies that have flourishing hip hop scenes, rap production and performance is tied in with cultural, political, and ideological movements that do the work of constructing identities and personal relations. The palpable connections between the rap and the philosophical thought of a population are startling in their complexity and creativity. Rap often re-imagines people within power structures and toys with the very basis of subjectification. No matter where the rappers are or what their sociocultural backgrounds, examples of their music can be found pushing off of the rules and experimenting with limitations. Because of this creative engagement with social currents, rap can be considered as not only a form of music, but also a form of thought.

The foundation of my study of hip hop lies in examining how rap's unruly imagination can resist and stretch boundaries, as well as directly challenge the thought networks of power structures. My understanding of power as a complicated set of fluid relations between individuals, groups, cultures, and the state, as well as the underlying impetus of this project, are inspired by the work of Michel Foucault. He suggests bringing power relations to light by carefully examining the struggles against them (329).

For him, resistance is an attack on “a form of power that makes individuals subjects...a form of power that subjugates and makes subject to” (331). Subjectification, whether it be from the state or from a small cultural group, is one important facet of power that is addressed by rappers in various countries. As Foucault argues, “We have to know the historical conditions that motivate our conceptualization[of power.] We need a historical awareness of our present circumstance,” but we also have to ask ourselves how different histories and power structures are connected through common strategies of resistance (327). Why is it that Hip Hop culture has emerged in such historically and culturally different places as a popular and well-developed avenue for resistance? Is it important to compare different, but connected creative movements against control in a global society when power is more abstract, far-reaching, and indirect than ever? For established researchers in the field of hip hop studies, rap can be key in addressing these and many other pressing questions about marginalized populations.<sup>1</sup>

Hearing the “voices from the margins” is indeed the most important reason to study rap music (Rose 1). In many places, hip hop is one of the best ways for groups of young people that are disadvantaged and possibly excluded from traditional educational systems to communicate their creative ideas and express their criticisms on a local, national, or even international stage. This is especially true in an urban setting, but participation in hip hop culture is not at all limited by population size or demographics because it is overall a very cheap, accessible form of music that requires only minimal equipment. In fact, some of the fastest growing groups of listeners and musicians come from places as varied as White American suburbs and African villages (Rose 4). The diversity and geographical separation of rappers and audiences makes it one of the most interesting and varied genres of music that retains a focus on social inequalities.

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1 Hip hop scholars such as Rose, Usher, and Bazin among others make a technical delineation between the terms rap and hip hop; hip hop being the totality of the cultural movement including dance, graffiti, style, and music and rap being the musical element of hip hop. However, these two terms are both used to signify the music of hip hop. Because I will only address rap music in this thesis, I will use hip hop and rap interchangeably in the interest of informality and variety.



As one of the very first scholars to begin studying hip hop as creative resistance in the early 1990s, Tricia Rose, recognizes this heterogeneity in rap, encouraging others to expand her work on American hip hop: “It is my firm belief that this project – which grounds black cultural signs and codes in black culture and examines the polyvocal languages of rap as the “black noise” of the late twentieth century – will foster the development of more globally focused projects” (xiv). Her call has been followed by an expanding collection of literature that studies world-wide expressions of rap. The last ten years have seen the publication of place and population-specific volumes on rap such as *Native Tongues, an African Hip Hop Reader* and *Rap, Techno, Electro*, a study of French artistic and sociocultural work in these technologically specialized musical genres. Scholars such as Daniel Kunzler have begun to amass and catalog personal libraries of African hip hop on tape as well as to connect them to local and national movements of opposition against political and cultural oppression. Though recently-published work on hip hop culture has accomplished amazing steps towards creating a thorough analysis of rap and giving it an important place in cultural and literary studies, it also opens up many uncharted spaces for new, exciting undertakings. This project is a foray into aesthetic, musical, and lyrical analysis that focuses on global rap. It falls into the seldom- explored territory of comparing and contrasting rap's philosophical content with its academic theoretical counterparts. In addition, while this study does recognize the strong local quality of certain rap expressions, it also takes their ideas into different contexts in order to experiment with their usefulness as components of a larger conversation on global revolutionary thought. Rap is a creative expression and a way of thinking, but it is also a politics that has its own discrete social tendencies. As such, hip hop culture can enact concrete societal affects and modes of shaping the interactions of its listeners and artists; affects and modes that can be manifested on local, national, and global levels.

In the three parts of this work, I examine rap from the United States, West Africa, and France, bringing out the common threads of a thesis that is woven through each section. While there are immediate logistical and historical problems with analyzing the music of three geographical locations, the comparisons possible and the conclusions reached by doing so are fruitful. The most compelling reason

to analyze a specific anti-dominance element of rap across cultural and geographical borders is that it shows how the strategies of resistance present in this music can and have been altered to make them functional anywhere and in any language. A sweeping view of rap and its resistance to control also makes it possible to begin establishing certain linguistic, aesthetic, and musical similarities that form the philosophical basis of this genre. Constructing such a platform facilitates the generalization of rap's core strategies of resistance and ideas about fairness and justice. In other words, if we want to grasp the revolutionary imagination of Francophone hip hop, it is necessary to examine it in context with its primary roots; those that stem from American technology/traditions and African technology/traditions. A broad picture of revolutionary rap and its various resistance strategies makes comparisons and contrasts with academic discourses on power relations more complete, valid, and interesting.

The global nature of rap and the historical facts of its creation and continuity makes a case for including the music of different geographical areas, especially if we want to talk about the imagination of hip hop. As Mitchell, Lipsitz, and Lunine all point out, the borders of countries are not necessarily the borders of artistic creation. The sounds and blending technologies of hip hop as we know it did come from the United States during the mid 1970s to 1980s, but to deny its global roots is impossible. As Lunine details, the birth of rap was heavily influenced by African American DJs, Jamaican sound systems, and aesthetics of Dub Reggae, all with the participation of European MCs who soon caught on and began exploring the genre (261). In addition, we see that the United States, France, and North and West Africa have particularly close connections. A definite and continuing network between the artists of these regions began in the early 1980s through 1990s with a series of intentional efforts to spread the rap movement. USA-based groups Afrika Bambaataa, Public Enemy, and the Black August Hip Hop Project among others toured in Africa and France as well as promoted rap's ideas and musical strategies (Fernandes 17). There are instances of collaborations between rappers and cultural institutions at this time; Afrika Bambaataa held hip hop seminars that were put on by the minister of culture under François Mitterrand in an effort to give disadvantaged youth more creative outlets (11). In turn, much of the young population who participated were of African descent and shared in Bambaataa and the Zulu

Nation's message of inspirational African unity to counter discrimination (Bazin 20). These efforts led to a thriving hip hop scene in France, which remains the second biggest market for hip hop in the world after the United States. They also created many opportunities for African rappers to interact in the West through these channels.

Relations between France, West Africa, and the USA, and the flow of their musical conversations provide a wide array of similar but divergent trains of hip hop thought to follow, compare and contrast. In each of these realms, hip hop can be seen as a tool for re-imagining and reforming the thought patterns behind social realities. As Lipsitz eloquently argues, “culture enables people to rehearse identities, stances, and social relations not yet permissible in politics. But it also serves as a concrete social site, a place where social relations are constructed and enacted as well as envisioned. Popular culture does not just reflect reality, it helps constitute it” (137). The crux of this thesis is to explore some ways that hip hop can be seen to fulfill the function of an imaginative reconstruction that can lead to greater empowerment and independence. In the various examples of hip hop that are highlighted in the project, this re-making of reality takes place in three specific avenues. As a form of resistance, rap has the ability to recognize and dismantle the imaginative matrix in societies that underlies policies, violence, and traditions that inhibit the personal, intellectual, and physical freedoms of minority groups. In order to do this, it re-imagines the subject in relation to the body, economy, and social grouping.

For the purposes of this work, it is necessary to flesh out what I mean by each of these terms and show how they interact. In every segment of the paper, the body, the economy, and the social grouping are considered in a very fluid way because they all blend into one another and cannot be crisply separated when it comes to the formation of subjectivity. It is extremely difficult not to find these three concepts bleeding into one another and reappearing in different forms because they are dependent terms, especially in rap. Because the themes examined here do interact strongly, they are highlighted in their different forms in three chapters that analyze them in the rap of specific geographical locations; the United States, West Africa, and France.

The first idea that is examined in each chapter of this thesis is the body. In the first segment, it can be seen to encompass a historical existence; the slave/minority and the overseer/police officer. Later, though we are talking about the economy of rap, the image of the rapper covered in jewels is undoubtedly still tied into a picture that places value upon the body. In the second section, the body includes the physical body and the discourses surrounding it, most importantly the clash between Western frameworks of imagining the body and the way it is treated in rap. The body is also blended with the female voice at the end of the paper: freeing it of constraints is dependent upon the freedom of female artistic contributions. In the final part of the thesis, the body we are talking about is tied to place, specifically the *banlieue*.

The economy can also be understood here as a few interrelated concepts that deal with movement and systems of value. First, it plays into the creative battles that are waged in American hip hop, allowing a contrast to be made between socially conscious and decadent, consumerist rap. Later, when looking at the role it plays in the second chapter, economy includes the ways that the female body and female contributions are valued in society, as well ideas about how women can transcend images that cast them as property, favoring them as artists and educators. In the last part of the thesis, I analyze economic currents and global value systems that negatively effect the way individuals view themselves and their communities and how rap responds.

The final concept, that of social grouping, is probably the most complicated and varied idea that runs through the paper. It includes individuals' relations with each other, the relations between groups of people, and the relations between populations who are separated by vast geographical spaces and different cultures. In the chapter on American rap, we see that the musical strategies in hip hop make it possible for individuals to interact in a rap community in a loosely structured way by using improvisation and technologies of sampling. Rap performance in the second section can be seen to change communities by favoring affective communication, facilitating the participation of those with little power in society, and by countering constrictive labels placed upon women. In the last part discussing French rap, social

grouping is examined in terms of solidarity and plurality; we see how rap can foster connections that blur national borders and worlds to create a new community through international collaborations.

Though the work that I will be discussing has positive, socially conscious characteristics, there are many examples of rap that completely contradict my assertions and methods of framing the genre. The diversity of rap shows a spectrum of political, artistic, and aesthetic qualities that is ultimately very difficult to generalize. To borrow from Vicherat, it is impossible to analyze rap, only raps. The multiplicity of voices and the diversity of rap has to be taken into account, and the qualitative aspects of the poetry and sounds must always be held up. Finally, the medium of writing is incapable of truly capturing all of the effects and affects that are present in this music (9). Limitations aside, socially conscious rap is a strong and growing part of the overall rap movement, so all of the rap I use is picked on the basis of having something to say about freedom, self-image, and the ideas and structures that govern people.

Many of the spaces and ideas that rap opens up are revolutionary and incredibly freeing, but that is not to say that the genre itself is always open or liberating. Of course, the world of rap can be extremely self-limited and unwelcoming to new ideas and people. The best examples would be the relative rarity of female rappers and Djs and the misogyny, exploitative tendencies, and racism present in some rap. However, as hip hop scholars point out, the overwhelming media focus on negative or destructive elements in rap tends to obscure the social and economic inequalities behind them (Rose 1). Further, “rap’s contradictory articulations are not signs of absent intellectual clarity; they are a common feature of community and popular cultural dialogs that always offer more than one cultural, social, or political viewpoint” (Rose 2). In any case, many examples of rap today play a part in revealing the facets of culture that are the most unpleasant to accept, such as consumerism, sexism, and racism, but this is not purely a disadvantage of rap. There are perhaps no other musical genres that hold within their aesthetic and ideological frameworks such completely divergent ideas and ways of viewing the world.

Because of this extreme diversity in rap, its viewpoints, poetry, and sounds are constantly stretched and bounced off of conflicting ideas, giving hip hop the energy and potential to blossom and

deepen its socially positive, revolutionary ideas. Philosophically, though a sizable proportion of what rap makes possible in song is not yet possible in society, or even in every rap scene, hip hop thought and innovation merits our attention and analysis. My point in working with hip hop lyrics and music is not just to “hear the voices from the margins,” but to show how some of its elegant literary, philosophical, and sonic ideas can speak inside and outside of rap songs. In the end, the intelligence and spark of hip hop creativity has an abundant stream of ideas that can bring life to conversations in music, politics, academia, and beyond.

## **Mental Freedom and State Control: The Revolutionary Imagination in American Hip Hop**

As the rhythm designed to bounce  
What counts is that the rhymes  
Designed to fill your mind – Chuck D

As a member of one of the oldest and most appreciated rap groups, Public Enemy points out that the musical expressions of rap are an incomplete undercurrent without the most important facet, the lyrics. A raw and often sublime poetry, set to samples and beats, is the backbone of a widespread global phenomenon. Recently, hip hop music has eclipsed all other musical genres in the United States both commercially and critically (Usher 1). Though it has strong and diverse influences from musical and linguistic traditions, it has broken with them to form a distinctly creative practice of writing. For all intents and purposes, hip hop music is a literature highly political and subversive in nature. As such, scores of universities have fledged programs, courses, and departments dedicated to its study. That said, scholarship is relatively new and self-contained, and it continues to grapple with an academy that is often repelled from exposure to its most negative, commercial manifestations. Some debate must be expected about the assimilation of a totally new musical or literary vein, but many scholars, such as Sujatha Fernandes have recognized beautiful new possibilities for hip hop. At the very least, it has the ability to change the shape of local political spaces, and possibly even go further to form lines of communication between distant groups of people (23).

One of the most interesting facts about hip hop is that its listeners are exceptionally numerous and varied across class, race, gender, and border lines. More important still is that the content of so much of hip hop is overtly political, conscious, and critical of social inequalities. In the United States, Rap is an art form that is created largely by young black men – the most heavily imprisoned, stereotyped, and feared American population. Therefore, a characteristic

that much of it shares is a thorough critique of current societal control practices (Rose 2). The discussion that hip hop opens up is capable of identifying nefarious internal and external sites of repression and discrimination, creating strategies for resistance, as well as activating discussion within communities and with the world at large. Because of this possibility for opposition, the hip hop movement represents one of the most promising avenues for an ideological battle against certain dehumanizing strategies of the capitalist state, namely a form of communication that could be used as a non-violent model for revolution. In this section, I will examine the multidimensional quality of oppression as it is represented in this genre – the internal and external manifestations of a demeaning control – and expand on possibilities for forming concrete social change through the unique strategies of resistance and social imagination created in hip hop.

### **Controlling the Body – Hip Hop and the Police Figure**

As Foucault reveals in *The Subject and Power*, studying power relations shows that struggles against it take the form of individualized, focused battles. People who engage in a fight against oppression “look not for the 'chief' enemy but for the immediate enemy” (Foucault 330,3). This is one reason why so many hip hop artists focus on the figure of the policeman in order to structure their social critiques. One such group by the name of KRS-One identifies the police with the figure of a beast, highlighting the sirens of warning that accompany the officers at every turn. “Woop-woop! / That's the sound of da police! / Woop-woop! / That's the sound of the beast!” In this chorus, the officer is reduced to a menacing force that warns everyone in earshot with an otherworldly cry. The sound is immediately comprehensible without analysis or examination; it is visceral and simply provokes an environment of fear and anxiety that is clear throughout the rest of the poem. The figure of the overseer in the verses becomes an elaboration



of the emotional response of the chorus: “Be a officer? You WICKED overseer! / Ya hotshot, wanna get props and be a savior? / First show a little respect, / change your behavior / Change your attitude, change your plan / There could never really be justice on stolen land / Are you really for peace and equality?” The totality of this poem forms a picture of the historical oppression of African Americans in the United States and links them with the fate of Native American populations. The bodies of the stolen people are tied to the appropriated land; both land and people are tamed by the overseer and forced to undergo a violent physical transformation.

This poem also shows the identical result of countering the authority of the overseer/officer, which is death, but this particular segment opens up a positive line of communication. While the connection formed between the overseer and the officer is stirring, there is an emphasis upon a space and play in the system of relations, a place for dialogue. A change is imagined as a result of mutual respect. The end of the line suggests the moral ambiguity of the police officer, an individual who is encouraged to examine his position. The beauty of this construction is the way that the song can jump back and forth rapidly between an emotional spark and a point by point attack on the character and function of the police officer, all without ever silencing him or burying his right to a response.

In another light, however, questioning the stated versus the real motives and functions of the police officer is a provocative plan of action that directly counters the legitimacy of his authority. In the remainder of the poem, we see that the previous written law of slavery continues in an insidious unwritten bondage, “Yeah, officer from overseer / You need a little clarity? / Check the similarity! / The overseer rode around the plantation / The officer is off patrolling all the nation...After 400 years, I've got no choices!” For KRS-One, the step from

overseer to officer, and above all the progression of history, does not show a marked change in the strategies of the officer/overseer. The integration of the United States has not erased the particular threat of physical violence that African Americans face in relation to the police. The image of the frightening police officer and the emphasis on an unpublished history of violence shows the necessity of revealing what Tricia Rose calls silenced scripts, perspectives that come from an oppressed minority (100). Presenting the continuity of repression counters the dominant society's claims to a progress that can easily obscure the continued state of discrimination that has come to reside above and beyond law. In *The Sound of da Police*, the perception of the police officer highlights the fact that a shift in law does not equal a shift in behavior on the part of the more powerful party. This move de-legitimizes the strong arm of the state, its local representatives, which is the first step toward a critique of the state itself.

Examining the result of a shift from a repressive law to unregulated repression helps to bring about a discussion about the nature of a police force. Walter Benjamin explains that in their use of violence, police do not necessarily enforce the restrictions of general law : “Rather, the 'law' of the police really marks the point at which the state, whether from impotence or because of the immanent connections within any legal system, can no longer guarantee through the legal system the empirical ends that it desires at any price to attain” (287). Following the argument of Benjamin and applying it to the critique of KRS-One, the police are fulfilling the aims of the state that remain tacit, the upholding of an economical and racial status quo; an absence of options for many African Americans as well as a life under surveillance. Because the members of the police department usually do not directly answer to the state except in a case brought before a court, most occurrences of police violence and discrimination also lie outside of the concrete moral jurisdiction of the state. Police intimidation can be foisted upon citizens that

usually have little recourse to counter it through law, leading to a profound mistrust in any US court of law.

Later, Benjamin states, “All violence as a means is either lawmaking or law-preserving. If it lays claim to neither of these predicates, it forfeits all validity” (287). Here, it is possible to see why the amorphous domination of the police elicits such an exasperated response. An officer wields the authority granted by the badge of the state, but the state does not always have the influence to regulate it with law. Accordingly, KRS-One’s discussion is not directed toward a state body but toward an individual one. Evidently, the resistance possible in this context is on a small local scale, countering the actions and attitude of a single officer. The way that the lyrics engage the officer points out a means of resistance that perverts the whole concept of the state’s authority over him, for if he can use his power independently from the state, there is also a possibility that he can exercise his abilities of reasoning against its aims. In this case, that overarching system of hierarchy that provides the police power could also be recognized as a system that has also taken away his choices and his ability to act according to his own reasoning; he can transform from the beast to the thinker.

One of KRS-One's most encouraging suggestions is that this individual turnaround is possible; that at some time, the hierarchy that controls the police officer will no longer do so because of the sway of his detractors. Their identification of his error could show him a different path. Transformation of the officer comes about in part because his enemies identify with and humanize him, which encourages him to do the same. In the middle of the song, there is a clear shift in the identity of the police officer in question. He is finally referred to just as “the Black police officer,” who does not see how his participation in the system of policing leads to the persistent suppression of his people. The shift from an overseer to a Black cop who is simply

after a salary is the sign of a corporeal, economic and societal change that obscures the form of the oppressor and suggests that the foe is coming from *outside* and *inside* of the community.

The localized enemy that one faces on a day to day basis is no longer natural or even discrete from another person in the neighborhood, but formulated by the capitalist system and its resulting inequalities. In effect, the Black police officer, or the police officer in general, must be turned away from his community by money and power in order to go about controlling it. But his isolation is not the only step that must take place. The officer also has to be separated from his peers by a system of thought that erases his similarity with them, the view taken by the dominant society that reinforces the image of the dangerous black male and erases the historical factors that lead to his position (Rose 102). With these realizations, the communication that takes place between the rap group and the police is doubly important. It is at once the possibility of resistance against the mindlessness of following an imposed code of behavior on a small scale, and the clarification of the role that the construction of identities and images plays in the process of control. The imaginative reconstruction of negative images is one valuable tool that hip hop possesses for destroying the virtual systems that are the basis of a concrete capitalist oppression.

### **Fighting Negative Images – Internal Economy in Hip Hop**

Carlton Usher points out that the images of rap artists and young black men created in main-stream society have been one-dimensional and tend to perpetuate and reinforce stereotypes of violence and ignorance. This happens particularly in hip hop that is currently the most commercially successful. It features over-the-top images of decadence, while glorifying characters that regularly disrespect women and each other (3). With such images widely propagated, the entire genre is often discounted and counterexamples of violent misogynistic content are ignored; criticism and “what may appear to be a sincere concern for the well-being of

America's youth is often a guise of a more sordid and insidious attack on black youth culture and its ability to critique, analyze, and provide commentary on society” (Ogbar 135). One recent event shows the way in which all rap artists bear the burden of a violent image. In May of 2011, Michelle Obama scheduled a hip hop performer and poet named Common to do a reading for high school-aged children at the White House (Youtube). The inordinate amount of media backlash that ensued was surprising, considering that Common is well-known for his efforts to educate children and embody a positive role model. The resulting uproar was based upon a poem in which he urges people to “Burn a Bush.” This statement was unanimously interpreted (at least by mainstream conservative media) as a call for a violent attack on the former president George W. Bush, even by self-proclaimed religious anchors who might have seized the obvious biblical reference to Moses and the burning bush – a moment in which Moses gains spiritual knowledge directly from God. In this case, members of the media took a reference that is well-known in the dominant society and obscured it as a result of its source.

A literary symbol accepted by the dominant society was forcibly re-written in order to discount its use by a minority who had already been labeled as violent and controversial; a kind of silencing that is even more worrisome than the one that Rose points out. Common’s imagined identity that tied him with a definition of rap music as a violent, materialistic genre made it impossible for his lyrics to communicate. This is always a danger with rap music when it is taken outside of its own cultural zone of understanding where it can end up being misinterpreted and labeled. Luckily, an attempt at creating a negative image in the case of Common did not result in his exclusion from the White House event and only prompted several thorough literary examinations of his poetry that were immediately posted on different websites (Rapgenius). The negative media slander led to an outpouring of critical attention and a debate over conflicting

ideas, an important stage for this musical genre to fight misinterpretation and labeling.

As Wilkins, Usher, and Rose all duly note, such expectations of violence and disrespect among rappers, audiences, and minority youth have been the main reasons for an across the board suppression of hip hop through a systematic constriction of authorized space and the resulting denial of forums and venues for concerts. Restrictions are often due to a few mainstream artists and their wholehearted participation in capitalism. Their success in selling violent, nihilistic images overshadows a whole field of artists who produce nuanced, self-aware art. While Rose and Usher point out that the commercial side of hip hop is dangerous and can de-stabilize and de-legitimize political artists, the battle waged between opposing rap groups can do much to inform us about the nature of a larger struggle against capitalist ideals and value systems. In effect, the fierce, yet non-violent battle of ethics going on within hip hop highlights our own troubles renouncing the taste for monetary gain and validation. The discourse of artists functions in much the same way as an academic vein; there is a fruitful progression that takes place when a discussion of clashing ideas ensues. That is the power of hip hop; it is a non-violent stage for expression, a battle of word and thought.

The most outspoken detractors of objectification and consumerism in hip hop are themselves Rap artists whose criticisms take shape in poetry and song. Benjamin states:

The sphere of non-violent means opens up in the realm of human conflicts relating to goods. For this reason technique in the broadest sense of the word is their most particular area. Its profoundest example is perhaps the conference, considered as a technique of civil agreement...there is a sphere of human agreement that is nonviolent to the extent that it is wholly inaccessible to violence: the proper sphere of 'understanding,' language.  
(289)

In hip hop, the technique that leads to agreement on values or acceptable ways of acting is an exchange of ideas in a public forum. It is not a conference that can be held in one location because of its dependence upon exchanges that come from the far reaches of the country. Critiques and communication create interactions between groups and individuals that are formatted like a literary discourse. It sometimes resembles letters, speeches, or narratives about others' behavior. In many cases, artists will directly address trends, schools of thought, and even challenge each other directly by name.

Some of the greatest imaginative work takes place in the vitriolic attack that politically conscious rap groups wage against their consumerist counterparts. One Boston group that questions the ideals of radio rap is The Perceptionists. A song called *Black Dialogue* released in 2005 explains the way in which Black culture and communication, referred to as "Black Dialogue" is commodified. Akrobatik states, "Corny niggaz switch it up and rent it to Viacom / But it was taught to me early on by my mom / Master yourself, for maximum outreach potential / Respect that you get from that will grow exponential / Preferential treatment brings us heat when / It only goes to those who rock the diamonds and sequins." In the first line, there is an immediate reference to Viacom, a powerful corporation that owns two of the most profitable music channels, BET and MTV, sources of big money to be made in rap music. The "corny" entertainers who profit from Rap are immediately attacked; they "rent" culture to a corporation, much as a member of the workforce rents his time to an employer. It is clear that the "switched up" or manipulated cultural product used for monetary gain is a poor substitute for a sincere production of dialogue, one that has significance in a community. The line that follows is a suggestion that the real importance of cultural communication is linked to the family. In turn, to form and inform the self leads to success that is not based upon monetary gain, but on respect.

Self-realization, much in the sense that Gandhi spoke of, is the integral step between simply making music and transcending it to actually reach others, suggesting that achievement of the individual is at the crux of meaningful communication and the freedom of a community (151). In the last line of this segment, again there is a perfect example of one of the most troublesome problems for hip hop, the tendency to give preference to the representation rather than the content. The paradoxical nature of this propensity to hold onto an image of a musician is not unique to hip hop, and it leads many artists to mistrust the mainstream system. However, countering it does involve the necessity of interacting with it in some way. Rose maintains that despite their dangers, the mainstream channels are essential for the propagation of socially conscious rap that resists oppressive social forces (102).

Popular work that challenges mainstream consumerism in rap can sometimes be found in playful musical expressions. As Deleuze shows, counteraction and struggle against deleterious practices in society are not necessarily the only factors that enact profound societal change. Desire, pleasure, and attraction to new lines of thought can cause “dispositifs,” or power constructions, to take flight and transform (320). In hip hop, varying tone from grave to humorous can alter the image and adaptability of resistance and bring different perspectives into being. The universality of the accepted image of the rapper is denied with an ingenious strategy that sustains a need to entertain as well as instruct. The Coup, an Oakland-based group, provides an outstanding example of the rejection of consumer culture through comedy. In “My car is better than your shoes,” Raymond “Boots” Riley goes through a hilarious series of warnings for the passenger of his dilapidated car, describing in detail each broken, defective part. In bringing out the image of the sad, barely running car, Riley inverts the popular, reinforced image; a rapper in a pristine, expensive car. His poem also knocks it down from its place as a status symbol,



bringing the vehicle back to its most basic function: transportation. Material poverty is by no means glorified, but it does become an alternate image that actually reflects the economic situation of many rap listeners instead of validating the outrageous consumption habits of rappers.

Riley also speaks with frustration to the fact that unfortunately, the deepest and most adroit hip hop music usually does suffer the trials of other humanities and culture-based pursuits. These particular avenues of critical thought work are not highly valued in the consumerist society of the United States, especially because of their tendency to question that very system. In fact, on the whole, Black cultural production has typically been highly admired and reproduced, but woefully, poorly compensated. This gap between pay and production is an irony that Usher mentions in the first pages of his book (5). We can wonder how conscious hip hop can make it in the world when many of the artists are struggling financially and ideologically against consumerist currents. How can hip hop address these caustic forces while still making use of mainstream systems of distribution? Is there a way to go from the “cultural imperialism” Usher describes to a recognition and an appropriate compensation for the inspiring imaginative work that hip hop has done? There is no definitive way to answer these questions, but looking to the exciting new strategies of community building, group interaction, and education that hip hop uses could provide us with an idea of where room for manoeuvre lies.

### **Creating Communities – Hip Hop and the Fight Against Consumerism**

To conceive being as a necessary revolution, as integration of a freedom that, responding to the necessity of the subject, invents a new history: such is our task. With the crisis of Marxism and the concomitant indestructible awareness of the failure of the most bountiful utopias of real socialism, our generation carries within itself the knowledge

*[conoscenza]* of the inhuman fate that capitalism reserves for us and the certainty that the political, ethical and civic system in which we live cannot be recuperated. (Negri 96)

As Negri posits, the invention of a new way of being is not an external process, but rests equally upon individual and collective imagination through which daily life becomes an existence that is fundamentally revolutionary. The Spinozan vision, which provides a space for the fusion of the physical with the ethical is the very being that is formulated in the practice of Hip Hop. The historical and concrete essence of being is joined inextricably with the creative process of analyzing and imagining the place of the self in the group. This fusion is done through both a process of categorizing roles in the society as well as blurring the limits that have traditionally constrained participants in performing arts.

One of the most salient features of the hip hop imagination is the reverence for the figure of the teacher. In this construction, the MC or rapper acknowledges a role to educate and clarify a path towards freedom and ethical social existence, a characteristic that comes at least partially out of hip hop's religious influences. In his chapter entitled "Black Theology and Hip Hop Culture," Usher points to this genre's strong connections to the Nation of Islam (NOI,) an organization that was founded by Master Wali Fard Muhammad in Detroit in the 1930s, and that later spawned the Nation of Gods and Earths in the 1960s (NGE.) Both groups hold up the figure of the Black man as divine and provide an equation to explain historical power relations. In NOI and NGE, the human population is broken down into three basic groups, the 85%, comprised of the uncivilized and uneducated who are easily manipulated by the 10%, the group of wealthy who exploit the poor and live off them while teaching them lies, specifically that God (or divinity) cannot be seen or felt in the real world. The last group are the 5%, comprised of righteous, poor educators that reject the values and systems of the 10% (33-64). The pursuits of

the 5% are not necessarily in total opposition to the 10%, for their task is all inclusive: they aim to educate every human being unconditionally. In holding up the teacher, NOI and hip hop recognize the absolute necessity of intellectual insight and interpretation in a productive society or movement. The educator is seen as the provider of the path toward personal enrichment and new ways of viewing existence; in the context of Spinoza, the teacher in hip hop is actually the embodiment of knowledge, the essential location of *conoscenza* in the society.

The role of the teacher is primary in rap and it can take many forms and show new manifestations that can be linked to a revolutionary Spinozan metaphysics. In a poem called *Arise*, Mr. Lif shows the composite, transforming and transformative quality of the teacher figure with its connections to nature and society. In the beginning of the poem, the teacher is a cruel God that shocks and punishes. Lif begins with the line, “Here's a vision,” and goes on to provide a sermon-like narrative of destruction: “I perform something you can all see/As I change the climate from cold to balmy / As temperatures rise / I squeeze acid water out of the skies / To burn out your eyes / Cause you could never see what I devise.” God/Nature is clearly separated from the masses, and inflicts further suffering on people who are already at a disadvantage. Spiritual blindness and human disrespect for natural beauty is punished by a physical blinding.

Further on, though, a clear dividing line between an ignorant humanity and a divine being is snapped: the God-like authority is no longer terrible and absolute, but becomes a teacher-figure with an energy that he transfers to others in order to change them into educators. Lif continues:

You can be armed with shanks and tanks / Bayonets, Missile Threats / Yet I still launch  
lyrical text / That gets so intense / It could disassemble all of those other meds [mediums]  
So you should fear what the God invents / Since I was sent under the name of Lif

Which means to upLif / It's my never ending duty to attempt to shift your mind / From  
one train of thought to a more positive state / So then in turn you can create / Control  
your own fate...

We should all walk out of our manger / And start to educate the nearest stranger  
Though Lif seems to periodically return to a powerful teacher-figure that guides others, he  
retains a God-like force. Shifts between fearsome human-created catastrophes and calls for  
small-scale self-improvement show a circular nature to oppression. It is linked back constantly  
to a disconnect between most of the population and the terrifying processes their culture sets into  
action. Pain comes to human beings precisely because they are destroying nature, but do not  
recognize that they inflict their own wounds in the same instant.

Lif equates personal and societal improvement with communicating the creativity of the  
teacher to others. In the last line of the excerpt above, he hints at the possibility of overcoming  
personal bias and origins with the goal of educating others. Each person has the ability to leave  
“the manger,” a singular domestic or religious background, in order to embrace the stranger.  
Lif's use of the teacher-figure to enact progress shows definite ties with NOI ideals, but the poem  
also shows the fluidity and conflict of a system that is still based upon hierarchical separations.  
The two sometimes opposing sides on a path to enlightenment, the teacher and the God, are  
always in tension: we can say that the role of the teacher is in a cycle of change. As de Certeau  
suggests, redefinition of power relations by those without power still resides somewhere in  
established systems: “*une manière d'utiliser des systèmes imposés constitue la résistance à la loi  
historique d'un état de fait et à ses légitimations dogmatiques*” (35). Using the God and the  
teacher to produce an effect that leads to individual growth *and* a communal consciousness-the  
equalization of hierarchical separations due to ignorance- is an example of subtle resistance. The

expanded consciousness of the 5% can awaken the uneducated, but the process of awakening does not happen without constant shifts and re-scripting of the conflicted power of the teacher.

Lyrics such as Lif's provide fodder for the construction of a new being, but even more compelling is that the entire practice of hip hop tends to stretch and transform established ideas about performance and existence. Much in the way that Jean-Luc Nancy and Yves Citton point out inspiring new communal and individual mechanics based on the form of the Jazz ensemble, several attributes of hip hop creation provide unusual spaces for personal and group enrichment. In its musical content and performance, much of hip hop is tied to Jazz. Performing groups of musicians follow a structure of individual verses with group choruses and moments in which the soloing vocalist is doubled by the others to add affect. There is a strong emphasis on improvisation, called "free-syling," in which a rapper creates a "flow" or session of improvised poetry and competes or "battles" other musicians to create the keenest, longest, and most rhythmic verses. In these ways, participation techniques mirror Jazz performance, but at the same time, hip hop vastly expands upon Jazz in its creative and social exploits. First, the groups and the ties between the music and poetry are amorphous; any rapper can break off and join with another group for a song, an album, or a single performance. Just as well, any artist can draw from the lyrics or the beats of another rapper, which can deepen the conceptual quality of a poem. One example would be the omnipresent tag line "...and you don't stop," found in hundreds of Rap songs, which purportedly started with New York MC Coke La Rock, one of the first MCs to appear in Hip Hop, whose verse continues to appear in the most recent releases. The phrase in itself does not point to conformity with the past styles and technologies of former Rap artists, but encourages continuity and infinite reworking in hip hop. At a certain point, determining a concrete origin of a phrase or a sample is difficult. Hip hop groups continually

interact by appropriating and adding to extended segments from the creations of other groups; the process of sampling is an infinite construction. It is as if that which Nancy calls “Being Together” – the celebration of the forward-moving individual production among the others in the unit – could exist not just between people, but between groups of people and their cultural expressions. This is one way that communication in hip hop fosters the formation of what Spinoza calls the *multitudo*.

In this case, the agreement between individuals and groups takes the formation of a community that recognizes the same internal symbols and histories, and focuses on individual creativity and assimilation of new sounds, styles, and techniques. The music and the poetry of any rap song are able to work independently, but they draw their raw building blocks from every other musical genre (or *any* form of audio recording). They are remixed; a process of sampling, cutting up, and re-arranging the former structure. A tune, oeuvre, or song can be torn apart, reinvented, and used in small or large pieces, which has many implications. The liberation that takes place with the explosion of a piece of music into pure sound is revolutionary. For example, making samples out of classical or traditional music is quite common, and is a way to give it new life considering its currently waning, aging audience. Sampling is also the utter rejection of established ideas of intellectual or musical copyrighting, challenging the very concept of ownership and validating the right of the artist to use any tool how he or she sees fit.

Some hip hop scholars, such as Lionel McPherson, argue that the genre has not thus far achieved a real politically revolutionary stance due to its preference for the Black population and its participation in Capitalist American culture (Darby and Shelby 182). However, because he is functioning in the realm of empirical analysis, he does not give the possibilities for hip hop's revolutionary communal envisioning ample thought. If we consider that a fight against capitalist

control and subjugation is above all a battle to throw off its insidious hold on the deepest fibers of our perception and our material understanding of the world, the creative imagination and subversive critical eye that hip hop employs could be the first step toward concrete change. Further, the change is already concrete in the Spinozist understanding of being if it has contributed to the recognition of personal agency or a shift in the mentality of a single listener.

Scholars and fans of this unique cultural production do not refer to the spread and popularity of rap as the Hip Hop Revolution for nothing. The fundamental re-imagining of rap encourages people anywhere who listen to it to participate in a mental change and an evolution of values. While this shift of principles is important when it comes to political and national principles, it is perhaps even more so in the case of engrained social or religious practices. As a cultural tradition in itself, rap has great advantages as opposed to government or international intervention when it comes to addressing unjust or dangerous customs.

## Cuts against Cutting: Female Expressions and Bodies in African Rap

Si la tradition tue, on revoit la tradition  
En notre ère c'est ridicule, on en a marre de bande de son  
– Collectif Abazon

As with hip hop in general, academic interest in global hip hop has also increased with the recognition that this widespread cultural movement merits discussion, especially in educational settings because it offers a great opportunity for educators to connect with young people. International manifestations of this music are examined in recently-published volumes such as *Native Tongues, an African Hip Hop Reader* and *Global Noise, Rap and Hip Hop Outside the USA*. Current work highlights the fact that rap is “often a tool by which African youth express oppositional viewpoints of the state, assert local identities, and voice societal and generational concerns” (Kunzler 23). One such important issue that has sparked the creative outpourings and solid opposition of hip hop groups in Africa is that of Female Genital Cutting, a practice that is geographically widespread throughout the African continent.<sup>2</sup>

While many facets of resistance to the practice and opinions about its cultural role are generally a positive sign, the problematic nature of a western discourse on FGC is also apparent, with scholars such as Hale and Dopico noting that the treatment of African women in Western texts dealing with FGC can be both reductive and biased. These women are routinely denied a voice in the debate. For this reason, it is necessary for work on FGC to both address the practice itself, presenting the perspectives, personal experiences, and arguments of African women and men, as well as to heartily reject western positions that obscure African women's agency and bodies. Examining the elegant and passionate arguments against FGC that can be found in rap by African artists is one way to do this. African hip hop successfully counters FGC on a local level by giving women the chance to conceptualize their own bodies, worth, and

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2 I will use the term Female Genital Cutting, or FGC for the purposes of my analysis because it corresponds most closely to the terminology of the rap artists that I will study: excision. Excision/FGC is the full or partial removal of the external genitalia of a girl child or young woman and the possible sewing-shut of her vaginal opening (infibulation.) FGC is a cultural and medical issue, and is also the subject of heated debates as an international human rights issue; numerous western feminist, anthropological, and philosophical discussions attempt to study it, define it, and ultimately, to see it finally abolished.



physical place in society, and can also be a useful model for responding to problematic discourses about the practice. This chapter will analyze the lyrics of three artists in order to show how they respond to FGC: Sister Fa (Senegal), Féenose (Burkina Faso,) and Studio Abazon (Burkina Faso.)

### **FGC and the Body – Problematic Discussions of Genital Cutting**

To begin looking at the strategies that African rap uses to talk about the practice of FGC, it is useful to briefly examine the ways that some Western work, often by feminists (for example Alice Walker's book on the subject, *Warrior Marks*) not only condemns it, but in doing so espouses ideas that are themselves degrading and oppressive to African women. The most apparent concern is one that Christine Walley highlights: duality and othering. In her survey of western literature on FGC, she constructs a set of opposites, stating that, “the cumulative effect of these binary oppositions is to perpetuate a dichotomous understanding of first and third worlds, an enduring division between 'us' and 'them'” (38). This duality places a writer objectively apart from the culture that he or she wishes to examine, a move that might make a tone of neutrality possible, but which also comes with a separation from reality. Being able to distance oneself from culture in order to write about a sensitive cultural practice is an impossible endeavor as this act of writing is in itself a form of cultural participation. Writing on one side of such a divide dangerously masks the reality that FGC is a practice that has been present through time in varying degrees in many societies, and has been an upsetting part of a global culture that controls women's bodies (*Rites*). It is unfair to freeze culture and condemn practices while ignoring the shared attitudes that are behind them. In addition, speaking for the other can lead to erasing the other, a move that suggests ties to a Neo-Colonial discourse.

The most poignant binary oppositions in Walley's list are those of modernity/tradition, women as actors/women as repressed, and medical knowledge/ignorance. These particular examples suggest the way in which western ideas on FGC can fall flat in their reliance upon their own norms and regulations about the body, applying them ham-handedly to the body of the “other.” If African men and women are viewed as repressed and ignorant victims of tradition, there is very little chance of also showing that they indeed deserve to control their own bodies and make decisions about their health. Rather, the formulation

would lead to the judgment that Western-trained medical doctors should control and maintain their bodies, an unsatisfactory conclusion in light of the fact that so many Africans have little or no access to a Western medicine complex. In addition, Western medicine is largely uninformed about the sexuality and subtle physical experiences of women who have already undergone forms of FGC. In *Rites*, Efua Dorkenoo also stresses the fact that the opposition to FGC should never be limited to a purely medical issue or discussion of pain and suffering, arguing that this way of talking about the practice could obscure the entitlement to an intact body that figures into human rights. Medical approaches ignore the emotional experiences of women that are reacting to the practice. In addition, when we consider primarily the physical implications, the issue is clearly one that only touches on the problems of women such as reproduction and menstruation. In societies that may view discussion of the physiology of the opposite gender as a taboo, medical discussion can entirely exclude the participation of male members of the community. As a larger cultural issue that does also have implications for men, it is through inclusive communication that FGC can be properly evaluated and opposed.

Breaking through to find a space of discussion for men and women in Africa and the West involves negotiating the different views on female sexuality that partially stem from divergent lines of Islamic and Western thought.<sup>3</sup> In *Beyond the Veil*, Fatima Mernissi highlights the main difference as being an active versus a passive conception of female sexuality; that in traditional Islam, “women must be controlled to prevent men from being distracted from their social and religious duties. Society can only survive by creating the institutions which foster male dominance through sexual segregation” (4). Because women wield a possibly destabilizing power over men, physically controlling and separating them with FGC or seclusion can be seen as a necessary step to maintaining a functional society. This idea of women as powerful sexual beings contradicts Mernissi's formulation of Western society's control of women, which consists of instilling them with strongly internalized sexual boundaries (3). Considering

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<sup>3</sup> Though FGC is in no way exclusive to or present in all Muslim populations, Muslims form about 95% of the population in Senegal and about 60% of the population in Burkina Faso, so examining Islamic views on sexuality is pertinent to an analysis of sexual politics in these countries.

this difference is key when it comes to resisting cultural practices such as FGC. While Western feminism does need to provide ways for women to break free of a passive, powerless image, which could include forceful denunciations of discriminatory institutions or policies, this approach may not always be suitable in primarily Islamic societies.

Scholars such as Stephen Bishop and Sondra Hale recognize the danger of aggressive attacks on FGC and the possibility that a backlash, especially against Western intervention, could actually lead to more cutting. Both give several examples of overt criticism of FGC, including the decision to begin calling it Female Genital Mutilation, and each rightly shows regressive cultural responses as rejections of colonial power and cultural domination. In *Empathy and Rage*, Bishop follows his argument with a pertinent link between tradition and the cultural progression of societies. His chapter “*posits a shift in desire*, from wanting to see FGM as normal, admirable, and integral to certain African societies, to an openness to see it as unusual, objectionable, and even detrimental to these same societies” (41). In essence, an attack on a practice, especially from the outside can be an attack on the entire society and a block when it comes to changing people's opinions. The shift in desire, only truly possible through discussion and reflection about FGC must “seduce” a population. An oppositional narrative is one opportunity to mull over the practice, and there are examples of such invitations in African rap.

A good example of this effective technique can be found in the work of Sister Fa, a Senegalese rapper who has produced music and a documentary about educating communities against FGC, both entitled *Sarabah*. The strength of her arguments comes from the fact that she uses a personal perspective, and her rural Senegalese background provides a common thread with her audience. In addition, she avoids a negative or judgmental stance, and rather uses her art to foster an active discussion with kids and community members, saying passionately, “nous, on est là pour briser le tabou, parce que nous pensons qu'il est vraiment l'heure d'en parler. Et d'en parler à qui ? A vous, parce que le futur, c'est vous” (*Sarabah*). Her visits to small villages include appearances at schools where she both performs and holds discussions with mixed-gender groups of students.

Both in her attributes as a widely-traveled, experienced, and open-minded musician, and her vision of connecting to as many people as she can through her music and social messages, Sister Fa perfectly embodies the teacher-figure observable in traditional Islam and in Nation of Islam teachings. At several points in the documentary, she encourages classes of students to participate by inviting them to present the knowledge or opinions they already have. In one class, a young girl expertly summarizes physical dangers of excision for women, and a young man breaks out into a chorus of “je dis non à l'excision” during a song the band is playing for the class (*Sarabah*). The excitement and engagement during the music and the discussion is apparent and any anxiety about breaking the taboo is softened by the informal mood in the room. Crowds of teenagers freely discuss FGC and enjoy the live music at the same time.

### **Revaluing the Female Body Through Rap – Strategies Against Cutting**

While some of the rap that will be discussed here does include graphic imagery and descriptive language that could offend some, it also has qualities that make it an effective tool for addressing FGC on a local level. The first is that in itself, this music is a local form of expression. This might seem a strange statement considering that hip hop culture, style, and the technology of rap music as we know it did originate primarily in the United States, and most of its international forms still have many similarities with American hip hop. Still, African hip hop can claim a local as well as a global base. Immediately apparent is that the raw material that goes into making the percussion and instrumental loops used in much of African rap comes from music played on traditional instruments; sometimes older musicians that play traditional music are even involved in a process of collaboration with rappers. Also, it is typical for a single track to include both French or English and one or several local languages. Collaboration and mixing in local musics lends a sound quality that is distinctive and African. Finally, as Kunzler point out, many artists or crews function on a neighborhood level and perform a great deal in their areas, selling their music on tape (26). In fact, a great majority of rap music that is produced in West Africa is impossible to obtain without actually purchasing it at the market in the neighborhood where it was made.

In this way, the money, the enjoyment, and the beneficial messages from the much of the music stays local.

Hip hop is also a communal activity that has the ability to engage with both local and global youth culture, a rich example of a possibility for exchange between national and international forms of expression. In this way, hip hop invites a form of participation that is open to the ideas, sounds, and technology of outside cultures, but it does so by thoroughly adapting and re-interpreting them. Rap does not conform to any single aesthetic or lyrical principle completely, nor does it deny the traditional influences that surround it. Because rappers almost always remain tied to their roots and their localities, even if they move far away from home, they are important transmitters and technicians of culture (Fernandes 22). In this respect, hip hop is both a local phenomena and a way to interact fluently with global culture.

Rap performance is a stage that encourages societal analysis and activism, both indispensable for changing traditions and norms and improving the lives of marginalized members in a society. In *The Author as Producer*, Walter Benjamin provides an analysis of how the work of a writer can be effective in fighting against the poor living conditions of the working class. The key argument in this piece is that a writer's activism or political sympathy toward a certain group cannot have significant bearing in affecting change unless the writer's work expertly reflects his or her leaning as well as displays excellence in its literary qualities. Benjamin states, "the correct political tendency of a work includes the literary quality *because* it includes its literary *tendency*" (256). Because it can provide a public stage for activism and a well-crafted message that stands on its own, rap is a special genre. Many accomplished rappers routinely use expertly fashioned language to address inequalities and social hypocrisy as well as openly support disadvantaged groups through activism.

With *Sarabah*, Sister Fa targets younger members of societies in order to help them realize that FGC is not necessary, and emphasizes the pain that it can cause to young girls. Women are viewed as beings that are more than their societal roles of wives or mothers. Fa's music and her social goals are perfectly in tune and her focus on involving women, children, and adolescents in the discussion gives

them the agency to act for themselves, and above all to prevent circumcision in the future. They are not defenseless girls for Fa, but the next generation of women who will decide whether or not to circumcise their own daughters. The work of Sister Fa and others, often referred to as “sensitization” by FGC activists and scholars is also a way of communicating in the lyrics of specific songs. As we saw earlier, breaking a community's taboo against discussing body issues requires a certain subtlety. In the music of Sister Fa, Studio Abazon, and Féenose, a delicate lyrical approach is used; the pain of women is transferred to non-sexual areas of the body:

J'ai le coeur qui saigne car j'ai trop de peine / à voir ces fillettes – Féenose

Un chant mélancolique dans ce cour illumine le coeur tellement triste de ces petites filles

Un chant mélancolique dans ce cour illumine le coeur tellement triste de ces filles  
blessées – Sister Fa

La lame qui suit, la lame qui blesse, la lame qui tue, la lame qui donne toujours la trouille

Le Coeur percé par le pese de lourds passés – Collaboration de Studio Abazon

In each example, the pain of excision that is felt in the female genitalia is exchanged with that of the heart, which accomplishes two goals. First, it makes the lyrics more sensitive by avoiding a traumatic, direct image of a young girl bleeding from her wounds. Second, it generalizes the pain that could only be experienced by the female body to a pain that affects everyone in a deep, emotional way. The empathetic response in each song includes men and women, a move that widens the scope and weight of the lyrics.

Another shift that is present in the Studio Abazon track is in the point of view. Though every rapper shown in the video recording is male, a female perspective is brought into the song. In the first moments, we see just two rappers who begin by speaking directly to women on the tradition of FGC: “C'est pas que je renie ma tradition, je tourne pas l'âme.../ Mais le modelisme m'a ouvert les yeux / J'ai vu depuis arboliser / Maman, tu vois?” The first part of the line positions the MC on the side of tradition and spirituality and he refers to the woman he is speaking to in the line as “mother,” a term of respect that can apply to any older woman in African cultures. In addition, the role model that opens his eyes here is

probably a reference to Wangari Maathai, the first woman in East or Central Africa to achieve a doctorate degree and a winner of the Nobel Peace prize for her work mobilizing women in projects to halt deforestation across the African continent. The mention of Maathai in this piece of music holds her up as a symbol of inspiration, a move that locates this MC in solidarity with the motivations and achievements of women. She embodies the ability to uphold tradition, be a good mother, and have a powerful intellect in Africa and the western world.

Male MCs in this recording enter into a purposeful conversation with women, deferring to them and pleading with them to stop cutting; they wield the power in this context. The backdrop to the entire filming is a series of shots of young girls, women, and matriarchal figures discussing and acting out scenes about FGC. While they are not visibly present in the video, female voices perform every chorus, and signal the climax of the song, a dialog that is sung in call and response with one of the male MCs. The dialog and the lines that precede it signal a metamorphosis<sup>4</sup>:

*Elles sont choquées, les filles confisquées, elles sont mutilées, ne peuvent plus enfanter...*

Lame à l'oeil, la lame dévore ma petite soeur à petites feuilles

Je dévoile à l'orale ce préjudice morale

Oh la c'est triste, ce pratique qui ôte la vie de mes soeurs

C'est triste, ce trompauté perpétué qui nous tue et

Le mal est bien présent

Ce que je ressens / fait mal

C'est une assaille dans une bande de son...

*Une pratique antique qui fait souffrir les femmes en Afrique, il faut qu'on l'éradique*

*Pourquoi?*

Exciser cette fille, cette future mère qui va souffrir dans la peau et dans la chair

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4 Female vocals are italicized in this section.

## C'est pas humain

In this segment of Rap against FGM, female issues begin to change when the subject moves from young girls, to relatives, to the larger collective of society. At the beginning, the chorus shows shock, harm and reproductive consequences for girls. It is followed by a metaphorical circumcision of a little sister, and finally the practice is exposed as a prejudice that the MC specifies kills *us*. Another powerful line by a male MC expresses the pain of circumcision in the first person. As MCs add to the rap near the end of the verse, the points of view are multiplied and the pain of the concrete act and the sympathetic pain of the men are blurred. However, in the end there is but one final conclusion, that the practice of FGC is inhumane.

For Sister Fa and Féenose, two female rappers that are vocal against excision, resistance takes place on a more personal level. Each artist has multiple recordings that illuminate the practice, including tracks that detail their experiences as young girls:

Quel âge avais-je ne me rappelle pas! Mais c'est sûr que j'étais très jeune et Fatou Sadio ne m'avait pas dit la vérité sur le lieu ou on allait...Mais à notre arrivée je ne pouvais pas me douter que cette dure épreuve allait s'inviter à la fête. Dans la chambre qu'elles utilisaient à des fins que j'ignorais les vas et vients s'animaient / Le jour après les rires d'enfants c'étaient transformés en pleurs – Sister Fa

Je m'étais réveillé, le beau chant des oiseaux, le cocorico des coques / j'ai pris avec joie le chemin à mes classes, mais une fois en classe / Un oncle rendait visite à ma maîtresse J'ai ressenti une détresse...L'oncle me menait à participer dans une cérémonie réservée aux filles / c'était ainsi que je fus mutilée en couteau, assassinée dans l'âme – Féenose

The transformation shown in each of these songs refutes the cultural place of circumcision by inverting the perspectives and the effects of the practice. If the main argument by adults to cut



girls is to make them strong and wise and to prepare them for their roles as wives – to bring them happiness and acceptance – the emotional and physical damage to girls must be quieted. The perspective of the child and the still-painful memories of women show that forgetting the pain is not possible. The strategy that Féenose and Sister Fa use in their poetry about their own initiation ceremonies involves showing that the adulthood status awarded after cutting is less about gaining wisdom and confidence than it is about losing joy and confidence.

Silencing the physical and emotional pain caused by FGC can also be related to larger societal realities in Africa that tend to use up the bodies of (particularly rural) women and girls. As some of the most popular African novels such as *Xala* and *So Long a Letter* witness, older, hard-working female characters are seen through their bodies, and the marks of hard work and age are clear whether the woman is “une vieille peau de poisson” or “une feuille qui voltige” (34, 79). Use and wear on the body can also be seen in rap. In an as yet unpublished song titled *Excision*, and in *Milyamba*, a track on her 2009 release, *Sarabah*, Sister Fa describes a female body that is both broken and shamed by the hard work that is expected of women in Africa:

Je me posais la question à savoir pourquoi devrais-je retenir mes larmes devant cette  
femme avec ces lames prête à m'exciser comme un petit animal – *Excision*  
Au crépuscule je profite des dernières lueurs pour préparer dans ma cuisine  
Mes larmes qui coulent tout en offensant ma pudeur / Torse nu je travaille même si c'est  
un peu sauvage / Travailler dur pour nourrir mes enfants c'est mon ouvrage  
Je dois le faire avant même que la honte ne me ravage – *Milyamba*

The degradation of the female body by tradition and society can be seen in both of these songs. The body of the initiated girl and the toiling woman are likened to the bodies of animals. The girl's is altered like the body of a domesticated creature, and the exposed working woman's body

is called savage or wild. In each case, the marking or heavy use of the body – that which is demanded by the society – must be accepted and celebrated, one reason that the display of emotional suffering in these two excerpts is connected with shame. Interestingly enough, questioning the element of showing grief happens only from the point of view of the young girl on the precipice of entering an adult world. Why? Perhaps perplexed younger people in the society, more flexible with respect to the physical discipline of cultural norms, might play an advantageous role when it comes to changing them. In any case, the initiation ceremony is at the heart of the opposing views of the body.

The dichotomy of domesticated/wild bodies of women is explored in depth by Sylvie Frigon in the volume *Out of the Ivory Tower*. Though her analysis is centered on control and resistance of incarcerated women, several of her ideas can be adapted for understanding bodies in less institutional (but still controlling) social settings. She constructs the body as both a canvas for social norms and a site of lived experience, elaborating that, “the body can be seen as a hinge, that is, a pivotal point” (136). In this vein, the permanent physical and emotional scars on the body that are formed by cultural practices can be part of a scheme of acceptance or control in the society, but that does not stop them from also being part of a personal system of rebellion. Further, this individual opposition to one practice swings back toward the community and to other problematic societal structures. The resistance to the practice of FGC that is woven throughout the lyrics of Féenose, Sister Fa, and Studio Abazon shines a light both on the personal suffering of girls and the multiple contradictions and problems that cutting them reveals. The logic of tradition is unraveled by new ways of thinking about the body that are not confined to certain regions or conversations. That is not to say that global forms of communicating like rap will definitely expose isolated regions to a different way of treating the

female body, but that the dialogue can destabilize set ideas, whether they be the norms or concepts in Western or African societies.

### **Sound Bodies – Rap and Women's Contributions**

One important way that discussions of FGC challenge traditional western views of the body and cause major conceptual problems is through the little-understood sexuality and the tricky position of the already-circumcised woman. When an anti-FGC documentary that is filming in a rural village shows a room full of young women and girls being instructed about the harmful effects of the practice, there is an undeniable tension evoked by the fact that some unknowable percentage of the group is always already circumcised. In addition, there is a danger for circumcised women once minds have been changed to oppose FGC, but attitudes are still fixated on one image of a “normal” female body. For example, in *Confidence*, a song that discusses her own initiation, Féenose shows that the shift from preferring an excised woman to an unaltered one puts her and others like her in a difficult situation:

Ma fierté transformait en choque

Frustrations, sources de dépression, je voulais en parler à personne

Surtout pas aux hommes / Certains d'entre eux disent qu'une femme excisée égale à une femme robot / Pour dire que nous sommes insensibles, qu'on ne peut ni désir ni plaisir

Nous sommes rejetées, donc victimes on l'amène à la fermer, victimes amenés à la fermer

– *Confidence*

The lyrics in this section are an upsetting example of how simply opposing or stopping a practice without pulling up the root of its reasoning can leave a mental block in its wake. For Féenose, a circumcised woman in the now anti-circumcision community, stereotyping and exclusion are signs of a change in the rules, but not in the overall philosophy. This about face when it comes

to the proper body just replaces one group of improper women with another and demands of them the same mute acceptance of their marginality. Even worse, the circumcised woman is permanently pushed aside because this mark cannot be erased.

Though studies and interviews of circumcised women find that they are far from insensible, robotic, or permanently frigid across the board, some anti-FGC discourses and medical doctors insist upon their sexual dysfunction (Dopico 228-9).<sup>5</sup> Unwillingness to accept the differences between the sexualities of individual women is clearly rife in medical discussions and feeds into an unhealthy obsession with the “normal” female body. Undeniably, the idealized female body is present universally, as is discrimination against the offending or outlying bodies. In the flurry of different pressures on bodies, arguments against FGC can silence circumcised women, which is understandable because their experiences cannot always be incorporated into arguments against the practice, but it is a mistake to think that revealing the pleasures of the circumcised female body is in effect an argument that can be used in favor of FGC. This tendency is disconcerting and indicative of a major problem, especially when activists and doctors could be educating and listening to cut women to see how they can use what they have to lead a sexually fulfilling life. The inclination to ignore cut women leaves us in a sort of philosophical finger trap with little room for maneuver, where some women's voices will just never fit in; a conundrum that necessitates searching for ways of understanding that afford more fluid methods of communicating and qualifying experiences. Studying hip hop music affords us an opportunity to do just this because of its global reach, its multiplicity of points of view, its

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<sup>5</sup> The label of dysfunctional applies to any women who do not have orgasms, which is also a sizable proportion of women who have their genitalia intact.

ability to attract and instruct young people, and its use of surprising musical techniques that refuse the limits of dualistic thought.

Some respected scholars that see the promise of rap still recognize the contradictory and difficult quality of its content, but reason that observing the whole package carefully can yield startling realizations. Rose argues that listening to rap can provide us with the tools to gradually hear, see, and appreciate sounds, arguments, and ways of communicating and feeling that were at first difficult and obscure (XVI). While it is true that most of the resistance to FGC in rap on a surface level says simply, “don't circumcise anymore” and focuses on what should not be, it is impossible to ignore the musical aspects that sometimes deepen or even contradict the lyrical content, making for a more nuanced interpretation of the overall message.

In rap, the sounds and beats command their own space in signifying cultural facts and emotional reactions. A compelling example is found in *Silence (Excision)*, by Féenose, a song that criticizes circumcision and speaks about young women who are forced to begin working at a premature age. The silence in the title and at the end of the chorus section, “un silence cruel, un silence mortel,” has an ambiguous meaning in the song. From reading the lyrics, one could guess it to be the lack of opposition to the mistreatment of girls, or the lack of action on the part of the father who does nothing but drink upon learning that his daughter has died during circumcision, but the words alone do not exactly explain the nature of this silence.

A meaning is not truly apparent until the silence is viewed in juxtaposition with the first few seconds of the sound recording. The rhythm and melody of the initial chords, played solo on the keyboard through a violin synthesizer effect, decrescendo into a terrible chorus of the cries of a girl that have a strikingly similar sound quality, inflection, and swell to the keyboard riff that is later repeated throughout the song on a piano setting, and then finally in the voice. Immediately

following the girl's cries, and the only intelligible word she says, a lilting “no,” everything drops off with the crack of two dry snare hits signaling the completion of the circumcision and the beginning of the song. In melodic repetitions in the instruments, we see the mirror of the girl's cry, and the most pressing silence here is no response. The ignored cry puts an experience into sound and abstracts it, subtly creating a critique without coming out and directly declaring people's actions inhumane. In addition, this use of sound makes the song comprehensible on a deep emotional level: the cries are upsetting no matter why they are happening. It is almost impossible not to take something away from the song even if the lyrics are ignored or not understood.

*Silence (Excision)* shows a circumcised girl or woman who can only communicate through the cry, a corporeal expression. Sound mediates words to get at another level of understanding that more closely represents her reality, one that shapes her through her body. In *Sonic Bodies*, a fascinating study of sound and communication in Jamaican dub reggae, Julian Henriques develops a framework for thinking through sound, proposing it as “a model of a way of understanding that avoids being entirely bound up with language, notation, and representation” (xvii). For Henriques, this way of thinking involves triangulation. He establishes conceptual groups that break up ingrained western philosophical structures like the dyad of mind/body, instead favoring triads like mind/body/world. The beauty of this construction is that it is highly unstable, causes reflections to be centered around proportions and relationships instead of diametric oppositions, and takes subaltern/street knowledge and emotional affect into account.

The practice of triangulation validates ways of knowing that are deemed feminine, such as emotional intelligence and pathos in communication. Even more importantly, it whittles out a

nook for bodies, even deviant female ones. The mediation of logos by sound, as we saw earlier in the track by Féenose, could be a space where the female body, constantly marked and disciplined by language, finds a position of power. Much as Marie-Chantale Mofin-Noussi inverts a sometimes oppressive link that ties African women to nature to show their important role in environmental protection, the connection between a woman and the physical body could be her tremendous advantage in musical/sound communication. The sensibilities of female bodies are in tune with sound and natural processes through cycles and the birth of babies, but also because they are physically scrutinized and marked by every culture. Though being associated with, listened to, and cultured through one's body does pose problems on many levels, it imparts an intimate, dynamic connection between the conception of self and the physical body. Women in music have opportunities to explore, deepen, reject, change, and express this connection.

If the female body is a site of control, sound and music are mediums of physical and emotional self-expression through which a female a voice/body cannot be boxed up or silenced. Studio Abazon brings women's issues and powerful women to the fore, Sister Fa raps confidently about her musical prowess as a woman who can flow with just as much skill as her male counterparts, and Féenose exclaims “sur mes mots, pas de censure!” While these are not statements that would likely be heard on any street corner, through musical expression they have a stage to resound from and an opportunity to educate thousands of young people. Because their contributions to local and global discussions about FGC and many other pressing social issues are so astute and effective, rap artists deserve to be put in the spotlight in the realm of cultural studies that examine both traditions and politics.

## **Hip Hop in France : *Banlieue*, Alterity, and Plurality**

A l'Est comme à l'Ouest, au Sud comme au Nord  
Le hip-hop est de plus en plus fort  
– Lamifa

French hip hop is undoubtedly one of the most interesting and complex forms of the genre to be found anywhere in the world. This is not just because of the unfixed tonic accents or the rich tradition of wordplay that characterize the French language. It is vital because it represents an especially important medium through which to approach cultural studies in France. While rap can serve as a platform for re-imagining institutional and traditional structures, it is perhaps an even greater tool for forming and re-forming personal identities.

As both André Prévos and Mathias Vicherat stress in their inventive studies, much of French rap is made by the poorest segment of French society, including immigrants and the children of immigrants. Further, the majority of French rappers identify strongly with the disadvantaged, who have routinely been subjected to both poverty and very unfavorable depictions, sometimes called “a threat” and at worst “an invasion” (Le Telegramme). The last years have shown growing currents of phobia among the citizens of France, Europe, and the Western world as a whole, which represent real dangers for immigrants and poor citizens as well as proponents of a peaceful, heterogeneous society. Europe is presently rife with austerity measures and unrest, rioting, and malaise in young populations. These developments are particularly worrisome in countries such as France that have, in the post-war era, striven for the creation of a conscious, inclusive society. As de Latour warns, the way that different groups see each other has a huge effect on how societies are shaped: “Lorsqu'on envisage l'autre dans une radicale altérité, les groupes ethniques se hiérarchisent inéluctablement, et les plus dépréciés sont tenus à l'écart par les lois de l'apartheid ou exterminés” (152). In essence, the work of creating and altering the image of a group becomes in the long run, a situation of life or death, which is certainly what is communicated in the lyrics of rap.



In this last chapter, I will show how hip hop fights negative, reductive images of immigrants and poor citizens by reconstructing a physical, economical, and social place for them in France. This process involves examining how rap treats the space of the *banlieue* and the marks it makes on its inhabitants, as well as a personalization of young people living in poverty and a call for their salvation. Rap shows an edgy challenge to attitudes that contribute to the economic problems of the poor that has implications in French society. Finally, it uses a pluralistic framework to create connections and solidarity between different groups.

### **Confined Spaces – The *Banlieue* and the Image**

As Prévos explains, the cramped living conditions, drab exteriors, and depressed economic situation in the *banlieues* in much of France are clearly present in the imaginations of French citizens, and they bring out immediately negative associations. Prévos notes, “These suburban areas have come to symbolize the excesses in violence, drug consumption, social dislocation, and delinquency encountered in financially strapped urban neighborhoods” (67). Most apparently, the older, dilapidated architectural facades, usually somber and cold, create an almost prison-like desolation in the areas surrounding the HLM buildings.<sup>6</sup> In addition, as Hughes Bazin shows, the racially and culturally diverse populations of the *banlieue* are routinely amalgamated into a single, homogeneous, ethnicized group. He explains that in the wake of fears over immigration, media depictions of the *banlieue* zones participate in a trend that crystallizes the image of the average inhabitant:

Le zonard prend alors la figure de l'immigré et plus précisément du jeune Arabe. La banlieue devient tout ce qui est autre. Les « autres », ceux avec qui on ne peut pas communiquer ni construire un projet commun, ce sont les immigrants, les délinquants, les drogués, les prostituées, ...l'étranger pris dans une altérité absolue. (116)

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6 HLMs, or Habitations à Loyer Modéré, are the French equivalent of low-income housing.

This dangerous alterity and singular picture, for both Bazin and Prévost, is tied to the *banlieue* itself, having developed historically and ideologically as a place that is separated and other. Thus, studying the space of the *banlieue* in rap yields insights about how it contributes to ideas and representations.

The image of the HLM and the surrounding suburban environment is a striking one that is often present in rap. Many examples of French hip hop call for people to pay attention to the fate of those who exist and struggle in the *banlieue*. Vivid poetic descriptions of poverty and the politics that contribute to it can be found in the songs of groups like La Rage du Peuple, Assassin, and Ministère AMER. While much of French rap does descriptive work that paints gritty images of drug use and crime in the *banlieue*, some goes further by showing the direct mental effects of living in a marginal space. In the following text, *5e Soleil*, by Keny Arkana, the family of the HLM is scarred by its experiences both physically and mentally:

Bidonvilles de misère à l'entrée des palaces...

Prison de ciment, derrière les oeillères

Le combat est si long, pour un peu de lumière

Les familles se déchirent et les pères se font rare

Les enfants ne rient plus, se battissent des remparts

Les mères prennent sur elles, un jeune sur trois en taule

Arkana's lyrics go far in showing the extent of the influence that this urban setting has on its inhabitants. In the first line, the stark separation between life in the *banlieue* and in the wealthier parts of the city that border it is clear. The division is one of light and darkness that goes beyond the physically constrictive surroundings to actually occupy the bodies of the family. The cement prison is behind, not before the eyes, and the children build protective walls, turning themselves into the human equivalents of closed buildings. In the end, the blending of the body and its surroundings is completed in a circular fashion with the observation that one in three young

people end up in jail. The ambiguity of this last line makes it unclear whether Arkana is indeed referring to an actual prison or a mental state that has invaded the space of the home and family.

While these visions of the *banlieue* are certainly melancholy, they are quite different from depictions made by people on the outside, such as those of the media. Rather than showing the sorrows or difficulties of individuals in the margins, media portrayals can tend towards emphasizing only the physical dilapidation, rates or evidence of crime, or other externalized factors. In one documentary, *Reportage – Malaise en Banlieue*, there are almost no inhabitants shown and much of the beginning of the piece features police officers in small, poorly furnished quarters rifling through the belongings they find and confiscating a collection of different stolen items (Youtube). In essence, the imagery and sounds of this documentary mix a sort of appropriation of pictures of dilapidation with a tone of otherworldly scariness. Further, the use of the word *malaise* in the title is ironic as well, considering that almost all of the footage focuses on emotionless shots of buildings and objects. Arkana's blend of exterior and interior components counters this kind of imagery by humanizing the people who live in the *banlieue* rather than using their environment as a tool for shocking television audiences.

Because the influence of place on individuals is so deep, putting a different light on the landscape of the *banlieue* is definitely a part of changing the way people view its inhabitants. As films such as *Hadewijch* and *La Haine* show, the aesthetic qualities of the *banlieue* are not purely threatening, but when viewed with an artistic eye, they are stark and beautiful. Both of these films do an expert job of using sweeping cinematography to open up and add architectural interest to the spaces of the city as well as populating them with nuanced, diverse characters. *La*

*Haine* in particular is a piece that is inspired and informed by the way that rap artists view the *banlieue*.<sup>7</sup>

In French rap, the *banlieue* is above all treated as an important space that needs to be properly presented and fairly analyzed, which is rarely the case. Vicherat elaborates on the arguments of Jean Calo: “La plupart de temps la banlieue était montrée par des gens extérieurs!...Présentés essentiellement en cas de tensions, la banlieue et les « zones urbaines sensibles » sont, de l'avis même de leurs habitants, dépeintes de manière caricaturale par les médias” (43). For Calo and Vicherat, rap serves as a way to re-appropriate the images of the *banlieue* in a more truthful and subtle way.

In a movement that is almost the flip side of the imagery of Keny Arkana, the lyrics of Harlem and Fabe take back the presentation of the *banlieue* and personalize it, likening it to family members. This re-appropriation can be done in a negative or positive sense. Vicherat points out that lyrics connected to neighborhoods are often indicative of an « orgueil territoriale » but the following pieces' different uses of ambivalence and family members are also important (42).

Tu veux les avantages du quartier t'auras les inconvénients

Ta cité n'est pas ta mère si tu crèves elle aura d'autres enfants – Fabe

Ils parlent de la rue comme de leur sœur

S'accaparent un numéro de département et le scandent sans arrêt

– Harcèlement Textuel (Harlem)

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7 While the original soundtrack that accompanies *La Haine* is a mixture of music including Bob Marley, Burnin' and Lootin', there was a rap soundtrack made after the film's completion. Some of the most iconic French rappers including Assassin, IAM, and MC Solaar were asked to write original pieces of music based on *La Haine* in order to add to the scope and vision of the film.

Each of these segments shows a view of the *banlieue* that is ambivalent. Both evoke a closeness and a nurturing quality with the use of family members to represent the realm of the home. In Fabe's segment, it is clear that the *banlieue* is a rough place that is not going to mourn the passing of its children, but only insure that it continues to function and retain its own livelihood. The advantages of community here are temporary, and the only thing that is important is life's continuity, rather than the fate of individuals. Contrarily, Harlem shows the *banlieue* as a place that is tirelessly represented and protected like a sister. Picking a verb that has a double meaning, « scander », both to scan and to chant, we see that rappers from a particular part of the city can be seen to serve a double function. Their protection of the territory is tied to how they engineer its representation in verse.

Because many rappers perceive the ways that the *banlieue* is misrepresented, there are a wealth of examples that show a protective or familiar tendency toward its inhabitants. This applies particularly to the young, who are some of the most heavily stereotyped and feared people in French society. The following lyrics by Fabe are a warning to those who attack the young people of the *banlieue*.

C'est que tu t'frottes sur notre ciel bleu

Tu nous méprises tant

Tu ne devais pas t'attendre à mieux

La prochaine fois

Quand tu parles des jeunes de banlieue

Mesure tes mots,

Mesure les mieux – Fabe

Fabe provides a set of critiques that are both abstract and concrete. In the first three lines, there is a complex allusion to obscuring the blue sky of the young people. This clouding over of light contains several possible meanings, including the spread of pollution and the compromise of happiness and future survival. The *mépris* that is felt in concert with limited opportunities is revealed to be at the root of the problems that disadvantaged young people face. The last two lines are direct in their order not to speak of the young unfavorably without also taking some responsibility for their marginalization.

In “Petit Frère,” by IAM, the defense of young people is similarly concerned with the way in which they are represented :

Les journalistes font des modes, la violence à l'école existait déjà

De mon temps, les rackets, les bastons, les dégâts

Les coups de batte dans les pare-brise des instituteurs

Embrouilles à coup de cutter

Mais en parler au journal tous les soirs ça devient banal

Ça imprime la rétine comme situation normale

Et si petit frère veut faire parler de lui

Il réitère ce qu'il a vu avant huit heures et demie – IAM

Here, it is a precocious little brother that is invoked by IAM and contrasted with the images of youth that are spread throughout the media. In this piece, attention on the *balieue* is focused completely on crime that is shown to such a degree that it becomes the norm and the expectation. This is a demoralizing fact that only adds to the difficulties of living in poor communities in the first place. IAM separates himself from the lists of problems and incidents to personalize and explain them. In fact, allowing the little brother to communicate in the song does not guarantee

that he will report something negative, only that he will be allowed to speak for himself. In this case, freeing oneself from the pressure of externalized representations through self-representation is possible.

In all of the preceding examples from Fabe, Harlem, IAM, and Keny Arkana, the ties between the formation of family and the *banlieue* are strong, and the family persists even amid pressures and pain that cause it to weaken. It serves as an indispensable poetic symbol for expressing both freedom and confinement for these rappers, who see the community and the physical space through this unit. In itself, the importance of the family in hip hop – especially rap that represents the immigrants or ethnically diverse people living in poverty at the fringes of the city – contradicts and complicates portrayals from the outside. While some media and the more conservative members of French society often suggest that poor and immigrant populations threaten to take over and weaken French values, examples from rap that are filled with images of the family move toward refuting these kinds of statements. There is nothing valued more dearly in French society as a whole than the close-knit family, and there is nothing that is mourned more earnestly in rap than the degradation of families due to poverty and discrimination.

### **French Hip Hop and Economy – Challenging Value Systems**

In looking at the ways rap addresses the media representations and physical existence of marginal populations, it is evident that another important facet of rap's expression is closely related to the struggles between consumer society and artistic culture. While media often misrepresents and stereotypes, it is also inextricably tied to the mechanisms of dispersing rap and other cultural productions. As Bazin notes, a system of value based on consumption is one of the challenges that faces all rappers and citizens of the *banlieue*. This materialistic measure of worth is especially prominent in younger populations, regardless of their economic or cultural

backgrounds. Bazin argues that when it comes to choices of lifestyle as well as the production of rap, those in charge of distribution and media create superficial, artificial trends: “on crée de la « culture jeune », c'est à dire un marché où les jeunes apprennent leur métier de consommateurs” (62). Such a synthetic culture is propagated by any business that is seeking to profit from catering to young people, including the publishers, producers, and labels that put out rap music.

While this culture-based system of profits can be dangerous in terms of the creation of art that is independent or retains a coherent message, rap artists that are both dependent upon and suspicious of the media that promote them find interesting ways of challenging the ideals of consumption in the “culture jeune” and the society at large. Because an all-out conflict with media or record labels is impossible, much of rap relies upon nuanced lyrical strategies that provide subtle, but perceptible critiques focused upon creating meaningful discussions. Bazin calls these types of battles of ideas in rap, the “*défi*.” As he defines it, “Le *défi* est une manière positive de détourner les luttes violentes et l'idéologie de la réussite dans un engagement constructif. Le défi développe sa force dans les expressions artistiques, aussi bien le rap, la danse ou le graff...Le défi constitue ainsi un moteur, une motivation qui catalyse les émotions” (30). In the way that Bazin frames the work of rap, it has marked similarities with the theories detailed by both Benjamin and Bishop. As we saw, Benjamin's construction of the sphere of language and the conference as spaces for non-violent human agreement resonate with the *défi*'s insistence upon settling disputes with a conversation in art (289). Further, the positive action and emotional force of the *défi* link it to Bishop's explanation of oppositional narrative (41). As a technique that takes place through lyrics, combines a wide array of emotional sparks, and is non-violent, the *défi* is often employed by rappers to attack the status quo in polemical issues such as economic inequality.



Though the *défi* shows certain constants like non-violence and engagement in a conversation, there are several ways that its affective motivations can be achieved. One female rapper that approaches the economy in various interesting ways is Keny Arkana. Her work presents several different methods of attacking the status quo and her music uses disparate strategies to evoke emotional reactions. In comparing and contrasting two of her works that deal with the economy and how value is assigned to individuals, *Cueille Ta Vie* and *L'Ordre Mondial*, a complex, varied scheme of opposition is revealed.

*Cueille ta Vie* is a collection of stories about citizens and their relationships to life. It surveys the problems that arise from following value systems that make it impossible to live in the present moment or to appreciate life in general. While not all of them are directly related to valuing the self regardless of personal or economic achievements, the vignettes that start and finish the piece of music are arranged to set the tone, and later, to emphasize a lack of fulfillment linked to money.

J'vois cet homme le regard vide comme chaque matin il part au chantier  
Mais n'en a plus envie. Ça fait trente que ça dure le même train-train  
Mais il faut bien nourrir sa petite famille même s'il sent sa vie mourir...  
Puis un homme style la cinquantaine sort de sa voiture  
Costard cravate, tête droite, avance avec fière allure  
Mais dans son ombre on peut lire celle d'un homme triste et seul, pas d'amis  
Juste des gens intéressés par son fric, il les a tous perdus, sa famille et ses proches  
Faute d'un égo démesuré, trop d'aigreurs dans les reproches  
Et aujourd'hui a fini par comprendre dans son malheur  
Qu'en étant seul même tout l'argent du monde n'a plus de valeur

The beginning and the end of the lyrics are symmetrical in that they paint two mirrored extremes, the poor man who sacrifices his life because he feels it necessary for the good of his family, and the rich man who loses his family and friends due to his harshness and ambition. This construction shows the danger of an imbalanced attitude toward money. Though it is simple, it is also inclusive in the way that it chooses its subjects; the song argues that putting money before the self or the others is equally emotionally damaging to the poor and the rich man.

While Arkana does not provide any direct remedies to these problems, the hook offers a response to them in the form of a motivational statement:

Cueille ta vie, avant qu'elle soit emportée par le vent

Cueille ta vie, avant qu'elle soit abîmée par le temps

Cueille ta vie, tiens-la fort et ne l'enferme pas dans leur rang

Ne la laisse pas s'envoler loin des rêves, cueille-la dès maintenant

The inspirational and optimistic message of *Cueille ta Vie* emphasizes the possibility of personal awakening and pulling the self out of the system of hierarchical representations that equates economic exploits and monetary gain with success in life. Throughout the song, dreaming, hope, and human connections are the most valuable assets. Life is not only a state, but a product, likened to a piece of fruit; a rich harvest that must be picked and savored. This positive invitation constructed through song has much in common with oppositional narrative. It presents paths of action and inaction in the challenge of forming an independent vision of self.

Positivity is not always expressed as optimism, but can also take the form of an aggressive push to action and responsibility. In *L'Ordre Mondial*, which is certainly the most compelling of these two titles, Arkana uses her own voice to represent a personified vision of economic forces that oppress the vulnerable members of society:

Un peuple qui se lève? Moi je lui couperai ses vivres  
Pour mieux alimenter sa haine et l'emmener en guerre civile  
Car y'a pas meilleur profit que le business de la mort  
Destruction, reconstruction, investissement, marché des armes,  
Pro-guerre, prospère je fais monter la sauce  
Vous monte les uns contre les autres, pour mieux alimenter ma force  
Car mon règne prend son ampleur dans toutes vos divisions  
Libéralement capitaliste, au service de vos illusions

This segment recognizes the forces of capital that create devastation and destabilization. They function in a circular fashion and profit from the wars, divisions and violence that plague society. The language of the lyrics creates references not just to consumption, but to devouring. An image of boiling sauce and a force that is fed by tensions boiling up between people emphasizes the fearsome nature of the world order not only as a human construction, but as an independently destructive creature.

In the chorus of the song, the symbolic interpretation of a world order that transforms into a supernatural beast is accomplished:

Je suis l'ordre mondial  
L'ordre créé par les puissants,  
Confréries, chefs de multinationale  
Politiques économiques, je suis la conjoncture  
Imposée à la planète, j'ai instauré ma dictature

While the lyrics themselves do suggest the presence of the creature, it is only fully established musically with a set of frightening vocal effects that reveal a hideous beast with the power to

attack and pervert any resistance. In the hook, the main vocal track is doubled by two others that form a dissonant triad. The lower tone is the gritty and harsh, frankly frightening, sound of the beast. Its scope of action is huge yet paradoxical, as it is shown to be a coalition of the powerful but to also to form a dictatorship said to rule over the entire planet. The other higher vocal track plays a stranger, more obscure role. At first listen, it seems to participate in the soundscape of the beast, supporting the fact that it is both collective and omni-powerful. However, as the chorus is repeated, the higher voice begins to break away and slow, sounding more like the plaintive cry of a grieving woman. Here, within the single piece of poetry that makes up the hook, the speaker begins to multiply and transform into separate subjects. The powerful, the political complex, and the suffering victim all participate in the voicing of the beast. This formation can be seen as both a condemnation of abusive economic powers and a call for individuals to recognize their responsibility in the culture of profit.

As in the work of Féenose, Keny Arkana's lyrics are imbued with sonic strategies that give them much more meaning and affective power. This kind of use of music to augment the potency of language is one important aspect that is absent from Bazin's concept of the *défi* as well as from literary analyses of rap lyrics such as the text by Vicherat. Each tends to carefully isolate the prose of rap from the sections of their writing that deal with musical creation and flow. As is clear in the second track by Arkana, it is a musical device in the chorus of *L'Ordre Mondial* that forms the complexity and disturbing synthesis of subjects. Without analyzing the lyrics in concert with their sound quality, this is a fact that might easily be missed. Rap's philosophical meaning cannot be separated from the music, but it is also tied to the political in its contributions to social grouping.

## Rap and Creating the Global – Plurality and Solidarity

In rap communities, particularly in France, forming a group or making a recording frequently involves the meetings and interactions of people who are culturally diverse. As we have seen, marginalized spaces in society often push different groups together, which is a decisive ingredient in rap creation. While the diverse inhabitants of the *banlieue* struggle under the weight of a criminalized, racialized, and homogenized grouping, rap responds by creating social ties that work toward solidarity and alliances based upon plurality. Interacting within the mix of the *banlieue* is a necessity and a benefit for French rappers. Notable examples of these movements are found in rap collectives, such as La Rage du Peuple, that draw from the ideas of *Altermondialisme* to create economic solidarity among the impoverished. Also, the works of multiracial groups such as *Noir et Blanc*, by Suprême NTM spread a message of racial tolerance. However, the most interesting strategy of forming connections found in rap is probably that of the international collaboration. These meetings offer a possibility of both breaking down the borders of a space like the *banlieue*, and giving its ideas and problems international exposure.

Rap has the ability to facilitate a global system of communication that allows for the transmission and contrasting of ideas. Global exchanges between rap artists are usually initiated by individuals, but they are also mediated by the music industry: rap uses the infrastructure of global media to its advantage, while still challenging its intellectual limitations. As de Certeau details, using existing (and potentially exploitative networks) is part of resisting or reworking any repressive system or image. He argues, “dans ces stratagèmes de combattants, il y a un art des coups, un plaisir à tourner les règles d'un espace contraignant. Dextérité tactique et jubilation d'une technicité” (35). On the global scene, rap definitely uses joyous and playful methods to push the limits of established ideas, language, and space. In this exchange, there are numerous

examples of play between different values. For example, artists create a plurality of interpretations of Islam that encourage the relaxing of fixed ideas in and about this religion. Further, a melting down of national linguistic and musical borders creates solidarity between marginalized groups as well as opportunities for musicians. These movements have even begun to spread in the United States, where the image of Muslims suffers and where it is uncommon to find foreign hip hop or rap songs that contain more than one language.

IAM is one French rap group that challenges a single, stereotyped view of Islam and a fundamentalist, close-minded practice of the religion. One intriguing way that IAM addresses Arab culture and Islam is through what Prévost and Swedenburg call “pharaohism.” This includes references and imagery related to ancient Egypt, symbolic lyrics, and the use of pharaonic aliases. Presenting the religion of Islam through pharaohism avoids inflammatory statements and seeks to present it as beautiful, mystical, and spiritual. The stated goal of IAM is “to widen the space of tolerance for Arabo-Islamic culture in France, through its lyrical subject matter, its deployment of Arabic words and expressions, and its musical mixes, splattered with Middle Eastern rhythms and samples of Arabic songs” (Swedenburg 71). Pharaohism provides an alternative, creative example of a unique interpretation of Islam that counters a fixed image of Muslims.

Pluralistic visions of religion, and Islam in particular, are common in much of what IAM produces. The group criticizes fundamentalism both in France and internationally. In *Seul Face à Lui*, a collaboration between IAM and the RZA, a five percenter and member of the American group Wu Tang Clan, religious and racial intolerance is rejected:

Excuse, y'en a pas mal qui imite, chacun son sort, chacun ses rites

Chacun sa cause, fuck les antisémites

Je dois rien à personne à part au Seigneur

Là-bas y'aura pas d'blancs ni d'negros

You know?

In this section of the song, IAM brings the focus off of criticizing the other and shines a light on personal religious responsibility. A relationship with a higher power is not dependent upon practicing a certain religion in a certain way, but by upholding that which one believes. The lyric even seems to downplay the necessity of practicing religion in an organized fashion. Further, race differences are presented as marks that are erased by transcendence to an unspecified higher state, whether it be heaven or any other paradise.

As the song progresses, the RZA and IAM elaborate upon the themes of plurality, tolerance, and discipline as these rappers' different versions of Islam are woven together. Throughout the song, there are both elements of IAM's vision of tolerance, as well as a focus on self-realization that is closely in tune with the philosophy of the five percenters. In the teachings of both pillars of African American Islam, the Nation of Islam and the Nation of Gods and Earths, one of the most important philosophical elements is knowledge of self (Usher 49). A stress on self-evaluation can be seen repeatedly in *Seul Face à Lui* in several of the verses that have a confessional tone: one member of IAM laments his first cigarette, saying that he had betrayed himself; another looks back on a search for fame that cost him his studies. The RZA's verses reiterate the imperative goal of seeing the self in a truthful light.

Finally, in the hook of the song, the English and French lyrics are interspersed. Each member of IAM's voice is heard in between the RZA's lines:

On se trouvera seul face à lui

The lie shatter, no computer data, only truth matter

Tout seul face à lui

Every step you take, every breath you take, every move you make<sup>8</sup>

Seul face à lui

You can't escape fate, Allah be the maker, bow down to your creator

Tout seul...face à l'unique

Mixing together the voices in this way adds a structural element to the combination of languages and ideas that the song creates. The hybridized Islam in this piece of music is summed up in a lyric that ties all rappers together : IAM declares, “On joue tous les mêmes scènes, les mêmes peines.” This lyric has a double meaning ; it emphasizes the similarities of human struggles everywhere, but it is also a reference to the work that rap does. These rappers, though divided by different nations and cultures, play in the same scene and share the same privileged role in influencing their respective societies.

Many rappers recognize their connection through rap and find ways to express their varied, though ultimately common motivations to create a global vision through their craft. One of the most impressive and ambitious collaborations between French, American, and African rap artists to date is called *New York-Paris-Dakar*. It is a 1997 release by a group called Positive Black Soul (Senegal) that features collaborations with KRS-One (New York), Alliance Ethnik (France), and Manu Key (Guadeloupe) (Maillot). Created in Paris, New York, and Dakar, it is a

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<sup>8</sup> There is even an interplay between very different genres of music present in this piece: the RZA pulls his second line from the very recognizable Sting song, “Every Breath You Take,” an interesting rebirth for a lyric that refers to an ever-present stalker.



blending of styles, of Wolof, French, and English languages, and above all a recording that constructs an international platform of communication that seeks to dissolve borders in rap.

*New York-Paris-Dakar* is a fitting piece to help in forming a conclusion, as the lyrics of the song beautifully sum up the global ideas and connections that rap creates. Early in the title track of the album, PBS evokes a feeling of mutual appreciation and solidarity between rappers regardless of their cultural or national origins:

On partage la même passion

Le même micro

et l'âme au fond

La même nation

The idea of the Hip Hop Nation as an entity only existing in a single space or within established borders is exploded in this segment. In contrast to connections formed by way of race, place, religion, or nationality, the bonds formed between hip hop artists lay down a basis for communication that is founded upon sharing spaces of performance and a life and livelihood dedicated to creative arts.

Later in the track, a clever vocal hockett between two rappers and the verse that follows detail how hip hop alliances move:

Je suis (partout) d'ailleurs (nulle part)

J'arrive de quelque part (et puis quoi)

d'heures du haut qu'l'eau

Paris New York Dakar Star...

Pas du hasard

Check ton agenda

Note cette collabo

Souligne la voix

Remarque le flo

Universel

In the hockett, it is clear that hip hop community is based on unstable, shifting sands. The rapper is everywhere and nowhere, forever in transit. At the end of the section, he playfully arrives in three places at once, four if the double meaning of star is understood. He is widespread and thus recognized as a star, but he is also immaterial; a force that can shine in multiple contexts. The verse that follows the hockett expands upon the collaboration's ability to form connections. It is an intentional, careful process of communication that frees the voice of the individual and allows it to participate in a communal way.

In rap, this vision involves transferring new information and techniques as well as digging into the creative use of sounds, ideas, and aesthetics of the past. KRS-One rhythmically repeats this phrase between the other verses: “The old to the new / The new to the old.” Both the flow of time and the hierarchical structures in rap are fluid and multidirectional. Old pieces of music are torn apart, freed from their eras and significations, and reborn repeatedly in rap as samples and beats. Newer, less established rappers are given chances to put out their music and reach bigger audiences, and older, respected rappers are given fresh exposure and inspiration. The heritage and the future of rap are in some ways circular, which opens it up as a genre and a stage for social action.

Finally, as Positive Black Soul attests, rap retains a taste for the underground:

J'ai la sauce pure, clando...

Toute la cité de Paris m'entoure

Le ton de l'underground

Underground est la sauce

Local flavors of rap and even obscure rappers are important to the Hip Hop Nation because they provide much of the experimental expression and energy of the movement. Even when it is part of the conventional or the global, hip hop retains the impetus both to strive for the fair representation of those who are unknown or marginalized, and to work against rap's appropriation and perversion by exploitative popular or economic forces. Inventive rap artists always find ways not to be completely revealed, sold, or given up to the mainstream.

Rap resists and revolutionizes in a cyclic way. The fluidity of place, freedom of interactions, and scope of collaborations possible in rap strive for a state of heterogeneity and equality. An inclusive and pluralistic vision in much of rap is just the kind of philosophy that can make a creative and dynamic space for the contributions of those who are considered other, whether they be minorities, the impoverished, women, or marginalized populations. Including their voices takes them out of the realm of representation and into the action of self-expression.

## Conclusion

In *Black Noise*, Tricia Rose argues that when it comes to rap, “the most receptive listeners are always rewarded. What is at first unfamiliar and perhaps unintelligible is increasingly absorbed, and new ways of seeing and hearing become second nature. This is the sort of creative and dynamic engagement that empowers rap music” (xvi). Rap is a productive way to understand and study cultural practices that arouses the participation of anyone who will listen carefully, from the Burkinabé street kid to the French professor.

Motivating and inviting listeners to engage with rap is important; so much so that it is built into the structure of this music. As Jouvenet argues, the very basis of rap is the ability to rework, recreate, and reformat the work of others: “les univers musicaux actuels sont marqués par cette plasticité des œuvres, et les auditeurs, musiciens professionnels ou non, vedettes ou inconnus, sont invités à se saisir des œuvres pour en créer de nouvelles versions, dans un mouvement collectif continu de transformation de la matière sonore” (Jouvenet 69). The flexibility of the electronic music that is the basis of rap is also possible in its lyrical and philosophical elements. Rap poetry and rap thought are pliant and ready to be split into variations, toyed with, and molded into new ideas and disciplines. The flexibility of rap is recognized by its creators, who are constantly striving to expand its reach and make it new.

As is witnessed by a recent wave of books by prominent rap artists, rappers have a strong urge to relate to people that are not necessarily the average rap listeners, as well as to explain the work of rap to outsiders. In recent works, Common, Jay-Z, Albert Johnson, and the RZA tell personal autobiographical stories and meditate on the process of creating hip hop. By writing outside of the context of rap, these figures all attempt to expand upon their ideas and focus positive attention and respect on their craft. Guida argues that “by discussing the contexts, personal, and otherwise, in which the music is made, hip hop itself might be brought a little closer to Earth, given a more neutral space for reflection, and return the more interesting for it”

(N+1). These efforts to explain the whys and hows of hip hop are surely intriguing and they might be able to shed light on rappers as people, but they are not a substitute for engaging with rap music directly. Artists and writers do not exist to stand front and center and represent their works or to lead critics about how they should be interpreted. Like literature, rap should stand alone. I believe that the more we study rap as a literature and a politics, the more we will realize how many opportunities it opens up in an academic setting.

For instance, there are several ways that this particular project could be expanded to include rap's connections and relevance to cultural studies, musicology, and poetry. The most interesting possibilities lie in connecting the work of literary critics and hip hop musicians. Because rap is a stage for communicating that does not follow a dominant or academic train of thought, it puts such traditions (and those who are fluent in them) out of comfortable and well-defined ways of thinking. Accepting and working through a cultural disadvantage when it comes to understanding slang, languages, and music can push us to get down into the depths of what our own ways of conceptualizing culture mean and help us incorporate the ideas that young people process through hip hop. If people in the West want to have a global conversation in the humanities that does not overtly favor its own sometimes insular discourses, there is no better way than studying and engaging with rap. Self-reflection and collaboration is not just vital to rappers, but to educators and researchers, particularly in the humanities, and creating the framework for these kinds of discussions is vital. Interdisciplinary links further the work of cultural studies and benefit the people that make music and art. After all, interpretation and criticism are in themselves creative endeavors.

Deepening the connections and solidarity between those who study culture and those who work in it could help to strengthen both groups and further their goals. For people in the

humanities as well as musicians that fall outside of the main stream, consumerist culture has greatly de-valued and weakened their contributions to society. This trend has manifested in less and less compensation and funding for arts and humanities as well as a general lack of respect for their pursuits. In addition, both of these groups have had an especially difficult time putting up a fight against their own gradual extinction. In particular, the humanities often lack the ability to seduce the population with its studies and socially conscious musicians frequently lack the exposure and attention that thoughtful criticism provides. To resist a growing marginality in the capitalist system, it is key for cultural producers and researchers to identify each other as possible allies and to use each other's strategies of resistance to the fullest extent. As Lipsitz attests, we can and must “work through the conduits of commercial culture in order to illuminate affinities, resemblances, and potentials for alliances among a world population that now must be as dynamic and as mobile as the forces of capital” (17). The flourishing of creative and revolutionary thought in society, as well as the greater social equality it offers us is reliant upon our efforts to draw it out of every possible source and piece it into our own lives and disciplines.

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